The Best Gag in the Picture:

Gag-Based Comedy's Adaptability in Blockbuster-Era Hollywood Cinema

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Gags and gag comedy may be most often associated with silent and early sound cinema in discourse, but they also remain a vital component of Hollywood film comedy across the blockbuster era. Given this, I argue that, as a cinematic form, gag-based comedy displays an unusually high degree of resiliency and adaptability that helps account for its survival within Hollywood cinema. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of blockbuster era Hollywood, ranging from roughly the mid-1970s and on, as gag comedy often does not fit the "bigness" of blockbusters *or* garner the cultural prestige of smaller-scale "independent" productions. Gags have instead carved out a surprisingly stable space between these two extremes, adapting to numerous industrial changes over the decades of blockbuster cinema to maintain a notable presence within Hollywood comedy. At the same time, this industrial adaptability is often in tension with a discourse, both popular and scholarly, that struggles to recognize the shifting status and adaptations of gag-based comedy across this time. It is precisely this give and take between industrial adaptability and discursive inflexibility that has most shaped gag-based comedy's role within blockbuster era Hollywood cinema. Across this dissertation, I examine the tension between these forms of adaptability in gag comedy and their impact on the role of blockbuster era gags in relation to industry, discourse, genres, production, animation, Black comedy, and satire. If the adaptability of gag comedy has allowed it to maintain *a* place within Hollywood film, it is ultimately the pressures it faces from trying to manage industrial, discursive, and cultural adaptability that have pushed gags into the increasingly niche and/or marginalized role where they exist today.

"Introduction: Gags in the Shadow of the Blockbuster"

Although often connected with earlier eras of Hollywood cinema, memorable gags continue to grace screen comedies as blockbusters have dominated the Hollywood industry over the past half-century. Some, like the sights and sounds of cowboys farting around the campfire in *Blazing Saddles* (1974) or the gag where Ted's semen is mistaken for 'hair gel' in *There's Something About Mary* (1998), have attained a mythical status due to their ability to comically and effectively push contemporaneous boundaries of propriety. In other films, it is the sheer density of gags that stands out, from sequences set in the Coco Bongo club of *The Mask* (1994) or in Dorry's Tavern from *Gremlins* (1984) to entire films like *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990). Other gags are noteworthy due to their ingenuity and complexity, like the escalating running gags revolving around a supposed encounter with Denzel Washington or creepy neighbor Gary being left out of the eponymous *Game Night* (2018). Still others stand out due to their incongruously smart stupidity, like the musicians revealed to be providing diegetic theme music for the heroes in *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (1988) or *Airplane!*'s (1980) numerous puns, verbal misunderstandings, and absurd one-liners. Additionally, several of the above examples showcase the use of gags in conjunction with effects, a connection reinforced by the various interactions between the digitally animated critters and live-action beachgoers in *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* (2015), or when Barb confides to a crab who responds in a Morgan Freeman-like voice in *Barb & Star Go to Vista Del Mar* (2021). Examples like these and innumerable others serve to highlight how gags and gag-based comedy continue to be a vital source of humor in blockbuster era Hollywood comedy.

And if this claim seems intuitively valid via casual observation, it is further reinforced by

a critical discourse that also continues to see gags as an essential part of Hollywood comedy. In contemporary films, critics note an abundance of gags across a wide, seemingly disparate range of comedies. Gags may add to the furious pace of a family-friendly animated comedy like *Zootopia* (2016), or they may serve to augment the "winningly crude" humor of raunchy, R-rated comedies like *Sausage Party* (2016).[1] For other films, critical discourse sees gags as both appealing to the "target demo" of children under eight for *Tom & Jerry* (2021) and as proof that the "sniggering gags about boners and butt slaps" reveal the seemingly "adult" movie *Long Shot* (2019) to be "aimed at adolescents of all ages."[2] Sequels can continue to "find delirious ways" to build upon the gags of their predecessor like in *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* (2013), or they can simply throw gags at the screen rather than develop characters in *Zoolander 2* (2016).[3] Tonally, the "dubious gross-out gags" of *Neighbors 2* (2016) may serve to make it "an uneasy watch," but it is precisely the mixture of tones and comic styles, including "pratfalls, gross-out gags, tossed-off asides, [and] witty banter," that gives *Bridesmaids* (2011) its wide appeal.[4] Even in a single film, gags can be both helpful and harmful: if one reviewer specifically notes "a few lame gags" in *Deadpool 2* (2018), another avers that the film ultimately "delivers the gags" for viewers.[5] Although only a brief sampling from across the vast breadth and depth of the spectrum of comedy, these excerpts from popular discourse further reinforce the continued presence and power of gags in Hollywood comedies of recent years.

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1 Anthony Lane, "Now Playing: Zootopia," *The New Yorker*, 21 Mar 2016, p. 26. Tim Grierson, "'Sausage Party'," *Screen International*, 10 Aug 2016.

2 Roger Moore, "Movie Review: 'Tom & Jerry' Terrorize NYC," *Movie Nation*, 26 Feb 2021. Anthony Lane, "Affairs of State," *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2019.

3 Scott Foundas, "'Anchorman' Sequel Good News for Ferrell Fans," *Variety*, 17 Dec 2013, p. 82. Anthony Lane, "Fashion Victims," *The New Yorker*, 22 Feb 2016, p. 82.

4 Fionnuala Halligan, "'Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising'," *Screen International,* 5 May 2016. Ethan Alter, "Wedding Bell Blues," *Film Journal International*, May 2011, p. 9.

5 J.R. Kinnard, "In 'Deadpool 2' the Obscenity Delightfully Continues," *PopMatters*, 15 May 2018. Fionnuala Halligan, "'Deadpool 2'," *Screen International*, 15 May 2018.

However, even this small sample highlights a number of questions about gags and their discursive framing in the blockbuster era. What exactly do we as scholars, not to mention critics, practitioners, and audiences, mean when we refer to "gags"? If gags are largely identifiable as a type of comic unit, do they have similar connotations across films and types of humor that range from broad, family-friendly animation to raunchy comedies and boundary-pushing grossout? If so, how do gags achieve this flexibility? In what ways are gags cued for audiences to recognize them as such? How have they adapted to the shifting terrain of the blockbuster industry so as to remain a small but important part of Hollywood comedy? In what ways can these questions help us better understand the stakes around gags, audiences, and shifting notions of taste that are hinted at in this discourse? And how does the discursive reception of gags display its own struggles to adapt to the shifting role and forms that gags take across the blockbuster period? In attempting to answer these questions and others, this project argues that gag-based comedy in the blockbuster era displays an unusually high degree of industrial resiliency and adaptability compared to other film types, but that this industrial adaptability is itself in tension with a concomitant lack of discursive adaptability in the reception of gags. As a consequence, the tension between the two has helped limit contemporary gag-based comedy to a niche, and increasingly secondary, comic form within Hollywood cinema.

Definitions

Before continuing, though, I need to address a question that lies at the heart of this project: exactly what *is* a gag? As we shall see, "gag" as a comic term has a long, winding history dating back to its 19th century theatrical origins, and practitioners, critics, and scholars alike have subsequently understood the term in a wide variety of ways. If this applies to "gag"

as a comic term more broadly, it is even more nebulous within the context of film. Over

cinema's century and a quarter, gags have referred to everything from stunts, marketing

gimmicks, and practical jokes to a particular comic unit that can range from a momentary facial

expression or a background element of mise-en-scene to a sequence, an entire scene, or even an

entire film.[6] Further adding to the confusion, the term "gag" is often used interchangeably with,

but is not entirely synonymous to, other commonly used comic terms and concepts like jokes,

comic business, slapstick, broad or lowbrow humor, physical comedy, and more. Additionally,

while some explicitly single out gags as a *visual* form of humor, and many implicitly do so,

others also explicitly define gags as utilizing *verbal* or *sonic* humor as well.[7] These various, and

at times competing, tendencies make it extremely difficult to get a clear sense of what exactly a

gag refers to at any given point in time across Hollywood history.

　　　With such a broad background to draw from, how will I be using and understanding the

term "gag" across this dissertation? To start, I want to make it clear that my intention is *not* to

get bogged down in the minutiae of defining the gag or coming up with an absolute, airtight

definition of the term. Instead, I prefer to use an understanding of gags that tries to both remain

coherent while also displaying a high degree of looseness and fluidity based upon shared features

in the term's usage across popular and scholarly discourse. For my purposes here, I understand

the gag to be an identifiable, generally small-scale comic unit incorporating cues via physical

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6　For the first three usages, see chapter 1. For examples of facial expressions or mise-en-scene, see Donald
　　Crafton, "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy," *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds.
　　Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 110, and Richard Neupert,
　　"'We're Happy When We're Sad': Comedy, Gags, and 1930s Cartoon Narration," *Funny Pictures: Animation and
　　Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, Berkeley: University of California
　　Press, 2011, p. 102, respectively. For gag as an entire film, see Sylvain du Pasquier, "Buster Keaton's Gags,"
　　1970, trans. Norman Silverstein, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 3.2 (Apr 1973), p. 284.

7　See Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping*, Malden, MA:
　　Blackwell Publishing, 2007, and Marijke de Valck, "The Sound Gag," *New Review of Film and Television
　　Studies*, 3.2 (Nov 2005), p. 223-235 for examples of each approach.

humor (including a frequent emphasis on the body and bodily functions), visual humor, sonic humor (both through music and sound effects), forms of brief verbal humor such as one-liners and puns, or some combination thereof to create its comic effects. This approach may still be quite broad, but that is by design: instead of relying upon necessary and sufficient conditions or a rigid binary that declares something to be clearly a gag or not a gag, research and experience lead me to understand gags as falling more along a spectrum of possibilities. Across this spectrum there will be clear core examples that are easily identifiable and widely agreed upon as gags (like those mentioned in the opening paragraph), peripheral examples that arguably or only loosely fit as gags, and examples that fall off the extreme end of the spectrum and can be understood as, at best, poor examples of gags. Limit cases may be too small, too large, too dependent on complex forms of verbal wit, not clearly separable as comic stimuli, not clearly comic, or possess some other factor that makes them fit poorly as a gag. And while divisions along this spectrum may not always be clear, this too is a feature rather than a bug. Rather than being too strict or too vague, a spectrum of gags allows for a constantly evolving measure that better aligns with the shifting understandings of gags themselves across different periods and contexts.

In addition to understanding the gag as a term, one may also be inclined to ask *why* it matters that I focus on the gag itself, both as a comic unit in general and as a part of film comedy specifically. There are many potential answers to this, ranging from the under-explored role of the gag as a key component of blockbuster era comedy (as detailed in the opening chapters) to the long, complicated history of the gag in film comedy that continues to shape its relevance for Hollywood cinema today. The gag is also particularly important as a highly malleable comic unit that can effortlessly flow across media, further creating a complex web of gags across time,

media, and other contexts that requires further unraveling to better understand how comedy functions across such contexts. Perhaps most important, though, is the gag's central role within comedy as a whole. Although comedy is much larger than gags, these comic units are nevertheless often at the heart of comedy across different eras and different media. The gag tends to gravitate toward the fantastical and the absurd, the boundaries of propriety and taste, and simply those elements that are intended to elicit laughter without *necessarily* being closely or explicitly tied to other narrative, generic, or sociocultural concerns. While this is all hinted at in the literature on gags, as I unpack more fully later on in this introduction, the gag itself remains little understood even though it is at the heart of much of comedy's appeals. This is particularly pertinent for film, the media form where gags have arguably had the most sustained, longest lasting impact across the past hundred and fifty years.[8] Therefore, if the gag itself needs to be better understood, specifically examining the gag in film comedy is likewise necessary for to understand the role of the gag elsewhere in contemporary media, from TV and streaming to social media and other online forms. Even if, as I argue, gags have become increasingly more diffuse and less concentrated within films in recent decades, the history of gags in film still continues to provide a key backdrop against which to understand the role and appeal of the gag across its innumerable forms.

Since my project is centered not only around gags but also around a comic film type called "gag-based comedy," how do I understand this broader term as well? In one respect, it highlights how my project is not only focused on individual gags but around films that feature a number of largely gag-based sequences or that are primarily gag-oriented in nature. However,

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8 Gags may have been more central to, say, vaudeville, radio, and television at various points across this time, but none of these other media have the same mixture of longevity and relevance for gag comedy as does film.

while there are certainly *some* films that are almost entirely gag-based, the majority utilize gags along with a variety of other comic, narrative, and generic appeals. For my purposes here, then, I understand a film to be a 'gag-based comedy' *if* gags are largely identifiable as the predominant comic form rather than, say, predominantly situation or character-based comedy. These other forms are less often separable into identifiable gags, and historically they have even been directly opposed to gag comedy in discourse. Films that fit better as gag-based comedies also tend to make gags a *main* focus rather than a secondary one that is subsumed into a larger narrative structure such as a murder mystery, action film, or romance. As with my understanding of the gag itself, this is not meant as a clear cut opposition between gag-based/not-gag-based but as an attempt to identify and highlight films where gags are an essential, primary driving force. Using this approach, we can better acknowledge the different contexts for gags and what constitutes a gag-based comedy. Thus, while the kinds of humor on display in a 1920s Buster Keaton film, an early 1960s Jerry Lewis film, or a 1990s film from the Farrellys may vary in key respects, they still can and do fit both textually and discursively as strong examples of gag-based comedy. By contrast, films with comic units that are more tightly connected to overarching situations, characters, and narratives, or that feature humor depending on lengthy dialogues or complex forms of verbal wit, are far less likely to use clear gags or to be received as gag-based. This does not mean that gags cannot or do not make use of situations and character-based comedy (among other forms), but rather that not all such types of comedy use the gag as their primary comic unit.[9] Gags may be present, but to a lesser degree or in a weaker form than in other types of comedies; they are simply another ingredient rather than the main course, so to speak.

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9   Consider how films like *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) or *Office Space* (1999) often blend identifiable gags with an overarching focus on character or situation-based humor.

Understanding what constitutes "gag-based comedy" can also be viewed along a spectrum, then, with films being clearly gag-based, partially gag-based, or largely not gag-based while still occasionally using gags. To better differentiate between these in practice, consider films like *Clue* (1985) and *Knives Out* (2019). Both may be comedies with narratives centered around murder mystery plots, but the former is clearly far more dependent on gags rather than the central narrative question of who committed the murder than is the latter.[10] Similarly, *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *There's Something About Mary* may both be romantic comedies centered around the challenges a couple faces in establishing a romantic union, but given how the latter clearly spends as much (if not more) time on its gags than its romance, *Mary* would clearly be the more gag-based romantic comedy of the two.[11] While I could go on, my point is that this project largely focuses on films that fit as core examples of gag-based comedy and are largely identified in discourse as making prominent use of gags throughout. Much like gags in gag-based comedies as a whole, only those films that are partially or largely gag-based will serve as the 'main course' of this project.

One could again ask, though, why gag-based comedy itself is important as a particular comic form. To better address this particular question, perhaps it would be useful to also briefly consider the third category on the spectrum of gag-based comedy mentioned above: gags that function as comic relief in otherwise non-comic or non-gag-based films. For example, numerous superhero films over the past two decades make use of a given character's powers or personality for comic purposes in one scene and dramatic purposes elsewhere. The Hulk tossing Loki

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10 In fact, *Clue* features no less than three different endings and different answers to the question of "whodunit," further reinforcing the film's appeal as centered more around its performances, verbal wisecracks, and physical humor than its plot.

11 See chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between romantic comedy, narrative, and gags in *Mary*.

around and muttering "puny god" in *The Avengers* (2012) may be recognizable as a slapstick-style gag via its physical humor and pithy one-liner, but the Hulk's brute strength and barely controlled rage are elsewhere clearly used to serve different, non-comic narrative and generic functions. *The Avengers* may incorporate gags, then, but is clearly *not* a gag-based comedy. However, as I will argue throughout, this approach has become likely *the* primary one for gag comedy in recent blockbuster Hollywood cinema, pointing to the continuing appeal of the gag and gag comedy for audiences and creators alike. And while gag-based comedy may no longer hold the same cachet it once did, to better understand the continuing appeal of gags and why they continue to still appear in many of the industry's most popular films today, we need a clearer, more thorough understanding of gag-based comedy as a whole. Film is certainly not the only province of gags, and gag comedy itself may be in decline, but the history of gag-based film comedy up to and throughout the blockbuster era still shapes the appeal of gags and their usage in movies today.

Argument Summary

Across this project, I argue that gag-based comedy's ability to survive for over a century displays an unusual degree of resiliency and adaptability, particularly given how gag comedy has only rarely been a major, central cinematic form within the Hollywood industry. Furthermore, while this flexibility was on display in the classical era, I argue that it is even more noteworthy across what we would call the blockbuster era of Hollywood cinema, stretching from the mid-1970s to today. As a small, relatively niche form that generally lacks notable critical approval or cultural prestige, gag comedy would seem a poor fit for an industry increasingly focused on big blockbuster, tentpole, and franchise films on one end of the spectrum and awards-bait or

culturally prestigious, small-scale "independent" productions at the other.[12] Instead, gag comedy

has carved out and maintained a small but stable space for itself, weathering the shifting

landscape of Hollywood cinema as well as, and arguably better than, any other film type. To put

it another way, while various film genres and types (westerns, epics, fantasies, etc.) have also

been around since the early days of cinema and experienced greater highs than gag-based

comedy, they have gone through more fallow periods and lower lows than gag comedy as well.

By contrast, gag-based comedy has maintained a smaller, steadier presence within the industry

across the blockbuster era, growing over the 70s and 80s before reaching a peak level of

prominence in the 1990s and early 2000s. And while it has rapidly lost this position over the last

fifteen or so years, gag comedy still displays atypical adaptability as it moves into an

increasingly subsumed, supporting role in bigger films and away from film and into other

transmedia outlets. A major goal of this dissertation, then, is to trace the various ways in which

gag comedy has adapted to major shifts in technology, industry, audiences, and more to maintain

this relevance across the blockbuster era. All film types must necessarily showcase *a* degree of

flexibility in the face of industrial changes, but gag-based comedy has been particularly adept at

finding ways to survive and even thrive as a minor, niche form of mainstream cinema within an

industrial framework that in many ways does not support such a film type.

In contrast to this industrial adaptability, both popular and scholarly discourse often

struggle to effectively acknowledge the survival and shifting forms of gag-based comedy across

the blockbuster era. Gag comedy continues to evolve, but scholarly approaches to gags often

remain focused on aligning them with visual, silent comedy rather than acknowledging and

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12 See Tom Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, eds. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 29-31 for more on the rise of "indie" cinema during the late 80s and early 90s and its place on the small-scale end of the spectrum.

unpacking the ways gags have adapted to the changes of the late classical and blockbuster eras of

Hollywood cinema. Popular discourse also often follows suit, aligning gags with a mythical

classical Hollywood past and only infrequently grappling with how gags have evolved in recent

decades. As a consequence, this project also argues that, along with gag-based comedy's

industrial resiliency, this discursive *in*flexibility in regard to gag comedy's adaptations over the

past half century has helped lead to it being an underexamined and undervalued comic form. Of

course, the industrial and the discursive are themselves intertwined and by no means easily

separable. Industrially, gag comedies depend upon both well established precedents and a drive

to find the next major trend, while critical and popular discourse will often reward and reinforce

the most effective new trends until they become old hat and increasingly unsuccessful (both

commercially and critically), forcing the industry to look for a new form of gag comedy and

starting the cycle anew. Discourse around notions of class and taste also serves to reinforce

industrial trends that further push gag-based comedy into narrower and more niche forms,

ultimately aiding its recent decline and its splintering into typically more supporting roles. The

give and take between the production and reception of gags also hints at a struggle for cultural

adaptability that I will briefly explore later in this project, as gags function to both reflect and lag

behind cultural changes. In general, then, this dissertation serves to highlight the tension

between the industrial resiliency of gag-based comedy and the struggle of discourse to flexibly

respond to it, helping to explain gag comedy's trajectory in the blockbuster era and why its

continued role has largely gone unnoticed.

Methodology

To understand the resiliency and adaptability of gag-based comedy in the blockbuster era,

I approach gags using both a variety of perspectives and a variety of methodologies. Across this dissertation, one major source I draw from is the industry trade press, both historical and contemporary, to help provide a sense of how the industry has framed the role of gags and gag comedies over the years. I augment this by using craft journals and primary production documents to better grasp the actual creation of gags and the ways in which these processes align with or contradict the larger discursive framing of gags by the industry. Together these approaches highlight how gag-based comedy has adapted to industrial and technological changes *and* the ways in which it has struggled to change as it tries to fit within a shifting industrial landscape. Outside of trade and industry discourse, I also examine a great deal of popular criticism and scholarly work that provides a complementary framing of gag comedy, one that further highlights both the struggle of gags to adapt and the discourse's own struggle to adjust to the changing roles of gags. If this serves to prioritize discourse over the textual study of gags themselves at times, I do so in a manner befitting Jason Mittell's call for a cultural approach to media genres that emphasizes "how the genre is defined and conceived of in more common everyday use" and thus focuses more on "discursive practices" rather than textual understandings of genre and generic constructs.[13] However, I want to make it clear that I am not arguing for an understanding of gag-based comedy as a *genre* but rather as a looser, more broadly conceptualized comic film *type*. I still find Mittell's approach to be a useful model for tracing how gag-based comedy has negotiated changes in the blockbuster era, though. Rather then getting lost in definitions and catalogs of gags that will, inevitably, miss key examples and/or types, a discursive approach allows for a more holistic view that better unravels "the complex

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13 Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 3, 11.

interrelations between texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" taking place within any film genre or type.[14]

Of course, I do not simply ignore the textual functioning of gags either. On the contrary, a good deal of my research into primary production documents for various gag comedies serves to better convey how gags reach the screen, and several chapters incorporate case studies that directly examine how gags unfold and how they cue comic responses. Given that part of my argument revolves around the ways in which gags themselves change to adapt across the blockbuster period, examining their textual functioning is vitally important. Therefore, in addition to Mittell's model of the discursive approach to genre, I also draw from the framework of Johan Nilsson's approach to film satire, which I discuss in more detail in chapter seven. Borrowing from the work of neoformalists such as David Bordwell, Nilsson argues that studies of filmic satire need to take into account how such works make use of specific formal and stylistic devices so as to cue satire.[15] Nilsson further acknowledges that there are no universal ways of creating satire, meaning that he is less interested in "whether or not satire is actually understood as satire" by real audiences but rather the processes by which satire is cued within the films themselves.[16] Drawing from this approach, I likewise endeavor in my examples to look at how gags *cue* humor "based on stylistic and formal cues as well as contextual knowledge" rather than arguing that they are always (or even necessarily often) received as such by actual viewers.[17] This has the added benefit of further highlighting some of the tensions on display in the discursive reception of gag-based comedies: gags may cue humor or satire in such films, but other extratextual factors from marketing to cultural notions of taste may complicate or obfuscate

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14 Ibid., p. 9.
15 Johan Nilsson, *American Film Satire in the 1990s: Hollywood Subversion*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 2.
16 Ibid., p. 13.
17 Ibid., p. 15.

those cues and make critics, scholars, and audiences less likely to understand them. Much as

how Mittell's approach does make use of textual analysis in practice (if not in theory), Nilsson's

acknowledgment of the importance of context points to a role for discursive framing within

textual analysis as well, making the two complementary and effective models for this project.

    It may also be useful to briefly outline some of the frameworks I am *not* focusing on in

this project and the reasons why. For instance, while Janet Staiger's work on reception studies in

film may seem like a potential source to draw from, her interests overlap with but ultimately

diverge from mine here. I echo Staiger's point that, due to a variety of social and historical

contexts, reception is often "*contradictory* and not coherent," which we will see reinforced

throughout this project.[18] However, akin to Nilsson's approach, I do not fully agree with Staiger

"that contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences" of viewers or that a

discursive study's *primary* job must be to "account for events of interpretation and affective

experience" of a film.[19] On the one hand, this is simply due to a matter of emphasis: I focus

more specifically on discourse, implying a give-and-take between various entities, rather than the

potentially more one-way street implied by reception, and I am thus more interested in larger

industrial, critical, and scholarly discursive trends rather than the experiences of individual

spectators. As a consequence, this means that I generally do not draw from audience studies

frameworks either. While I readily recognize the important role that audiences play within the

discursive and industrial framework of Hollywood cinema, my focus in this project is more

centered around discussions of gags and gag-based comedy from critics, the trades, and scholars

rather than actual viewers. This is not to say that the kind of work done by Henry Jenkins and

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18 Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 48. Emphasis in original.
19 Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, p. 1.

others on audience responses and creations is not valuable or that it could not be applied to gag-based film comedy.[20] However, my project simply asks other questions and is concerned with investigating other discursive realms, making approaches based on real audience responses beyond the purview of my work here. Instead, I largely depend upon a variety of textual cues (a la Nilsson) and contextual factors (a la Mittell) to estimate how a hypothetical viewer would understand gags across film and other media.

Literature Review

Although it does provide an important sense of how I am relating to other frameworks, the preceding methodological discussion still does not actually outline the extant literature on film comedy or the place of gags within it. Individual chapters will include more in-depth literature reviews for specific topics, but let me begin by sketching out the literature on film comedy more broadly. Historically, comedy has often been an understudied area of film studies, struggling to be "taken seriously" as many scholars are quick to remind us. Nevertheless, it is still represented within early eras of film studies from the 1960s and 1970s. Works by Raymond Durgnat and Gerald Mast provide early overviews of the form, and although these examples are as much works of film criticism as they are historical or academic studies, they would provide central reference points for the study of comedy across the 1970s and 1980s.[21] Numerous other works from this time also focused on individual comedians or historical periods, including a wide range of books, discussed more in chapter one, that examined the films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Again ranging from broad critical and biographical to more focused historical and scholarly approaches, these texts often used the films of individual comics to

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20 See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press, 2006, as a good example of one touchstone work (among many) for contemporary audience studies.
21 Raymond Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the American Image*, London: Faber, 1969. Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.

tentatively theorize the function of film comedy as a whole. However, they often did so in

relatively piecemeal fashion, with the focus on specific performers, time periods (especially

silent cinema), and forms of comedy (particularly visual ones) serving to limit their usefulness

for more in-depth, more widely applicable theorization about film comedy.

In large part, it was not until a series of influential works from the late 1980s and early

1990s that we see sustained attempts to examine and theorize film (and often television) comedy

in such explicitly broad strokes. Perhaps most notable and most widely cited by later film

comedy scholars are three particular book-length studies. First, Jerry Palmer's 1987 *The Logic of

the Absurd* attempted to provide an overarching theory of how jokes and gags functioned in film

and TV comedy.[22] Approaching comedy via semiotics, Palmer framed jokes and gags as both

signs (of verbal and visual humor, respectively) that followed a consistent two-part structure:

peripeteia, or a form of comic surprise, and syllogism, where the eponymous "logic of the

absurd" served to create simultaneously plausible and implausible conclusions based on the

premises of a joke/gag. Palmer's work also related comedy to narrative, building upon how he

framed the individual unit of comedy (the joke/gag) and examining its relationship to broader

narrative forms. Second, 1990 saw the publication of Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik's *Popular

Film and Television Comedy*, which set out to trace comedy's functions and forms across

different times periods and media.[23] For Neale and Krutnik, comedy functioned as a genre with a

huge array of different forms, and much of their work was thus dedicated to unpacking some of

these forms and their expression within both classical and contemporary film and television. In

particular, they devote much of the theoretical portion of their study to comedy's relationship to

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22 Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd: On Film and Television Comedy*, London: BFI Publishing, 1987.
23 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, London: Routledge, 1990.

narrative, laughter, and verisimilitude, outlining a series of topics that both contemporaneous and subsequent scholars continued to explore. Finally, the following year saw the release of the collection *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, a series of essays that approached comedy from a wide variety of theoretical lenses prominent in film studies of the time.[24] These included psychoanalytic theory, semiotics, feminism, class, and comedy's narrative and formal structures. Although not all of these essays would subsequently have the same impact, a number of them did become central reference points for later examinations of specific comic types, including the forms of gag-based comedy that I study in this project.

Before moving into the literature on gags in comedy specifically, though, a few other later works on film comedy are worth noting for both their role within the field and their influence on my work here. Roughly a decade after Neale and Krutnik's work and *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, Geoff King's *Film Comedy* served to synthesize and update of many of these earlier approaches for the 1990s.[25] Differing from Neale and Krutnik, King saw comedy not as a genre but as a *mode* of cinema, which for him offered a more flexible and widely applicable way of approaching comedy's near-infinite variety of forms. Consequently, much of King's work in this volume centered around various comic modalities and how they created comedy by departing from "what are considered to be the 'normal' routines of life" and society.[26] These again often relate to narrative, satire and parody, and issues of race and gender (all of which will be discussed more in later chapters), but he also spent time discussing the transgressive and regressive potentials of comedy and the function of comedy within otherwise non-comic contexts so as to better reflect growing trends within film comedy of the previous decade. Jumping ahead

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24 *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew S. Horton, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
25 Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, London: Wallflower Press, 2002.
26 Ibid., p. 5.

another dozen years, the 2013 collection *A Companion to Film Comedy* again offers a wide range of approaches to film comedy across historical periods, themes, theoretical perspectives, and international contexts.[27] At times updating previous work to address more recent examples or contexts that remained understudied, most notable here is the framework of "media comedy" outlined by Henry Jenkins that serves as an important backdrop for my project. Jenkins invokes the term to better conceptualize and analyze the career of Mel Brooks across a variety of media, how Brooks' work fits into broader trends across them, and how, as a comic creator, Brooks uses these media forms and their interactions as a primary venue for his comedy.[28] This is particularly useful given how, at various points across this dissertation, I also am interested not *only* in film comedy, but in the ways that comedy flows across various media and media contexts as well, making Jenkins' essay worth highlighting as an important corollary to the other aforementioned foundational works on film comedy.

Moving into the literature on gags within film comedy more specifically, while gags and gag comedy are themselves often understudied in the literature, there are still several important antecedents that showcase some of the myriad ways in which scholars understand gags. At a most basic level, definitions of the term "gag" are infrequent and often extremely nebulous. However, several scholars do offer explicit definitions that provide a starting point for framing gags. Although I will discuss the theatrical origins of 'gag' as a comic term more in chapter one, when applied to film comedy, scholars tend to agree that the gag functions as a comic unit of some kind. Beyond this, though, there is often little clear overlap in their definitions. Neale and Krutnik see gags as inherently visual, or a "non-linguistic comic action," but they freely

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27 *A Companion to Film Comedy*, eds. Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
28 Henry Jenkins, "Mel Brooks, Vulgar Modernism, and Comic Remediation," *A Companion to Film Comedy*, eds. Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 151.

acknowledge that there is little coherent sense of the gag as a concept and that their decision to define it in this way "is rather an arbitrary one."[29] Daniel Moews allows for visual *and* verbal gags when defining the term as "a basic unit of laughter" and "a technical term" for any verbal or visual constructions that produces a laugh, but this definition is simultaneously more inclusive and less coherent by framing *anything* humorous as a gag.[30] If Tom Gunning agrees that the "gag is basically a comic action," he also sees any definition of the term to be futile since "defining it can be as difficult (and self-defeating) as defining what makes us laugh."[31] Likewise, Donald Crafton may see jokes, articulations of cinematic space, or thematic permutations as "variations" of gags, but he ultimately concludes that there "can be no concrete definition of a gag because it is marked by affective response, not set forms or clear logic."[32] This approach both allows for leeway in identifying a gag while refuting other approaches that frame gags as a formal system or an identifiable, structured unit. As these show, there are several definitions of gags available in the literature, but a review of them struggles to actually provide a clearer, more concrete understanding of exactly *what* a gag is or how it may function within a given scholars' work.

Instead, it is far more useful to examine common scholarly approaches to gags and the implicit understandings of the term that they reveal. For instance, while gags may cross historical periods and be so broad as to refer to any "comic action," they are nevertheless most frequently connected with visual, silent Hollywood comedy. I will again explore more of the reasons for this in chapter one, but James Agee's 1949 essay "Comedy's Greatest Era" is clearly a major reference point for the veneration of silent comedy, slapstick, and gags that would

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29 Neale and Krutnik, p. 51.
30 Daniel Moews, *Keaton: The Silent Features Close Up*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, p. 19.
31 Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and The Origins of American Film Comedy," *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 89.
32 Crafton, "Pie and Chase," p. 106, 109.

influence approaches and definitions across the rest of the twentieth century. In the essay, Agee

frames the comedy of the late 1930s and 1940s as in a state of decline due to the introduction of

sound. As a consequence, "the only comedians who ever mastered the screen [for Agee, Charlie

Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, and Buster Keaton] cannot work, for they cannot

combine their comic style with talk."[33] Agee may not explicitly link silent comedies with gags,

though he does refer to examples of gags throughout, but his canonization of silent comedy

reinforced a link between gags and specifically visual humor that others have continued and

developed. This includes 1970s dissertations on the visual comedy of Buster Keaton by George

Wead and Noël Carroll and Carroll's later typology of sight gags, outlining six types of sight

gags based upon the manner in which they create visual humor and supporting each type almost

exclusively with examples drawn from the major silent comics (mostly Chaplin and Keaton.)[34]

He points out that sight gags "can occur in films that are neither silent nor comic," but the almost

exclusive focus on examples from silent comedy creates an implication that gags largely *are* best

suited to silent films. Others share this approach, as in the previously cited Neale and Krutnik

definition and in the one by Moews that in theory allows for the *possibility* of non-visual gags

but in practice only examines explicitly visual humor in Buster Keaton's work.

This focus on silent cinema and visual gags was particularly central to early film comedy

scholarship, as I discuss in chapter one, but it still remains relevant today. In her 2014 book on

Charlie Chaplin's work as a director, Donna Kornhaber continues to frame the gag in inherently

visual terms, largely conflating it with the sight gag. She does note that "the gag itself is not

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33 James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," *Life*, 5 Sep 1949, p. 71.

34 See George Wead, *Buster Keaton and the Dynamics of Visual Wit*, 1973, Northwestern University, PhD
    Dissertation, and Carroll's *Comedy Incarnate*, an updated version of his 1976 dissertation on Keaton's *The
    General*. Noël Carroll, "Notes on the Sight Gag," *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew S. Horton, Berkeley:
    University of California Press, 1991, p. 25-42.

synonymous with all silent comedy, only with slapstick," but the longstanding connection of

slapstick with silent cinema (present in her work here as well) implies that the gag is largely tied

to visual, silent cinema.[35] Similarly, while Maggie Hennefeld's 2018 study of female comics and

feminism in early slapstick does not explicitly engage with the gag as a term, it frequently refers

to gags and sight gags in ways that further connect gags with visual humor, slapstick, and silent

film comedy on an implicit, unacknowledged level.[36] Even when studying slapstick shorts of the

early sound era, Rob King discusses gags largely in the context of silent comedy. He explicitly

points to them as something viewed with nostalgia by the end of the 1930s and notes how the

gags in Buster Keaton's sound shorts showcase a movement away from the mechanical

complexity on display in the gags of his silent films.[37] Of course, each author's choice of topic

necessarily predisposes them to examine and/or refer to gags in the context of silent comedy, and

I do not wish to imply that they are consciously or deliberately connecting gags *only* with the

silent era. Still, the degree to which recent scholarship continues to align gags with visual, silent

comedy highlights how the strength of past links between the two still continues to shape the

literature on film comedy today.

However, there are also some important exceptions to this focus on silent cinema and

gags that are likewise worth briefly examining for their contributions to the gag literature.

Several scholars implicitly or explicitly consider the role of gags in early sound comedies, as in

Henry Jenkins' study of the "vaudeville aesthetic" of what he termed the "anarchistic" sound

comedies of the early 1930s. He identified gags as a primary feature of this comic style, many of

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35 Donna Kornhaber, *Charlie Chaplin, Director*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014, p. 62-63.
36 Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick & Silent Film Comediennes*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. In particular, while gags themselves are only linked to specific examples from individual films, Hennefeld often connects *sight* gags to broader notions of gender, femininity, race, and the carnivalesque.
37 See Rob King, *Hokum!: The Early Sound Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, p. 166-167 and 174-175, respectively.

which were imported from the vaudeville routines of performers who moved from the stage and into early sound cinema. Jenkins saw such gags as creating a potential for "comic excess" and functioning as "a source of audience fascination that competes directly with plot and character development" in anarchistic comedies.[38] While I will again return to this issue of gags and narrative in chapter one, Jenkins' work is also important for acknowledging the role of gags in early sound comedy more broadly. He points out that certain periods of Hollywood comedy will favor comic situations over gags while others will favor gags over strong narratives, pointing to both early slapstick and the anarchistic comedies of the early 1930s as strong examples of periods that largely emphasized gags over narrative.[39] And if others discuss the gags of specific performers in early sound comedies or within various essays, Rob King's aforementioned work on slapstick shorts of the 1930s engages with gags in the broader context of an examination of early sound comedy as a whole.[40] King may at times implicitly point to a separation between silent gags and sound comedy, but he explicit rejects the "reification of silence" in the history of and literature on film comedy that sees a schism between silent and sound comedy.[41] Gags may not be on the surface of his work as much as they are in Jenkins', but King's approach here fits well with my own: I too see the link between early periods of gag comedy and the blockbuster era as best measured in terms of *evolution* rather than one of *revolution* or clear rupture.

In addition, another major area that at times explicitly considers gags is the literature around animation and, in particular, classical Hollywood cartoons. For instance, Ethan de Seife's

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38 Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 99, 104.
39 Jenkins, *What Made*, p. 104.
40 See Randy Skredvedt, *Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies*, Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press, 1987, and Frank Krutnik, "Mutinies Wednesdays and Saturdays: Carnivalesque Comedy and the Marx Brothers," *A Companion to Film Comedy*, eds. Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 87-110 for examples of each.
41 Rob King, *Hokum*, p. 5.

work on Frank Tashlin's animated and live-action films provides another explicit definition of the gag as being interchangeable with a joke "to mean any individual moment of comedy" that "can be verbal, visual, sonic, or some combination of the above." This definition largely covers the same ground seen elsewhere, but de Seife goes further to argue that "in the same way that we may consider the shot to be the basic unit of filmmaking, the gag is the basic unit of the comedy," using this approach to underpin his subsequent analysis of Tashlin as a comic filmmaker.[42] Framing the gag as a "basic unit" of comedy is intriguing, albeit still broad and vague, but it further aligns with a long-standing tradition that sees gags as a fundamental unit of classical cartoons.[43] Although he does not offer an explicit definition of the term, gags are also an essential part of comic animation for Paul Wells, and he attempts to create a typology of gags in animation by outlining twenty-five different options that range from sight gags, puns, and verbal gags to personality gags, forms of gag narratives, reflexive humor, and more.[44] Gags are also a key reference point for several authors in the 2011 collection *Funny Pictures*. In their introduction, Charlie Keil and Daniel Goldmark characterize cartoons as "borrowing situations and gags passed down from [comedy's] development in earlier entertainment forms," while a later chapter by Richard Neupert examines the give and take between visual gags and narrative in classical cartoons.[45] Again, their understandings of the term "gag" may vary across these works, but these authors also provide another avenue and space for investigating the role of gags

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42 Ethan de Seife, *Tashlinesque: The Hollywood Comedies of Frank Tashlin*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012, p. 10-11.

43 For instance, Norman Klein calls the gag the "atomic unit" of the cartoon and Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston refer to gags and gag types as central to animation throughout their 1987 book *Too Funny for Words*. Norman M. Klein, *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, London: Verso, 1993, p. 10. Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *Too Funny for Words: Disney's Greatest Sight Gags*, New York: Abbeville Publishers, 1987.

44 Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 127-186.

45 Charlie Keil and Daniel Goldmark, "Introduction: What Makes These Pictures So Funny?," *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 7. Neupert, "'We're Happy When We're Sad'," p. 94.

within comedy scholarship writ large.

Of course, while the literature on gags and film comedy is fundamental to this project, my argument centers around not only the comic functions of gags but their industrial role as well. It is thus necessary to also briefly outline some of the literature around the contemporary Hollywood industry. When sketching out this literature, arguably the most important concept to unpack is that of the blockbuster itself and the ways in which scholars define the blockbuster era as a particular period of Hollywood history. Most scholars can agree on the periodization of classical Hollywood cinema, seeing it as stretching from the mid-1910s to the late 50s or early 60s with some fuzziness and disagreement on the boundaries at each end.[46] If this period is widely agreed upon, though, what came after the classical era is far less clear. One option is to refer all of this as the contemporary period, as several scholars have done, but the idea of "contemporary" accrues different connotations and meanings in different contexts and across different years, making it an increasingly unwieldy and untenable term.[47] To put it another way, a period like the mid-1970s might still have been "contemporary" in the late-1990s, but to call it contemporary today is a far greater, and far less tenable, stretch. Another option, to refer to anything beyond the classical Hollywood period as simply "post-classical," suffers from a similar instability of meaning, especially given that the "post-classical" has now lasted nearly twice as long as the classical era itself.[48] In both cases, the terms may indicate a separation from

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46 See, for instance, the argument by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson for their periodization of 1917-1960 in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 9-10.

47 See *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith, London: Routledge, 1998, and *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, eds. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008 for general examples. "Contemporary" is also a common descriptor for studies of particular topics in film, as evidenced by the various books on contemporary Black cinema cited above, as well as books on masculinity (*Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*, ed. Timothy Shary, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), authorship (Alison McMahan, *The Films of Tim Burton: Animating Live Action in Contemporary Hollywood*, New York: Continuum, 2005), and many more.

48 For example, see Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, Austin: University of Texas

the more clearly defined classical period, but without providing a clearer, stable sense of *why* to

delimit, periodize, and label it in this way.

Other terms, even that of the "blockbuster" itself, may remain largely more coherent

while still raising potential issues of their own. While some scholars have attempted to refer to

the Hollywood industry from the late 1960s and on as the "New Hollywood," this too failed to

gain traction given the ways in which the term 'New Hollywood' has developed and retained a

narrower connection to the auteur-driven films of the late 60s and 1970s.[49] Even scholars of

blockbuster cinema recognize that the "blockbuster" is a slippery term, with Julian Stringer

calling it "something of a moving target" that changes across time "according to who is speaking

and what is being said" before ultimately concluding that the blockbuster itself "has no essential

characteristics."[50] Instead, in a manner not dissimilar to Mittell's approach to genre, Stringer

argues that the blockbuster should be examined historically and discursively rather than being

defined ahistorically via essential characteristics.[51] Still, he and various other scholars of the

blockbuster do point to several features common to blockbusters and the blockbuster era: an

emphasis on "bigness" (in regard to production budgets, marketing campaigns, and even running

times); a focus on spectacle and special effects; and wide distribution through saturation booking

and a concomitant emphasis on a massive degree of advertising.[52] It may still be somewhat

slippery, but these elements create a relatively stable idea of the blockbuster that critics, scholars,

and the industry all seem to largely agree upon as a coherent concept.

Press, 1994, p. 7-8.

49 See Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 8-36, and Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, for examples.

50 Julian Stringer, "Introduction," *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 2.

51 Ibid., p. 3.

52 See, for instance, the summaries on Stringer, p. 8, and Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, p. 50.

Given this, I find the blockbuster era to be the most coherent, widely understood term that effectively encompasses the period this dissertation examines. If *Jaws* (1975) is widely cited as the prototypical example largely responsible for setting off the shift to blockbuster filmmaking, with the runaway success of *Star Wars* (1977) cementing it, other massive hits of the earlier 1970s like *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973) still served as important precursors and/or examples of blockbusters as well.[53] And although the Hollywood industry has certainly continued to change since this time, especially in terms of increasingly globalized production and consumption and the shift to video, streaming, and other "ancillary" markets that have long outstripped theatrical profits, we still largely find ourselves in the blockbuster era today.[54] This period aligns most closely with the gag-based films, filmmakers, and discursive issues focused on in my dissertation, ranging roughly from *Blazing Saddles* to the present. The blockbuster also serves as a useful framework for examining the resiliency of gag-based comedy given the ways in which such films largely do *not* fit its industrial model. Many gag comedies, including highly successful ones, do not fit the "bigness" associated with blockbusters, and if they do, it is only in certain aspects. For example, while some comedian comedies may be big budget affairs, they tend to center around their star's central performance as their primary form of 'bigness' rather than (or at the very least in addition to) other types of spectacle or effects.[55] And while the industry does still make space for smaller, less expensive films, gag-based comedies often struggle to fit within here as well, for reasons I detail further in chapter two. Gag comedies thus stand out as an awkward fit for an industry focused on the economics of blockbusters, making

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53 See Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, p. 54-55, and David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 25-43.

54 For ancillaries outstripping theatrical revenue, see Tom Schatz, "The Studio System," p. 36.

55 There are, of course, exceptions to this as well, from Jim Carrey's *The Mask* and Eddie Murphy's legendary box office bomb *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* (2002) to the Will Ferrell/Mark Wahlberg action-comedy *The Other Guys* (2010) or the Melissa McCarthy vehicle *Spy!* (2015).

their continuing adaptation and resiliency that much more noteworthy.

Not only this, but industrial imperatives across the blockbuster era make the adaptation of gags impressive in other ways as well. The rise in both the costs and complexity of effects work is certainly one major factor, as I discuss in chapter four, but there is also a tendency for greater blending of genres and film types within blockbuster films that further pushes gag comedy into a more secondary role. On the one hand, such genre hybridity is not a new phenomenon, as Steve Neale points out when noting the near-infinite number of genre labels trade discourse could give films within both the classical and the blockbuster eras.[56] At the same time, though, these broad generic mixes have continued to evolve and become even more dominant within blockbuster Hollywood cinema, especially for the biggest profile films that aim for broad international audiences to offset their equally huge production costs. I will discuss this in more detail across several chapters of this dissertation, particularly chapter two, but even a brief recourse to many of the most recent examples in this chapter hints at how this works. Some of the most globally successful mainstream films do make use of gags, but as part of the vast array of generic approaches and filmic modes on display in the broad categories of the family film (e.g. *Zootopia* or *Tom & Jerry*) or the superhero film (e.g. *Deadpool 2* or *The Avengers*) that may include elements of crime films, action films, fantasy, comedy (gag-based and otherwise), sci-fi, musicals, and more. Across the blockbuster era, then, gag-based comedy has had to adjust to numerous major changes in order to survive as a viable, if more niche, cinematic form.

Chapter Summaries

To trace these changes, this project outlines the industrial adaptability of gag-based comedy and the struggles of discourse to adapt to it across seven chapters. The first chapter

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56 Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 235-238.

examines the historical understandings of gags, tracing the discursive usage of the term "gag"

from its theatrical origins and throughout the classical Hollywood era. I argue that gags

displayed continuing fluidity and flexibility during this time, and I trace the reception of gags in

the trade press to showcase how gag-based comedy navigated a variety of studio era challenges,

including the shift to features, the adoption of a standard mode of production, the drive toward

middle-class respectability, and the rise of radio. In both the silent and early sound eras, we see

industrial tensions as gag comedy attempted to find its place within the studio system, and we

see discursive tensions as gags struggled to shed associations with earlier slapstick and an

increasing connection to "lowbrow," vulgar forms of humor. Due in large part to a resurgent

interest in silent gag comedy during the 1950s and 1960s, I also argue that popular discourse and

the burgeoning field of film studies began to codify connections between gags and silent cinema,

making it increasingly difficult for gags to be separated from silent comedy. This is especially

true given the focus on certain performers and visual humor in much early and subsequent film

comedy scholarship, often at the expense of engaging with later or non-visual forms of gag-

based comedy. Particularly since much classical era discourse displayed a greater, albeit still

unsettled, flexibility in its reception of gags, this continued emphasis is notable in early comedy

scholarship. It also hints at the increasing inflexibility with which later discourse would treat

gags, aiding gag comedy's movement into increasingly niche forms. While the various ways in

which gags have been historically understood impact the term's connotations for us today, I

ultimately argue that this discursive moment in the 1960s is most influential for shaping how we

understand and notice gags (or perhaps fail to do so) in the blockbuster era.

Moving into the blockbuster period proper, the second chapter focuses more on how gag

comedy has navigated the general industrial and discursive challenges of the past half-century.

Over this time, I argue that gag comedy's industrial shifts display an atypical degree of

adaptability compared to many other film types, allowing it to not only weather industrial

changes but to also find a place between smaller, higher prestige films and larger blockbusters

essential to this era's industrial approach. I have already pointed to some of the ways in which

gag-based comedy is a strange fit for a blockbuster-focused industry, and this chapter further

highlights how gag comedies favored low budget, low risk productions and were increasingly

flexible by blending with other genres and comic types so as to adapt and maintain viability

across these decades. Not only did gag comedy survive, but these industrial adaptations allowed

it to thrive, rising in the 70s and 80s to reach a peak of prominence and influence in the 90s and

early 2000s. This holds true even as gag comedy declined from the late 2000s on, becoming

merely another ingredient that was further subsumed into other film types. As part of this shift, I

explore how gag-based comedy has also shifted away from film into other transmedia forms such

as TV sketch comedy and online comedy shorts. These forms provide new outlets for gag-based

comic creators while also spreading prominent gag comedy further beyond film. As an example

of these trends, I look in greater detail at the website Funny or Die and how it has used its online

platform to adapt and overcome challenges like monetization and its relationship with more

traditional media forms. The complexities of industrial adaptation do showcase gag-based

comedy's work to remain relevant, but I end the chapter by arguing that gag comedy's industrial

rise also became increasingly in tension with its popular reception. As discourse often framed

gags as most suitable for younger, less sophisticated, lower class, and narrower audiences across

the decades, it further aided gag comedy's movement into a more secondary role within the

industry. While necessarily broad in several respects, the overview of this tension across the

blockbuster era serves as a foundation for the chapters that follow it.

Developing these trends in greater detail, in chapter three I focus on the ways gags relate

to genre in contemporary discourse and films. Although gag-based comedy is best understood as

a loose comic type rather than a full-fledged genre of its own, it is still frequently aligned with

particular comic genres, most often *with* parody and *against* romantic comedy. This is especially

true for scholarly approaches to comic genres that, explicitly or implicitly, link physical humor,

lowbrow comedy, and brief verbal gags to parodies and more complex, far less gag-oriented

types of verbal humor to romantic comedies. However, the combining of lowbrow gag comedy

with the conventions of the romantic comedy (or romcom) in the late 90s and on, best

exemplified by *There's Something About Mary*, serves to complicate this discursive positioning.

By examining how these gag-based romantic comedies work to balance narrative, gags, and

romcom tropes, I argue that the relationship of gags to genre highlights the continued

adaptability of gag comedy in the blockbuster era. It continues to borrow from other genres and

comic forms, thus adding gags to the tropes of other genres (the western, sci-fi, horror, and so

on). At the same time, I also argue that gag-based romcoms showcase the difficulties of

discourse to flexibly respond to those shifts by looking at how critics responded to gag-based

romcoms and their audience appeals. If popular discourse did see the potential for a broader

audience appeal in gag-based romcoms, they also framed them in stereotypically gendered terms

that assumed their gags were best suited for men and their romantic comedy for women. In this

way, discourse again created a tension with gag comedy's industrial adaptations, ultimately

serving to maintain a framing of gag-based comedy as best suited for more niche audiences.

Along with the push and pull of industrial resiliency and discursive narrowing, an emphasis on technological change and the increased foregrounding of effects has also become a defining element of the blockbuster era, and the ability of gags to adapt to these stands out as another notable strength. While such technological change has been both constant and central across this time, gag-based comedy has responded to it in a variety of ways. Part of my argument here details the ways in which classical gag makers utilized two primary approaches (or a combination of them): creating gags in pre-production by writing them into scripts so as to emphasize pre-planning and efficiency, or creating gags in-production so as to allow for more intuitive and improvisation-focused approaches. Blockbuster era gags often adopt and adapt both of these classical methods, even in effects-heavy comedies, to deal with the technological changes wrought during this period. However, I also argue that these adaptations come with additional challenges in terms of increased costs and more complex workflows that have further served to make gag-based comedy's role within the industry more tenuous. This is particularly evident in the subtle but important shift to creating or developing gags more frequently in *post*-production and the changes that this shift entails. As part of the increase in effects and post-production gags, I also argue that the blockbuster era features a shift away from a classical emphasis on gags centered around embodied comic performance and toward an increased emphasis on effects and other elements for gags, minimizing or eliminating embodied performance and further prioritizing the role of post-production in shaping gag comedy. Effects-based gags are by no means new, but they have become increasingly central, helping to make gags more and more of a supporting element within mainstream films.

One specific result of these technological changes is the emergence of films combining

live-action and animation as one of the blockbuster era's most prominent venues for gag-based comedy. Chapter five explores this phenomenon by tracing the history of these hybrid films and, given the added costs and technical difficulties of integrating live-action and animation, some of the rationales used to justify the frequency with which the two are combined. I argue that they have become a key site for gag comedy due to the ways in which hybrids can balance the freedom of animation with live-action's realism to create gags that are both fantastical *and* grounded. As for other shifts in this period, live-action and animation were certainly present in classical Hollywood, but they have become easier to integrate technologically and industrially over the last thirty or so years, making them ideally suited for a central role in gag comedy. However, as with other iterations of gag-based comedy, the discursive reception of hybrids shapes their viability as primarily gag-based forms. The discursive alignment of animation with family and/or juvenile audiences during this time has in particular served to limit potential audiences for live-action/animation hybrids and the degree to which they remain gag-oriented. Major examples such as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) may be huge successes, but such limitations mean that hybrids are also often more prone to spectacular flops than some other types of gag comedy. Tracing the ways in which hybrids make use of gags that attempt to utilize both animation's freedom and live-action's realism, I showcase the ways in which they serve to create another avenue for gags while also continuing to align gags with effects-heavy films, further aiding their subsumption into other film types.

Beyond technological changes, blockbuster era gag-based comedy has also adapted by aligning with previously underserved audiences and creators. I examine this further in chapter six by focusing on the rise, starting in the late 1980s, of gag-based comedies from Black creators.

Such films serve to highlight industrial adaptability by targeting different audience segments more so than previous gag comedies. They can also provide a space for "low" comedy and forms of "authentic" vulgar Black folk humor that, while identifiable in the literature on Black comedy and central to the racially and politically charged humor of earlier Black comics like Richard Pryor, were largely unavailable for mainstream films of the 1970s and earlier. In doing so, they paved the way for the work of various Black comics and filmmakers, most notably members of the Wayans family, to carve out a space for Black gag-based comedy in the 1990s and 2000s, reaching its peak with the runaway success of 2000's *Scary Movie*. However, if Black gag comedies provide a venue for Black creators and certain types of Black humor, they also foreground the continued struggles of discursive adaptability. Critics and scholars often frame such films as effective racial critiques, as reactionary continuations of minstrelsy, or as some combination of the two. This range of discursive responses is partly due to ambivalent gags in the films themselves, but I also argue that it ties into a long-standing discursive tension around the intersection of race and class that pits historical pushes for racial and cultural "uplift" against "lowbrow" (and low class) comedy and gag-based films. Black gag-based comedy thus not only provides a different perspective on continued trends of industrial and discursive adaptability, but it also points to how difficulties in *cultural* adaptability are increasingly central to the development and reception of contemporary gag-based comedy as a whole.

Finally, I examine another form of adaptability in gag comedy's usage of a greater range of satirical gags across the blockbuster period. While gags have been used as a vehicle for satire in many films, they are rarely received as such in both popular and scholarly discourse. Indeed, there is often a separation, both explicit and implicit, between satire and gags that will even

single out gags as a particularly *in*effective avenue for satire. I argue that this is due in part to another instance of discursive inflexibility, especially limitations stemming from common conceptualizations of satire and parody. Many scholarly discussions of the two tend to focus on clear limit cases for each that largely revolve around satire as a critique of content and parody as a critique of form. What gets lost in this approach, and what I am interested in looking at here, are exactly those underexplored, ambivalent cases that fall between these two poles, combining critiques of form and content so as to problematize the binaristic opposition of the two. To help address this gap, I examine how various films use gags so as to cue satire, arguing that while gags certainly *can* be used effectively to create satire, the presence of ambivalent or otherwise problematic satiric cues in a number of gags are a major reason why they are often seen as an inconsistent and ineffective method of creating satire. Satiric gags in mainstream films may be used at times to reinforce the flexibility and resiliency of gag comedy, but they can also point to the limits of such adaptability. If they carve out their own niche within gag-based comedy as a whole, it may be at the expense of struggling to be effectively recognized and understood by viewers, signaling the potential inability for gags themselves to effectively adapt to audiences or larger sociocultural changes.

These seven chapters thus provide a broad, and perhaps even eclectic, range of ways to engage with and understand the function of blockbuster era gag-based comedy. Given the looseness and broad applicability of gag comedy, though, such heterogeneity is necessary to better understand how it has adapted and maintained its resiliency in the shadow of the blockbuster. However, while I do approach gag comedy from a wide variety of perspectives, I readily acknowledge that this certainly cannot account for *every* factor that has shaped gags over

the past several decades. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope even of a project of this relative length and breadth. Nevertheless, these seven chapters serve to elucidate many of the ways, both broad and nuanced, gags have adapted industrially in this period, and how discourse has often struggled to recognize the changing roles of gag comedy. Far from being an archaic form relegated to the silent and early sound years of Hollywood cinema, as its reception sometimes implies, gag-based comedy has been and remains a vital force in Hollywood comedy no matter the period. Recognizing and further exploring this fact will be a major step in ensuring that the literature on film (and other) comedy can likewise continue to adapt to the resiliency and malleability of gags.

Chapter 1

"'But What Gags': A Discursive History of Gags in Classical Hollywood Comedy"

In one sense, tracing the history of gags in film comedy should be a straightforward checking of boxes. The earliest comedies, from *Arroseur et arrosé* (1896) and on, revolved around a single gag or brief repetitions of it, developing additional variations and a larger variety of gags as films grew in length from less than a minute to one and two reels. Later in the silent era, names like Keystone, Mack Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and more crafted innumerable memorable gags across their shorts and, eventually, their features. Early sound cinema added examples to the canon of gags by figures such as the Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields, and Wheeler & Woolsey, while animated cartoons proved to be another incredibly rich source of memorable gags. Subsequent decades of classical Hollywood cinema featured the often gag-based work of performers (Bob Hope), directors (Frank Tashlin), or both (Jerry Lewis), while international hyphenates such as Jacques Tati likewise rose to critical prominence on the back of their creatively gagged comedies. The blockbuster-era has been no exception, as Mel Brooks, Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker, Joe Dante, Jim Carrey, David Wain, and more continue this legacy. The types of gags may be different over this century-plus of cinema, but there remains a steady, reliable source of names, examples, and films that maintain the tradition of gag comedy.

It should also be clear, though, that this approach is overly simplistic and tells us very little about what gags and gag-based comedy truly are or how they are understood. Critics and scholars often write about gags in silent film comedy, and less frequently about gags in subsequent eras, but this does not mean that they are all necessarily referring to quite the same concept when they discuss "gags," nor do gags retain the same associations across this time.

There may be overlap between the gags in display in Keystone shorts of the 1910s or Keaton features of the 1920s and those mentioned in the opening of my introduction by critics in the 2010s, but that does not mean that gags *themselves* are understood by contemporaneous writers in quite the same way. Instead, the combined weight of those names, examples, and films, plus the accumulation of decades of discursive responses to gags and gag comedy, means that contemporaneous understandings will always differ in subtle, but important, ways. This is even more true for contemporary discourse around gags, which is shaped by both the changing discursive nature of gags and the evolving historiography of gag comedy itself.

Consequently, before we can better understand the connotations around gags and gag-based comedy in blockbuster-era Hollywood comedy, we first need to establish how gags have been *historically* understood. They may be a constant part of film comedy, but their meaning has continually shifted and evolved over the decades, and so to get a better sense of how gags have adapted throughout the blockbuster era, we thus need to first better understand the historical context of gags. How has popular discourse, including critics, the trade press, and filmmakers themselves, understood gags in the past? How have these understandings stayed consistent, and how have they changed over time to more flexibly acknowledge changes in the gags themselves? What particular understandings or periods stand out that have shaped, and at times limited, the scholarly understanding of gags that we have today? Similarly, how have we arrived at some of the inflexibility within discourse that I argue is a key part of the reception of gag comedy in blockbuster Hollywood cinema? To answer these questions, I examined results for the term "gag" in the trade press and other popular sources available from a variety of online databases (Lantern (http://lantern.mediahist.org/); the ProQuest Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive;

the ProQuest International Index to Performing Arts) to trace the usage of the term and how it has evolved over time. Complementing this wealth of popular discourse on gags and gag-based comedy, I also looked at the scholarly work on gags in film comedy studies to further nuance how scholars have helped shape, and been shaped by, the shifting historical connotations of gags. By combining these two approaches, we get a more concrete sense of both how the gag as a concept has adapted over time and how particular understandings shape, and at times limit, the approaches to gags in the age of blockbuster cinema.

This historical context is divided into two main parts. First, I trace the discourse around gags and gag-based comedy in the trade press throughout the classical Hollywood era, ranging roughly from the 1900s to the early 1960s. Over this period, we see how the concept of the gag shifts from its early theatrical roots, how it became understood as a major element of silent comedy, and how its usage ebbed and flowed in subsequent decades due to the impact of radio, changes in comedy production, non-comic usages, and more. Second, I trace the resurgence of interest in silent film comedy in the 1950s and 1960s and its impact on the understanding of gags in film studies discourse. This interest, both via books and compilation films, helped influence a number of key scholarly approaches to gags in early film comedy studies. At the same time, though, it also served to largely limit the understanding of gags to silent, visual film comedy, creating a less flexible approach that still affects our discursive understanding of gags today. Ending with a brief examination of discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this historical overview provides not only a stronger historical context for how gags are viewed today, but *why* they are often unheralded as a major component of contemporary Hollywood comedy as well. To understand the path that gag comedy has followed in recent decades, we need to further

unpack the ways in which gags' connotations and their usage have historically developed to create this mixture of adaptability and rigidity.

Gag Discourse in Classical Hollywood Cinema

Most sources date the comedic use of the term "gag" back to the nineteenth-century theater, where it could refer to a joke, a pun, or simply an actor's improvised remarks.[1] Given this, it is unsurprising that early mentions of gags in entertainment industry trade press linked the term to theatrical performances, especially vaudeville. Throughout the early-to-mid 1910s, gags were most often tied to verbal theatrical comedy, but it is difficult to get a clear sense of *exactly* how the trade press used the term during this period. In some instances, a gag was framed as the punchline of a verbal joke or as the culmination of a longer comic routine, as in a 1912 *Variety* review that decried a vaudeville team for using too much setup for too weak of a gag.[2] At other times, reviewers saw the gag not as a culmination to a comic set piece/routine but simply as a type of informal comic patter between performers or a much smaller scale unit of verbal humor akin to a joke or a pun, much like in the term's origins.[3] Even when used to describe theatrical performances, we see a wide variety of possible definitions and applications of the "gag" that vary according to scale and placement, from brief jokes to elaborate routines. Further linking these references is a consistent understanding of the gag as something *verbal* rather than physical or visual. A 1918 burlesque review specifically refers to a gag as the *utterances* that cue an actor to perform an onstage pratfall rather than the fall itself, while a 1916 ad for a 3-person act in Boston mentions that one group member slaps another member's face after the *telling* of each

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1   See definitions and examples under category 3 in "gag, n.1," *Oxford English Dictionary*, or by Don B. Wilmeth in *The Language of American Popular Entertainment*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981, p. 105.
2   "Morris and Clark," *Variety*, 15 Nov 1912, p. 25.
3   For comic exchange, see "Chicago," *Variety*, 10 Dec 1915, p. 24. For pun, see "Chicago," *Variety*, 28 Jan 1916, p. 36 and "Union Square," *Variety*, 2 Jan 1914, p. 21.

gag.[4] During the early years of silent cinema, then, the gag struggled (at least in the pages of *Variety*) to separate itself from its theatrical, verbal origins, which helps to explain the lack of references to gags in the earliest film comedies.

However, even when it *was* applied to film, the gag still carried a variety of different meanings during the 1910s. A gag could refer to a narrative twist akin to a gimmick or a trick played on the audience, such as when a *Motion Picture News* critic decried "the dream gag" as a played out method for salvaging an unworkable film by revealing that it was all a dream.[5] Elsewhere, a *Variety* report on the proposed filming of the Eugene Walter play *Fine Feathers* refers to it as a "picture gag," implying that the attempt to "reproduce the play in its entirety in pictures" was little more than a curiosity at the time, though not necessarily a *comic* one in any way.[6] In both cases, we see a developing sense of the gag as a type of gimmick, a trend that would continue to evolve as one way of using the term in subsequent decades. Outside of these types of narrative gimmicks, "gag" was most commonly used to refer to certain types of exploitation and advertising, a practice that appears to have originated on the stage but would also frequently be applied to film exploitation over the following decades.[7] As we will see, these senses lingered and eventually merged after the coming of sound, but during this time, none of these usages of the term specifically connect the "gag" with film *comedy* in any way. Instead, this particular connotation would not develop until later in the silent era.

Specifically, the trades began discussing gags in relation to film comedy as the industry transitioned to feature films by the late 1910s, albeit in reference to the one and two-reelers that

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4 "Broadway Frolics," *Variety*, 22 Feb 1918, p. 10. "Wells-Norworth-Moore," *Variety*, 29 Sep 1916, p. 34.
5 "'Trixie from Broadway' – with Margarita Fisher," *Motion Picture News*, 21 Jun 1919, p. 4212.
6 "With the Press Agents," *Variety*, 28 Feb 1913, p. 12.
7 For examples of theatrical advertising as gags, see "Chicago," *Variety*, 12 May 1916, p. 25 and "Unique Advance Gag," *Variety*, 21 Nov 1919, p. 7.

continued to dominate comedy production at the time. In particular, gags were often explicitly mentioned in stories on the comic performers coming out of or connected with Mack Sennett's Keystone studio, a central focal point for discourse on gag-based comedy throughout much of the twentieth century. Gags could refer to the overall comic style of Keystone, as when *Motion Picture News* chastises those who go "after the Mack Sennett type of comedy" by simply trying to one-up their gags through excess rather than variation.[8] They could also refer to Sennett's role as a producer, as when *Moving Picture World*'s preview of an upcoming Paramount-Sennett comedy promised that "every bit of funny 'business', every gag" had been thoroughly thought out by Sennett, the man who had made comedy (including gags) "his life study."[9] Most frequently, however, gags were used in conjunction with the works of performers who first gained fame as part of the Keystone cadre. A relatively early mention of gags, as a specific type of comic material lumped in with the "punch" or "laugh," comes in a 1917 *Photoplay* article on how Keystone's most famous former performer, Charlie Chaplin, made his comedy.[10] Similarly, a later profile on another Sennett "find," Louise Fazenda, featured her discussing the process of gag creation in her Sennett comedies, offering an explicit, if seemingly casual, definition of the gag as "any bit of action that will make people laugh."[11] Although this definition is extremely broad, it nevertheless explicitly ties the gag to film comedy, hinting at its evolution and eventual acceptance as a comic term.

The most prominent Sennett-related figure outside of Chaplin, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, provides additional definitions of the gag. At the height of his popularity in the late teens, Arbuckle was the subject of numerous profiles and other trade and fan press attention, and

8   Longacre, "Bringing Them Into a Close-Up," *Motion Picture News*, 19 Jan 1918, p. 441.
9   "Manufacturers' Advance Notes," *The Moving Picture World*, 29 Sep 1917, p. 2016.
10 Terry Ramsey, "Chaplin – and How He Does It," *Photoplay*, Sep 1917, p. 138.
11 Allen Corliss, "Fazenda – Comic Venus," *Photoplay*, Apr 1918, p. 67.

several of these stories discussed the role of gags in film comedy. For *Motion Picture Classic* in 1916, Arbuckle defined a gag as "a piece of by-play with no direct connection with the plot," further implying that such additions were frequently the result of on-set brainstorming and collaboration among the cast and crew rather than pre-planning.[12] This is also an early example of an issue that would become central to the discourse around gags, the relationship between gags and narrative, with Arbuckle here explicitly framing gags as working *against* a film's story. Two years later, a *Photoplay* story where Arbuckle "revealed" how gags were worked out on-set gives a more detailed definition of the gag as "a bit of 'business' – a situation, that will shake the laughter out of the casual looker, because of its incongruity, its abrupt contrast, or its physical humor."[13] Although Arbuckle is not explicitly positioned as the one defining the gag this time, this definition provides a much deeper connection to film comedy. It aligns with major theories of humor ("because of its incongruity"), implies a more complex relationship between gags and narrative ("a situation"), and refers to specifically visual comedy ("the casual looker", "its physical humor") in ways that show greater adaptability to how gags function in the context of film comedy. Although far from a clear, smooth line, we do see something of a development in the discursive understanding of gags in these examples, moving from broad definitions to more nuanced ones that better resemble later understandings of the term.

Additionally, stories about Keystone provide some of the earliest references to a figure that would dominate discussions of comic creation throughout the 1920s: the gag man.[14] The

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12 Robert F. Moore, "Feeding with Fatty Arbuckle," *Motion Picture Classic*, Nov 1916, p. 46.
13 "'Writing' Comedy with Fatty Arbuckle," *Photoplay*, Apr 1918, p. 48.
14 With very few exceptions "gag men" were just that: men. There is very little discussion of gag women in silent comedy, and what discussions there are generally see gag women as a novelty. The two major references I came across in Lantern credit two different women as *both* being the "first" gag woman in Hollywood (Frances Hyland, according to *Picture Play Magazine*, Jan 1927, p. 24, and Beth Brown, according to *Variety*, 29 Feb 1928, p. 10.)

term appears as early as May 1917 in a brief piece about the writing of comedy at Keystone, but the position of (and discursive references to) the gag man rapidly increased in the early 1920s.[15] As part of gag comedy's industrial adaptation in the decade, gag men were often framed as providing material to support comedy's big names in both relatively small profiles and elaborate, multi-page spreads that highlighted their contributions to the steady stream of comedy shorts coming out of Hollywood studios.[16] These profiles called gag men the unsung heroes of film comedy, painting them as chronically underpaid, overanxious, and overserious men who essentially function as "an undignified scenario writer," positioning comic creation as an (overly) serious business that belies the laughter it brings on screen. They also portrayed gag men as both essential to studios for the efficiency they brought to comedy production and invisible due to the fact that "their bosses' press agents tell the world each comedian does his own stuff."[17] In addition, stories on gag men also provided implicit and explicit gag definitions that echo those seen earlier, loosely grouping together gags as "a bit of business or a funny situation" that are noteworthy for their ability to create laughter.[18] Such stories should, of course, be taken with more than a few grains of salt, but they also point to the industrial importance of gag men and the ways in which the gag's comic connotations continued to develop in the silent era.

The stories on gag men also link back to earlier discourse by further aligning gags and narrative. Gag men like Malcolm St. Clair framed gags as tightly interwoven with narrative (since comedy must "arise from natural situations") and comedian Charley Chase concurred ("each gag must advance your story or it doesn't belong"), but these views often contrasted with

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15 Epes Winthrop Sargent, "The Photoplaywright," *The Moving Picture World*, 19 May 1917, p. 1113.
16 "How Do They Get Their Gags?," *Camera*, 14 Jul 1923, p. 22. See H.B.K. Willis, "In the Temples of Tee-Hee!," *Screenland*, Jan 1924, p. 28-29, 92, 99, and Alice Tildesley, "Leaders in the Funny Business," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Jul 1925, p. 28-29, 109-110.
17 Willis, p. 28.
18 Tildesley, p. 28.

the advice in contemporaneous writing manuals and articles.[19] In 1920, screenwriting columnist

Wycliffe A. Hill framed the gag as "exaggerated, unnatural comedy" that "is so ridiculous that it

makes you laugh," with the underlying implication that gag-based comedy depends on

incongruity rather than story context to evoke laughter. He also saw the gag as a central

component of slapstick comedy, a form where "there is very little story or plot necessary,"

further reinforcing narrative's lack of importance for gag-based films.[20] This echoes the earlier

conclusions by *Photoplay* writer Alfred A. Cohn that "there is no such thing as a scenario or

script of a slapstick comedy" since, as he claimed, their plots were generally the product of

conference discussions and were often changed during production.[21] William Lord Wright's

manual on photoplay writing also describes slapstick and farce comedies as largely building their

narratives during production, rarely drawing on external, preexisting stories as in the "comedy

drama type" of film.[22] Thus, while comedians themselves may have tried to discursively portray

their own gag-based work as dependent upon narrative, others identified gag-based comedy in

part due to its *lack* of a strong narrative.

The debate over gags and narrative continued throughout the 1920s and has remained a

major influence on the understanding of gag-based comedy ever since. As early as 1918,

Picture-Play Magazine praised the comedy in five-reelers because its depth of characterization

provided space for greater contrast between comedy and drama than in two-reelers, where "we

have gag after gag hurled at us" without variation.[23] Critics frequently expressed similar

sentiments in subsequent years, further separating gags and narrative. A 1922 *Film Daily* review

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19 Ibid., p. 28, 29.
20 Wycliffe A. Hill, "Continuity Writing," *Camera!*, 10 Jul 1920, p. 13, 15.
21 Alfred A. Cohn, "'Writing' Slapstick," *Photoplay*, Sep 1917, p. 118.
22 William Lord Wright, *Photoplay Writing*, New York: Falk Publishing Co, Inc., 1922, p. 126.
23 "What's Happened to Comedy?," *Picture-Play Magazine*, Dec 1918, p. 254-255.

of a Johnny Hines two-reeler bemoans Hines' decline from a comedian to a "gag engineer" who presents a series of gags "without very much attention or bother to story, character or continuity," while a *Moving Picture World* reviewer praised a 1924 Al St. John short for its "well connected" gag sequences and its above average story that did not intrude on the film's gags.[24] While the latter review is more positive, its implication that gag-based comedy does not *need* to have much (or any) story to be successful still points to a fundamental separation between gags and narrative. Further complicating this, reviews occasionally also accepted the two as *separate* but still *compatible*: a 1925 review of the Educational two-reeler *Dragon Alley* praised it for being incredibly funny, "one howl from start to finish," *even though* the film itself made no attempt to develop a story.[25] As these examples show, if critical opinions tended to advocate for a greater focus on story rather than gags in comedies, the relationship between the two was still contested at this time. The seeds of discursive adaptability and inflexibility can both be seen in these varying responses, but they remained far from settled in the critical reception of gag comedy during this decade.

As the 1920s continued, though, numerous examples highlight how the drive to emphasize story over gags would soon become the dominant discourse across the industry. This is perhaps most evident in writings attributed to major gag-based comics themselves that, in opposition to much of the critical discourse, showed a clear preference for the story-based approach by the mid-1920s. In *Exhibitors Herald*, comic star Charley Chase explicitly called for greater narrative development in comedies as part of the shift from one to two-reelers in comedy production. He advocated that gags remain "subservient" and were "never allowed … to crowd

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24 "Some Short Reels," *The Film Daily*, 9 Jul 1922, p. 13. "His Bitter Half," *Moving Picture World*, 12 Jul 1924, p. 142.
25 Chester J. Smith, "'Dragon Alley'," *Motion Picture News*, 16 May 1925, p. 2441.

out the human interest," hinting at a path that comedy as a whole would take as it transitioned

from shorts to features.[26] Sam Taylor, Harold Lloyd's frequent director, likewise declared the

"new styles" in comedy to be "away from slapstick and pure-gag footage toward legitimate

comedies of situation and plot development" in 1925, evincing a blunt preference for narrative

over gags.[27] These both echo comments credited to Chase the year before, when he declared the

day of the increasingly silly gags in comedy to be over, replaced by a new era "when comedy

must tell a story of some kind" instead.[28] Harold Lloyd concurred, proposing that audiences "are

appreciating more than ever the comedy which has a fairly well defined plot" and calling for

more "natural gags – laughs that are obtained in legitimate situations and by legitimate means."

However, he also notes that *some* of the roughness of older slapstick (implicitly, its more

physical humor) must remain in these films, again providing a sense that a shift from gags to

narrative would not be as clean, smooth, or total as other discourse may imply.[29] In general,

though, these creators were clearly positioning themselves as a vanguard in trying to establish

narrative as a necessary and key element for gag comedy moving forward.

Whether this discursive positioning reflected the actual views of comic creators rather

than their studios or producers is, of course, highly questionable, and critics continued to remain

ambivalent about the proper ratio of gags to narrative. Chester J. Smith of *Motion Picture News*

saw the 1925 Universal short *Capt. Suds* as loaded with gags "of the rough slapstick variety" but

ultimately judged it a failure for lacking suspense and humor as it padded itself to fill two-reels,

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26 Charley Chase, "Sincerity Keynote of Success in Comedy, Says Pathe Star," *Exhibitors Herald*, 28 Nov 1925, p. 82.
27 Sam Taylor, "New Styles in Comedy," *The Film Daily*, 7 Jun 1925, p. 111.
28 Charles Chase Parrott, "Comedy Production," *The Truth About the Movies by the Stars*, ed. Laurence A. Hughes, Hollywood: Hollywood Publishers, Inc., 1924, p. 418.
29 Harold Lloyd, "Comedy Development," *The Truth About the Movies by the Stars*, ed. Laurence A. Hughes, Hollywood: Hollywood Publishers, Inc., 1924, p. 411.

thus positioning gags as unable to provide adequate structure *or* comedy for the film.[30] *Variety* saw the 1926 Raymond Griffith feature *Wet Paint* in similar terms, calling it a film that "simply amounts to a series of 'gags'" instead of developing any of its various narrative threads; as a consequence, they found it moderately pleasant but about 18 minutes too long.[31] Responses like these may still see room for gags in comedy, but to the detriment of the overall narrative structure of the film. In contrast, others like *Motion Picture News*' Frank Elliott complained that the 1926 Johnny Hines vehicle *Rainbow Riley* suffered from too *much* drama at the expense of its gag material, a complaint similar to when *Variety* declared the lack of a story in Syd Chaplin's *Oh! What a Nurse* (1926) to be of little importance since it was "the 'gag' stuff" that made the picture work.[32] Conflicting critical opinions like these serve to complicate, or even refute, the discourse propagated elsewhere by comic creators, highlighting both the flexibility *and* the lack of a coherent, sustained approach to gags and narrative across trade discourse of the 1920s.

That being said, we still see producers and industry personnel trying to shift the balance toward the story end of the gag/narrative divide. Ray Rockett, a producer at First National, told *Motion Picture News* that "proper preparation of the story or scenario" was the most important element of filmmaking, including for comedies, and he advocated that comedy should be clearly "built" into a story rather than the "ridiculous" approach of simply injecting gags or slapstick into the narrative.[33] Such a sharp divide between the industry and (at least some) critics may seem curious, but the industry views, including those from Lloyd and Chase, are in many ways not surprising. Rockett, as a producer, and Lloyd and Chase, both of whom were intimately

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30 Chester J. Smith, "'Capt. Suds'," *Motion Picture News*, 19 Dec 1925, p. 3035.
31 "Wet Paint," *Variety*, 19 May 1926, p. 16.
32 Frank Elliott, "Rainbow Riley," *Motion Picture News*, 20 Feb 1926, p. 913. "Oh! What a Nurse," *Variety*, 24 Feb 1926, p. 43.
33 William A. Johnston, "An Editor on Broadway," *Motion Picture News*, 26 Jun 1926, p. 2947.

involved in writing, directing, and/or producing their own films, all had a vested interest in the

continued growth and efficiency of the Hollywood film industry. Thus, they championed

narrative-driven comedy, with its concomitant careful planning and pre-production, over gag-

based comedy, often framed as highly modular and only loosely planned, to fit in with larger

trends crystallizing in the industry at the time. Given the continuing emphasis on more rigid

divisions of labor, greater scripting and pre-planning for budgetary concerns, and greater overall

producer control, pushing this agenda discursively was as much an economic concern as an

aesthetic one.[34] If earlier discourse, especially around Keystone, emphasized spontaneity and a

reliance on improvisation and looser pre-planning, here we see the industry pushing back against

such a portrayal.[35] Rather than framing gag comedy as lacking top-down control and thus open

to potential cost overruns, emphasizing narrative attempted to associate gag comedy with the

idea that it could be as efficient, practical, and cost effective as any other form of 1920s cinema.

Critics lacked the same motivation to reinforce this industrial shift, and their reception of

certain gag-based films created further tension by implicitly refuting the industry's pro-narrative

approach. Harold Lloyd's films are a particularly revealing case in point. Across the decade,

profiles of Lloyd and pieces written by him took pains to position his comedy as one based

around classical principles of unity, characterization, and story, but reviews of his films and other

stories provided a different take on the strengths of Lloyd's comedy.[36] *Moving Picture World*

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34 See Janet Staiger, "Dividing Labor for Production Control: Thomas Ince and the Rise of the Studio System," *Cinema Journal*, 18.2 (1979), p. 16-25, and Janet Staiger, "Blueprints for Feature Films: Hollywood's Continuity Scripts," in *The American Film Industry*, 1976, ed. Tino Balio, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 173-194 for foundational examples of these trends within the early Hollywood film industry.

35 See chapter 4 for more on the discursive framing of Keystone. See also Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

36 For a sampling of these see Sumner Smith, "Harold Lloyd, a Real Showman, Discusses Comical Comedy," *Moving Picture World*, 25 Nov 1922, p. 316; Harold Lloyd, "The Laugh Factory," *The Film Daily*, 22 Jun 1924, p. 97; and Dorothy Donnell Calhoun, "Harold Tells on Himself," *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1925, p. 59, 104-106.

characterized Lloyd's 1924 film *Hot Water* as one that "carries no plot but consists entirely of one gag after another," a sentiment echoed in *Variety*'s positive review of the film as "strictly a gag picture."[37] This view held for 1928's *Speedy* as well, which *Variety* again called "a gag picture" with the appended praise "but what gags."[38] As we shall see, this kind of explicit praise for the gags rather than the narratives in Lloyd's comedies would be trotted out again in for his early sound films and later retrospectives of his career, showcasing a frequent reception of him as a clearly *gag*-based comedian.

This is further complicated, however, by the fact that neither Lloyd's self-positioning nor the trades' reception of him always remained consistent. While Lloyd usually emphasized the importance of character and narrative in his films, there were also several exceptions to this tendency. In a 1927 *Picture Play Magazine* profile, Lloyd claimed to not use a script, instead building his film up from gags, gag conferences, and the responses of preview audiences.[39] In this way, Lloyd complicates the sense of careful control by letting gags shape his films and allowing audiences to ultimately decide what gags will make the finished picture. Similarly, though Lloyd himself is not quoted, a 1928 report on his use of the "Lafograph" for preview screenings of *Speedy* serves to connect Lloyd with larger currents in gag-based comedy, emphasizing that comedies "should be a relay of gags" while also noting that gags should not interfere with narrative progression.[40] Lloyd's position is thus not a monolithic (or even necessarily a coherent) one during the 1920s, allowing discourse to more flexibly emphasize *both* the narratives and gags in his films. This can be rationalized, at least in part, by having

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37 "Harold Lloyd's Latest to Play Strand," *Moving Picture World*, 11 Oct 1924, p. 501. "Hot Water," *Variety*, 10 Sep 1924, p. 26.
38 "Speedy," *Variety*, 11 Apr 1928, p. 12.
39 Malcolm H. Oettinger, "Leaving 'Em Laughing," *Picture Play Magazine*, Aug 1927, p. 114.
40 P.K. Thomajan, "'Lafograph' Is Used to Snare, Record All Laughs in Comedy," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, 23 Jun 1928, p. 39-40.

audiences themselves stand in for the emphasis on careful pre-production that elsewhere served

to guarantee economic success; credit (and potentially blame) is instead placed on the predictive

ability of audiences' reactions to gags. In addition, while critics often focused on gags as the key

to Lloyd's success, they could frame Lloyd as an especially *story*-driven comedian at other times

as well. *The Film Daily*'s review of *The Kid Brother* (1927) praised its "corking set of comedy

situations that fit consistently into a well joined plot," while a later *Motion Picture Magazine*

profile of Lloyd promoting the film assured readers that the film balanced gags *and*

characterization equally.[41] Unlike the reception of *Speedy* as a gags-first affair, then, trade

responses here highlight narrative in a way that fits more neatly with Lloyd's frequent framing of

his own work.

At the same time, underlying these discussions of gags and narrative in Lloyd's work are

larger trends of changing taste that, as scholars like Lea Jacobs have shown, were on the minds

of both filmmakers and the trades in the 1920s.[42] Gag-based comedy was no exception, and the

explicit foregrounding of strong characters/narratives in the work of comedians like Lloyd and

Chase, as well as their reception as still largely gag-oriented comics, highlights how this tension

continued to operate within the industry. It appeared in debates about the balance between gags

and narrative to editorials about the "progression" of film comedy (e.g. Lloyd's entry in *The*

Truth About the Movies by the Stars) and in attempts to add a touch of class to gag men by

instead referring to them as "comedy constructors."[43] Moves like these created a split between

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41 "'The Kid Brother'," *The Film Daily*, 30 Jan 1927, p. 6. Milton Howe, "Behind Harold's *Spectacles*," *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1927, p. 25.

42 See Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

43 As far as I can tell, Jesse Lasky was the first to widely propose this new term. See "Lasky Defines Function of 'Comedy Constructor'," *Moving Picture World*, 2 Jan 1926, p. 73, and "Glorifying the Gag Man," *Motion Picture News*, 9 Jan 1926, p. 154-155. It gained some traction in the following years, but it failed to replace "gag man" as the preferred term to describe such contributors to film comedies.

'refined' contemporary comedy and 'primitive' earlier slapstick, creating connotations between gags and low taste that continue to be felt. It is also visible in reviews that credit Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* with using a more subtle, "human" humor rather than "the gag type that might be expected of Chaplin" or that describe Ernst Lubitsch's comedy as more akin to that of the era's respected stage dramatists than "the 'gag' type ... Mack Sennett formula."[44] As a notable exception to this trend, Gilbert Seldes' 1924 book *The Seven Lively Arts* explicitly favored the "vulgarity" of Sennett-style slapstick to the "gentility" he saw as encroaching upon film comedy, going so far as to see a dangerous "step toward gentility" in Lloyd's attempts to remove the vulgar from his comedy.[45] While this discourse does not, in general, *explicitly* frame gag-based comedy as a clearly "lower" form, such a position is strongly implied in the references to slapstick, Sennett, vulgarity, and other elements associated with gag comedy, adding further difficulty to the appeals for respectability from gag-based comics like Lloyd.

However, there are also examples of more explicit discussions of gags and taste during the decade. As early as 1920, the trades carried reports of production companies looking to move 'beyond' gag-based comedy. *The Film Daily* reported that Lloyd Hamilton and Jack White intended "to produce clean comedies" with strong narrative and the "elimination of the trick gag and slapstick stuff," while *Picture Play Magazine* later highlighted Monty Banks' 1924 move from "slapstick and the gag-man's labored mirth" of two-reelers to the more subtle humor of features.[46] Not only performers and producers but critics also defended this trend away from gag-based comedy to more "legitimate" (and, not coincidentally, more narrative-focused) comic

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44 Qtd in "Chaplin Picture Scores on Coast," *Motion Picture News*, 13 Oct 1923, p. 1796. "Originality Is Key to Lubitsch's Success," *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 1 Mar 1924, p. 7.
45 Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924, p. 16.
46 "Coast Brevities," *The Film Daily*, 23 Sep 1920, p. 3. "Monty Jumps Into Features," *Picture Play Magazine*, Mar 1924, p. 68.

forms. Writing in 1925 on the state of the short, Syracuse critic Chester B. Bahn called for more

short comedies "of the 'polite' school" because of the tendency he saw by producers to solely

provide comedy of "the hokum and gag variety" that served to underestimate the intelligence of

their audiences.[47] *Motion Picture News* characterized a Lupino Lane short as featuring weak gag

material that still "will undoubtedly be liked" in lower prestige neighborhood theaters,

highlighting a continued demand for gag comedy in less desirable locales.[48] Elsewhere, a

response from the executive director of New York's Film Arts Guild in *The Film Spectator*

agreed with some of the magazine's critiques of the 1927 F.W. Murnau film *Sunrise*, specifically

noting that the film's "artistic integrity" was destroyed by episodes such as "the drunken pig gag"

that fit more in a Sennett film than in a cinematic work of "art."[49] Examples like these served to

more explicitly reinforce the discursive trend that positioned gags as a lower comic form most

suitable for equally "lower" audiences, developing a connotation that continued to shape gag

discourse in increasingly inflexible ways.

The discursive view of gags further changed as the Hollywood industry transitioned to

sound at the end of the 1920s. Examining gag discourse during the early sound period highlights

three primary trends: concerns about the impact of sound on gag-based comedy; continued

debates over the relationship of gag-based comedy to audiences and notions of taste; and shifting

applications of the term "gag" to areas outside of film comedy. The move to sound created

technical difficulties for the entire industry, including the struggle to standardize sound systems,

an initial need for multi-camera shooting, and an early lack of effective sound editing, but gag-

based comedies faced their own set of unique challenges.[50] One issue was the impact of

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47 "Gauging the Scope of the Short Subject Appeal," *The Film Daily*, 21 Jun 1925, p. 30.
48 Chester J. Smith, "'A Half-Pint Hero'," *Motion Picture News*, 2 Sep 1927, p. 711.
49 Symon Gould, "From Symon Gould," *The Film Spectator*, 18 Feb 1928, p. 18.
50 For the technical challenges in transitioning to sound, see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson,

audience laughter on the flow of gags and story within sound films, particularly comic shorts. Leading comedy producer Hal Roach confessed to *Motion Picture News* in 1928 that he was "very skeptical" about the success of sound comedy (especially shorts) due to the difficulties of incorporating dialogue and maintaining a fast pace while still leaving appropriate space for audience laughter.[51] The fear of losing frenetic pacing, a staple of slapstick and gag-based comedy since its inception, was due not only to the difficulty of knowing where (or where *not*) to add dialogue to comic shorts, but to the aforementioned technical challenges of early sound film recording as well. Nevertheless, such issues hardly mattered for major Roach stars Laurel and Hardy, as they kept their popularity by maintaining a steady, measured pace that made use of reaction shots and double takes so as to allow ample space for audience laughter.[52] Other studios took different approaches. At Paramount, the studio averaged the laugh time of two separate "sets of auditors" after each joke and/or gag in a film to help determine the proper amount of time to leave for audience response in the finished product.[53] As late as 1935, craft magazine *The International Photographer* was still weighing in on the issue by proposing that technicians develop a variable-speed projector to allow projectionists to adjust to laughs (or lack thereof) on the fly.[54] While applicable to all kinds of humor, these examples highlight how the addition of sound posed specific challenges for gags, and how gag comedy adapted to successfully incorporate sound, during this transition period.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 298-308.

51 "Roach Skeptical of Sound in Shorts," *Motion Picture News*, 4 Aug 1928, p. 397.

52 In later years, some critics saw this approach as affecting the reception of Laurel and Hardy by contemporary audiences. In a theatrical setting, audience laughter smoothed over these areas of slower pace, but when watched alone or in smaller groups on television or video, the films' pacing could become extremely slow. See Randy Skretvedt, *Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies*, Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press, 1987.

53 Clifford Howard, "Hollywood Notes," *Close-Up*, Sep 1929, p. 250.

54 "California Pacific International Exposition," *The International Photographer*, May 1935, p. 33.

Of course, the industry as a whole learned to cope with the challenges of sound quite rapidly, but the transition to sound also shifted the discourse on gags in film comedy in other ways, especially so as to reinforce the notions of taste developing under the surface throughout the twenties. Early sound shorts like the 1928 Chic Sale film *The Ladies' Man* retained the same associations between gags and lower comic prestige, as it was called both a "good low-comedy gag picture" by *Exhibitors Daily Review* and "an out and out gag picture, designed for low comedy effect" by *Variety*.[55] Even more emphatically, as sound film began to supplant the silent cinema, new worries about the vulgarity of gags arose. As early as October 1928, reviewers noted the touches of vulgarity "so prominently displayed" in many contemporary comedies, implying a connection between the rise of sound and a greater vulgarity in film comedy that would continue in subsequent years.[56] This is perhaps most explicit in a review of the 1931 film adaptation of the stage musical *Flying High* that takes offense at its "dirty" gags because they are "never emphasized as much on the stage as on the screen."[57] While it is unclear if these specific gags are visual, verbal, or both, sound cinema seemed to push the propriety of gags past the line of acceptability, leading to a critical response increasingly concerned with the appropriateness of gags that still shapes comic cycles in more recent decades.

There were also further attempts during this time by producers and comedians to move "beyond" gag-based comedy's connotations into something ostensibly more respectable. RKO's 1932 announcement of a new short comedy department that would "get away from slapstick" and move toward "sophisticated" comedy by combining "sure-fire" gags with "light, sparkling humor" provides one explicit linking of gags and taste, but such connections remained largely

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55 "'The Ladies' Man'," *Exhibitors Daily Review*, 20 Oct 1928, p. 4. "Talking Shorts," *Variety*, 17 Oct 1928, p. 16.
56 "'The Bargain Hunt'," *Motion Picture News*, 6 Oct 1928, p. 1098.
57 Charles E. Lewis, "Passing in Review," *Motion Picture Herald*, 19 Dec 1931, p. 46.

implicit.[58] Harold Lloyd again provides a vivid example of these discursive trends in action:

while Lloyd responded to the onset of sound by continuing to stump for visual comedy, declaring

in 1929 that "a gag gets over better pictorially than it does audibly," his position soon changed.[59]

Mere months later, a feature on Lloyd in *Talking Screen* (obviously not an unbiased source) had

the comedian eagerly embracing sound since it "will vastly improve his gags," albeit more via

comic sound effects than by humorous dialogue, an approach that would allow Lloyd to still

maintain the rapid pace of his silent films.[60] The profile also positioned Lloyd as primarily a gag

comedian, calling story in his films "secondary to the comedy business," which Lloyd reinforces

when describing how he spent far more time working out comic scenes than story-driven ones.[61]

However, a steady decline in the popularity of Lloyd's early sound films caused him to reassess

this position. By 1934 he was framing *The Cat's Paw* as explicitly moving *away* from gag

comedy and toward more sustained story and characterization, a move Lloyd further believed

would help more than triple his infrequent feature output of the early sound years.[62] Although

this push may most proximately relate to filling a need for acceptable "clean" comedy at the

height of 1934's attacks on film content and threats of censorship, this shift also fits the constant

struggle to adapt that is visible in Lloyd's continued oscillation between emphasizing gags and

emphasizing story in his comedies.

No matter his approach to sound and story, though, critical response remained mixed.

Reviews of his first sound comedy, 1929's *Welcome Danger*, both praised its "mammoth

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58 "New Technique in Comedy Production Being Introduced by Radio Pictures," *The Film Daily*, 30 Sep 1932, p. 1, 6.
59 Harold Lloyd, "Timely Topics," *The Film Daily*, 3 Oct 1929, p. 8.
60 Charleson Gray, "Harold Speaks Up," *Talking Screen*, Jan 1930, p. 32.
61 Ibid., p. 33, 95.
62 "Lloyd Hurries 'Paw' To Take Advantage of Purity Campaign," *Variety*, 24 Jul 1934, p. 5. See also "Press Book Stresses New Lloyd Character," *Motion Picture Herald*, 1 Sep 1934, p. 61 for more on how the film's press book likewise emphasized Lloyd's movement away from gag-based comedy.

collection of gags" and its need for only "fleeting" moments of plot while critiquing the low

quality of the film's dialogue and its negative effect on the film's pace.[63] Similarly, responses to

his next film, 1931's *Feet First*, praised its ability to craft "a believable and consistent story upon

which to hang the gags" while also noting that, since his films are "gagged, not directed," the

gags "are what make a Lloyd comedy."[64] This latter comment continued to shape the reception

of Lloyd's work, and by 1932 some explicitly linked the decline in Lloyd's box office to, in part,

his continued use of gag humor. For some, the coming of sound made this type of humor

"relegated to the accomplishments of another day," a response that likely further spurred the

move away from gags and toward story and character in *The Cat's Paw*.[65] Nevertheless, while

advance notices praised this shift in *Cat's Paw* as Lloyd "proved his ability to rise above the

narrow limitations of a mere gag comedian," other reviews warned that Lloyd's substitution of

story for gags would prevent the film from having the "universal appeal" of Lloyd's previous

work.[66] This ultimately seemed to be the case, as the failure of *Cat's Paw* once again turned

Lloyd back to the realm of gag comedy for his final starring roles of the 1930s, *The Milky Way*

("a series of unending and hilarious gags") and *Professor Beware* ("just right for audiences that

like action and gag comedy.")[67] Throughout the decade, then, there is a continual give and take

between Lloyd and the trades, each continually moving back and forth between emphasizing

gags and emphasizing narrative as Lloyd attempted to win back his waning audiences.

These debates tie into previous connections of gag comedy and taste, but other factors

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63 All quotes from "Newspaper Opinions," *The Film Daily*, 1 Dec 1929, p. 5.
64 R.M., "Lloyd's 'Feet First' Tops His List of Laugh Records," *Exhibitors Daily Review and Motion Pictures Today*, 20 Oct 1930, p. 2. J.L.K., "Broadway Shop Window," *Exhibitors Daily Review and Motion Pictures Today*, 31 Oct 1930, p. 2.
65 "Absence Does Not," *The New York State Exhibitor*, 10 Dec 1932, p. 6.
66 "Along the Rialto," *The Film Daily*, 27 Aug 1934, p. 5. Roland Barton, "As I See Them...," *Independent Exhibitors Film Bulletin*, 11 Sep 1934, p. 4.
67 "The Milky Way," *Modern Screen*, May 1936, p. 49. "Professor Beware," *Variety*, 13 Jul 1938, p. 13.

arose in the 1930s to change the discourse around film gags in different ways. A major one was

the rise of radio and radio comedy around this time, shifting much of the trade press discourse

toward the use of gags in radio and its impact on comedy at large. Numerous stories posited that

gag men were now an "extinct species," one replaced by screenwriters and more rigidly defined

pre-production methods, while many of film's gag men moved into radio's fast-growing industry

of gag comedy.[68] Of course, gags carried different connotations in the strictly sonic world of

radio, often linking back to vaudeville-era understandings of the term. Explicit definitions of

radio gags as "a theatrical wisecrack depending on double entendre or facetiousness" or as

"puns, jokes, humorous exaggerations" framed radio gag comedy as predominantly verbal.[69]

Gag-based radio comedy also encountered the same debates over taste and propriety that

inflected gag-based film comedy of the time. In 1933, prominent comic Eddie Cantor called for

gag comedy to be cleaned up and replaced by a more character-based approach to comedy, likely

linking up with his push in the early 1930s to find wider audience acceptance as more than an

"ethnic" comic.[70] The increasing focus on gags in radio influenced their application to film

comedy as well. This ranged from the implicit separation of gags and dialogue in shorts, as in a

1934 Vitaphone short that revolves around a single gag *and* features rapid fire comic dialogue, to

the explicit separation of gag, situation, and conversation as distinct comedy types in the 1936

W.C. Fields film *Poppy*.[71] Others recommended that comic shorts for the imminent medium of

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68 For "extinct species," see Neville Reay, "The Stroller," *Picture Play Magazine*, Jul 1929, p. 58. For replacement by scripts, see "'Off the Cuff' Shooting Is Out," *The Film Daily*, 21 Sep 1930, p. 22.

69 Rudy Vallee, "Tuneful Topics," *Radio Digest*, Dec 1930, p. 54. "Reviews of Current Programs," *Radio Fan-Fare*, Jun 1933, p. 28.

70 "Cantor Answers Ad Men's Queries," *Variety*, 25 Apr 1933, p. 39. See Henry Jenkins, "'Shall We Make It for New York or for Distribution?': Eddie Cantor, *Whoopee*, and Regional Resistance to the Talkies," *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 153-184 for more on Cantor's shift in persona during this time.

71 "Talking Shorts," *Variety*, 5 Jun 1934, p. 12. "Motion Picture Daily's Hollywood Preview," *Motion Picture Daily*, 6 Jun 1936, p. 3.

television should use both "slapstick action *and* radio gag-telling" to ensure a well-made comedy.[72] By returning to older, theatrical notions of the gag as primarily verbal while also continuing to tie gags to slapstick and visual comedy, radio comedy's rise displayed discursive adaptability while also ensuring further confusion around the understanding of gags.

Both trends were complemented by the broader range of uses for the term 'gag' in the trades during the 30s. If gags in relation to film comedy previously made up a sizable proportion of the references to gags in the trades as a whole, throughout the 1930s this percentage dwindled greatly. Radio factored into this, but most frequently a "gag" in this period related to a film's marketing and exploitation. As we have seen, this sense of the term had been in use since at least the 1910s, but the linking of gags with exploitation rapidly proliferated in early 1930s discourse. Loosely understood as a trick or gimmick designed to draw attention and increase ticket sales, tips for gags, stories highlighting effective gags, and other similar exploitation references took off in the pages of *Exhibitors Herald World*, *Motion Picture Herald*, *Showmen's Trade Review*, and other trades during this time.[73] There are numerous causes for this, but likely the biggest is the increased urgency to draw in audiences after the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. However, it is worth noting that, while the aforementioned publications began to use gag as an exploitation term almost exclusively during this time, other trades also began to use the term in increasingly narrow contexts. For fan-based magazines like *Picture Play Magazine*, *Screenland*,

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72 Harry R. Lubcke, "Film Is Most Valuable in Television," *American Cinematographer*, Nov 1937, p. 482. Emphasis mine.

73 A Lantern database search for the term "gag" shows that the term appeared nearly twice as often in the 1930s (over 9000 results) than in either the 1920s or 1940s (around 5000 each). And while exact numbers for the percentage of references that corresponded to particular types of gags (in film; on radio; as exploitation; as practical jokes) over this period is beyond the scope of my project, a comparison of two years offers a representative sense of the change: of the 713 entries in Lantern for 1926, roughly 58% refer to gag men (almost always in the context of film) or to gags in film comedies, while only about 8.5% refer to exploitation or marketing. By 1933, however, out of 955 entries, about 43% refer to exploitation gags, with only about 16% referring to gags in film comedies.

or *Silver Screen*, gags were almost exclusively connected to practical jokes played by members of the Hollywood film industry.[74] For *Variety*, the gag could unsurprisingly be used to refer to most anything: stage, screen, radio, exploitation, and more. Only *The Film Daily* appears to use the term gag *primarily* in relation to film comedy during the decade.

Although gag-based film comedy underwent a variety of discursive changes throughout the 1930s, by the end of the decade a more coherent sense of sound-era gag comedy began to emerge, best exemplified by increasing references to gags and pacing during the latter half of the decade. While slapstick and gags were associated with fast pacing early in the silent era, the shift to sound interrupted this connection in the early 1930s. By 1936, though, trades were again explicitly connecting gag-heavy humor to a fast pace, as is evident in *The Film Daily*'s review of the Laurel and Hardy film *Way Out West*.[75] An ad for *College Holiday* (1936) likewise took pains to highlight how top gag men made it "twenty times faster and funnier" while another ad for *Easy Living* (1937) promised a "gag-a-minute pace."[76] This period also hinted at how gag-based comedy would come to be understood in subsequent decades. Now a decade removed from silent cinema, reviewers in the late 1930s continued to more firmly identify slapstick and gags with out-of-date but nostalgic comedy. If they were "antedated by modern standards," they were still good for laughs, and gags as part of "good old slapstick" were still an effective way to satisfy contemporary audiences.[77] The decline in production, popularity, and/or visibility of major silent stars further aided this nostalgia, as Chaplin's production rate slowed to a crawl,

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74 See, for example, the conflation of practical jokes and gags in Malcolm H. Oettinger, "Tales from the Cinemese," *Picture Play Magazine*, Apr 1931, p. 20-21, 106. In terms of Lantern, I estimate that there are about 3 times more mentions of gags as practical joke in 1933 than in 1926.
75 "Reviews of the New Films," *The Film Daily*, 19 Dec 1936, p. 3.
76 "College Holiday," *Motion Picture Herald*, 12 Dec 1936, p. 48. "Easy Living," *The Film Daily*, 17 May 1937, p. 18.
77 See "Reviews of the New Films: This'll Make You Whistle," *The Film Daily*, 6 Oct 1938, p. 7, and "Reviews of the New Films: Little Tough Guys in Society," *The Film Daily*, 25 Nov 1938, p. 6, respectively.

Lloyd (with one exception) retired from acting in 1938, and Keaton was relegated to low-budget comedy shorts. Weak stories also became an increasingly accepted feature of gag comedy, as critics praised them for their ability to generate laughs rather than their narrative sense, shifting away from earlier ambivalent responses and toward a more consistent connotation of gag-based comedy as narratively weak.[78] Previous trends around gags and taste also did not disappear during this time, as a 1941 Screen Actors Guild report complained that scripts featured "too much gag humor and not enough real humor," pointing to gags as a lesser, "false" form for at least some actors.[79] Together, these discursive shifts all point to later, and again often more inflexible, ways in which gag-based comedy would be understood.

Given the U.S. entry into World War II and the various seismic shifts brought about by the Paramount Decision, HUAC, and the decay of the studio system in the late 1940s and 1950s, gags factored relatively little into the discourse of this period. Gag comedies were certainly still being made, and the trades occasionally commented on individual films, certain stars associated with gags (Bob Hope, Abbott and Costello), and the role of gags in the new medium of television. However, this discourse largely fits previously identified trends without significant change. "Gag" as a term was still used in myriad ways, and gags were still often related to narrative and taste, especially in *The Film Daily*, which remained the main source for discussions of gags in film comedy. As noted in the introduction, though, the most notable contribution to gags and, arguably, the understanding of silent comedy as a whole was James Agee's 1949 essay "Comedy's Greatest Era," a lengthy, nostalgic panegyric to the great silent comedians that bemoaned the lack of similar quality physical humor in sound comedies.[80] Whether attributable

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78 See "'Six Lessons from Madame LaZonga' Good Fun," *Box Office Digest*, 9 Jan 1941, p. 12, for example.
79 "More 'What's Ailing Films'," *Variety*, 16 Apr 1941, p. 1.
80 James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," *Life*, 5 Sep 1949, p. 70-88.

to Agee or to other factors, his observations and focus on early film comedy foreshadowed a

major resurgence in silent comedy interest by the end of the 1950s that, as we shall see, helped to

shape, adapt, and limit popular and scholarly understandings of gags for decades to come.

Discourse and Early Gag Scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s

By the end of the 1950s, a growing distance from the silent era continued to create a

strong sense of nostalgia for it, providing ample fodder for popular film books that helped codify,

if not ossify, connections between gags and silent film comedy. Works focusing on individual

performers (Theodore Huff's 1951 book on Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton's 1960

autobiography) or on the silent cinema more broadly (entries in the British Film Institute's 1960

Fifty Famous Films: 1915-1945 and in Joe Franklin's 1959 *Classics of the Silent Screen*) helped

maintain and rekindle interest in silent comedy.[81] As a consequence, this discourse joined Agee

in helping to frame silent comedy, and a good deal of subsequent film comedy, in increasingly

inflexible ways. This is especially true for the rise of the term "sight gag" to describe the silent

era's visual approach to comedy. Outside of a *Variety* vaudeville review from 1919, "sight gag"

as a specific term does not seem to be in use at all prior to the 1940s, and still only fleetingly in

the postwar era.[82] Early examples do establish some connections between slapstick and silent

cinema, as *Variety*'s 1946 review of *Genius at Work* calls it a "lightweight slapstick comedy"

featuring "every type of sight gag and situation" to try and get a laugh, but the term was applied

only sparsely over the next dozen years.[83] Following the wave of publications around 1959 and

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81 Theodore Huff, *Charlie Chaplin*, New York: Henry Schuman, 1951. Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960. National Film Theatre, *Fifty Famous Films: 1915-1945*, London: British Film Institute, 1960. Joe Franklin, *Classics of the Silent Screen*, New York: The Citadel Press, 1959.
82 E.G. Kendrew, "In Paris," *Variety*, 21 Nov 1919, p. 9.
83 "Genius at Work," *Variety*, 7 Aug 1946, p. 15.

1960, though, usage of the term began to skyrocket.[84] Roland Pendaris' call for "a little more of the fine art of pantomime, the sight gag rather than the flip quip" for *Film Bulletin* in late 1959 is indicative of the direction that sight gag discourse would go in the following decade, often framing the silent cinema as a nostalgic era of comedy 'superior' to the present day's.[85] Most importantly, as a consequence of this shift references to sight gags in film (and, to a certain extent, television) became for a time *the* primary way of discussing gags in film as a whole.

While there is clearly a correlative, if not necessarily fully causal, relationship between the rise in publications on silent film and the rise in references to sight gags in contemporaneous reviews, other factors also drew attention to sight gags throughout the 1960s. This is particularly true of the many silent comedy compilation films that appeared during this time. *Boxoffice* provides one example of a (potentially) more grassroots approach from Philadelphia in the summer of 1961, where a local exhibitor ran a program of "Nickelodeon Nights" featuring "some of the finest sight gags from the silent film comedies," complete with live music, that hoped to tour the country in the near future.[86] Similar compilation films of sight gags and other "best of" moments from silent comedy made appearances across the country throughout the next several years, ranging from broad revues of the entirety of silent film comedy to compilations of footage from the work of individual performers. Indicative of this latter trend is the 1966 film *Harold Lloyd's Funny Side of Life*, a two-hour compilation of Lloyd clips (including the entirety of *The Freshman*) introduced by Lloyd himself, which *Variety* characterized as a veritable

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84 For instance, a search for "sight gag" or "sight gags" in *Variety* on the Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive database gives 29 results prior to 1950, 71 from 1950-1958, and 131 from 1959-1964.

85 Roland Pendaris, "The View from Outside," *Film Bulletin*, 23 Nov 1959, p. 3.

86 "Finest in Old Film Gags on Summer Schedule," *Boxoffice*, 7 Aug 1961, p. 3. It is unclear whether the tour did take place. A Lantern search also lists other screenings bearing the name "Nickelodeon Nights" in the late 30s and early 40s .

"documentary of Lloyd's contributions to the sight gag genre."[87] This framing is particularly interesting: as a "documentary," it points to silent comedy as an archive worthy of study, one that the burgeoning field of film studies would soon take up, while as a "genre" it points to how silent era comedy was being discursively positioned as the prime source for all sight gags.

The increased interest in silent comedy and sight gags is evident in other aspects of trade discourse from the early-to-mid 1960s as well. Reviews from the decade are filled with references not only to sight gags, but to the types of sight gags and slapstick specifically associated with major comics of the silent era. In particular, Mack Sennett and Keystone often served as a key point of comparison for the slapstick antics of contemporary comedies. *Variety*'s review of Stanley Kramer's massive 1963 film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* called it not only "a throwback to the wild, wacky and wondrous time of the silent screen comedy," but explicitly likened the film to a Keystone Kops short, albeit one "with modern conveniences" (presumably things like Cinerama, Technicolor, and an epic running time.)[88] Similarly, reviews of two 1965 features make further reference to the legacy of Mack Sennett in their handling (good or bad) of gags. For *Variety*, one of the highlights of *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* was a scene around a runaway plane of "which Mack Sennett would have been proud," complete with a Keystone Kop-like fire brigade used to accentuate the scene's visual comedy.[89] For the TV spin-off movie *McHale's Navy Joins the Air Force,*, though, they mused that "Mack Sennett might turn over in his grave at some of the sight gags and how they're worked" in the film before ultimately concluding that these gags would be serviceable enough for the film's target audience.[90] This discourse highlights the degree to which silent comedy and

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87 "Harold Lloyd's Funny Side of Life," *Variety*, 23 Nov 1966, p. 6.
88 "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World," *Variety*, 6 Nov 1963, p. 6.
89 "Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines," *Variety*, 2 Jun 1965, p. 6.
90 "McHale's Navy Joins the Air Force," *Variety*, 9 Jun 1965, p. 6.

sight gags were on the minds of critics at this time, but the latter response also gestures toward an encroaching inflexibility as it connects this interest in sight gags and silent comedy to, as we will see more in a moment, increasingly lowbrow, young, and unsophisticated audiences.

Throughout the 1960s, though, sight gags and silent comedy continued to display staying power. This included greater attention to earlier film comedy figures, like Harold Lloyd, who had been retired from the screen since the late 1940s but entered back into the trades' consciousness for his work on the 1962 compilation film, *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy*. A *Variety* story on the film's screening at the 1962 Cannes Film Festival took pains to emphasize a break between the silent "great comedians" and comedy in the sound era, offering a contrast between the situations and dialogue featured in sound comedy and the decline in gags and "sight bits" associated with the silents.[91] Once again, gags in general, and sight gags in particular, are used to connote a 'superior' form of silent comedy. Lloyd also serves as a discursive reference point for popular gag-based comic star Jerry Lewis, with *Boxoffice* explicitly likening some of Lewis' gags in the 1962 film *It's Only Money* to Lloyd's earlier work.[92] Elsewhere, Lloyd's one-time producer, Hal Roach, repeatedly claimed throughout the 1960s that he was on the verge of bringing back the sight gags and slapstick of silent comedy: he planned on directing again in 1961, insisted that "great visual film comedy was not dead, but only dormant" in 1964, and offered plans in 1967 for an "updated slapstick" television show to be produced by a Roach-led comedy unit.[93] Although nothing ever came from any of Roach's proposed ventures, they provided further evidence of how silent film comedy in general, and the notion of sight gags in

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91 Gene Moskowitz, "Lloyd Deplores Passing of Films' Great Comedians; Blames Sound," *Variety*, 20 Jun 1962, p. 2, 17.

92 "It's Only Money," *Boxoffice*, 26 Nov 1962, p. a11.

93 "Hal Roach, at 69, Again Directs Gags," *Variety*, 14 Jun 1961, p. 1, 61. "Hal Roach in Paris, May Seek to Revive Silent Pic Comedies," *Variety*, 8 Jul 1964, p. 2, 16. "Hal Roach Pitches Updated Slapstick," *Variety*, 20 Dec 1967, p. 7.

particular, were very much still on the mind of the film industry in the 1960s.

The industry adapted to this renewed interest by creating a brief, but notable, surge of new slapstick films during the decade. These may have been inspired by the success of silent comedy compilations earlier in the 1960s, but films directly invoking silent comedy like *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, Blake Edwards' 1965 *The Great Race*, and *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* point to how the industry used the interest in silent comedy to spur a coherent cycle of gag-driven films in the middle of the decade. As early as 1961, *Variety* pointed to a new trend in comedy that specifically used slapstick and gags to try and replace the recently prominent "sex cycle" of comedy.[94] By 1965, the summer release of *Those Magnificent Men* and *The Great Race* led *Variety* to note that sight gags and silent comedy in particular (the "sight biz of yore") was making a sudden, powerful comeback on American and British screens.[95] The trades were particularly interested in how slapstick-styled films used cinematic techniques (such as stop-motion and undercranking) "so old that they now seem refreshingly new" and that audiences likewise seemed "to be buying them all as if there had been no yesterday."[96] Although they also note differences between the contemporary wave of slapstick and its forebears (an emphasis on youth "or at least a youthful approach to filmmaking;" far greater budgets; a split between films designed for the family trade and sex-laced, more adult fare), the rhetoric of *Variety* here also hints at another developing discursive inflexibility as it attempts to conflate the

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94 Jack Pitman, "As Sex Cycle Ebbs, There's Rediscovery On All Sides of That Standby: Comedy," *Variety*, 5 Jul 1961, p. 16.

95 Vincent Canby, "Hokum's Comeback & Fancy," *Variety*, 7 Jul 1965, p. 3, 16. The title may use the slippery term "hokum," but I choose not to engage with it here since the story itself mainly makes reference to slapstick and sight gags. For a discussion of hokum and its role in the discourse of silent and early sound comedy, see Rob King, *Hokum!: The Early Sound Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

96 Canby, p. 3.

present with the past.[97] Doing so potentially positions this resurgence as a de facto erasure of the previous three to four decades of Hollywood film comedy.

This showcases a struggle to adapt by ignoring the fact that slapstick and gags clearly had *not* abandoned Hollywood comedy in the postwar era. While I briefly noted some examples earlier, major gag-based films and performers were present in B-movies (the *Bowery Boys* film series), major studio releases (much of the work of major box-office draw Jerry Lewis), and shorts (including cartoon series like *Looney Tunes*, *Tom & Jerry*, and Tex Avery's films), highlighting the persistence of gag-based comedy over these years. However, this "rediscovery" of gags also showcases the ways in which this cycle more explicitly tried to replicate the types of gags and settings found in silent and early sound comedy. The cycle was relatively short-lived, at least at the level seen during the summer of 1965, but traces of this gag-based "comeback" still abound over the next several years. An interesting corollary to this cycle was an even more diffuse and briefer anomaly where gags became explicitly connected with certain *high*brow film in the late 60s. One way we see this is in the rise of the term "inside" or "insider" gags to specifically refer to the deployment of film references or other forms of intertextuality, primarily within the works of French New Wave directors. Appearing in *Variety* as early as 1963 with a reference to Godard's use of "inside gags" (connected, interestingly, with silent film techniques) in *Les Carabiniers*, the term cropped up in reviews of later Godard films (1966's *Made in U.S.A.*), François Truffaut films (1970's *Bed and Board*), and even the work of filmmakers Claude Chabrol and Claude Lelouch.[98] Unlike the sight gag, the inside gag was not necessarily visual, but it was also not necessarily or exclusively connected to *comedy* either.

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97 Ibid., p. 3, 16.
98 "Les Carabiniers," *Variety*, 19 Jun 1963, p. 6. "Made in U.S.A.," *Variety*, 14 Dec 1966, p. 19. "Domicile Conjugal," *Variety*, 26 Aug 1970, p. 16. "Les Innocents Aux Mains Sales," *Variety*, 9 Apr 1975, p. 20. "Le Voyou," *Variety*, 2 Dec 1970, p. 16.

However, there was a brief time when comedies themselves were also framed as using gags in a more highbrow, sophisticated way. For instance, a 1967 *Boxoffice* review of Francis Ford Coppola's *You're a Big Boy Now* specifically notes how the film is "replete with witty lines and uproarious sight gags" that will "delight *sophisticated* patrons" and that "should be a smash in the class spots."[99] Although this example is rare in its blunt connection of gags to highbrow audiences, others reinforce the sense that this was a discursive trend operative between, roughly, 1966 and 1968. It is present in French New Wave-related imports, like *Made in U.S.A.* or William Klein's 1966 satire *Qui Etes-Vous Polly Magoo?* and the "comedy flavor" of its "far-out gags."[100] A preview of the British silent film homage *The Plank* is likewise high-minded in promising that it would be "an exposition of the mechanical gag."[101] Even a mainstream Hollywood comedies could be approached in this fashion, as evinced by the combination of "broad, sight-gag comedy" and "sophisticated satire" on display in 1967's *Divorce American Style.*[102] For at least a time, then, gags displayed a greater potential to move beyond previous associations with lowbrow, simplistic comedy in popular discourse.

That being said, this trend was both short lived and only a small part of the discourse surrounding gags as a whole at the time. In fact, on the same page as their description of *The Plank*'s "expose of the mechanical gag," *Variety* refers to the popularity of Jerry Lewis' slapstick and gag-driven films as evidence of "hicksville taste," showing that much of the discourse connecting gags to lower taste and audiences remained alive and well.[103] I linger on this brief trend, however, because of its relationship to another major consequence of the 1960s interest in

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99 "You're a Big Boy Now," *Boxoffice*, 23 Jan 1967, p. a11. Emphasis mine.
100 "Qui Etes-Vous Polly Magoo?," *Variety*, 2 Nov 1966, p. 22.
101 "Writer-Actor Sykes Slates Wordless Pic," *Variety*, 11 Jan 1967, p. 17.
102 "Divorce American Style," *Variety*, 7 Jun 1967, p. 6.
103 William Lyon, "Hicksville Taste Still Rules Spain; Westerns (Italy) & Jerry Lewis Tops," *Variety*, 11 Jan 1967, p. 17.

gags: its influence on the burgeoning scholarly literature on film and film comedy developing simultaneously. Indeed, while the spate of silent cinema books published at the dawn of the 1960s coincided with the 1960 release of Siegfried Kracaeur's *Theory of Film*, the continued attention paid to slapstick, sight gags, and gag-based comedy throughout the decade also overlapped with other critical and theoretical works and the rise of film studies as a distinct discipline within the academy. Given this confluence, then, it should come as little surprise that the popular discourse surrounding gags played a large part in shaping how the academy approached gags and their role in film comedy.

In fact, I would argue that the simultaneous nostalgic revival of silent gag-based comedy and rise of film studies helps to explain certain subsequent idiosyncrasies in scholarly approaches to gag-based comedy. In particular, I want to trace some of the major ways in which the popular discourse of the 1960s helped determine, and at times limit, many of the topics scholars chose to focus on in relation to gags. This influence can be found in subsequent scholarship's choice of subjects (both performers and the issues it focuses on in gag-based comedy, particularly narrative), and its emphasis on *silent* film comedy at the expense of sound comedy (especially from the late 1930s and on), leading to an often inflexible approach that prioritized visual humor and sight gags over other potential gag types. In terms of subjects, popular discourse helped shape the choice of performers from which gag scholars would later draw by emphasizing certain silent comics in a way that helped make them "default" choices for discussions of gag-based comedy. For instance, while Charlie Chaplin never really disappeared from the public consciousness, directing and starring in 1957's *A King in New York* and releasing a compilation film of his own, *The Chaplin Revue*, in Britain (1959) and the US (1964),

numerous factors, especially his political affiliations, greatly reduced his public profile by the 1960s. Still, his continued presence within the film industry and, in particular, his prominent role in a number of the aforementioned 1950s film books (Theodore Huff's 1951 book on him; a section devoted to eight of his silent shorts in *Fifty Famous Films*; multiple films and a "great star" entry in *Classics of the Silent Screen*) ensured that Chaplin played a prominent role in the nascent area of film studies. This was aided further by Chaplin's long legacy of high cultural approval, ranging from references in Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy's 1924 avant-garde film *Ballet mécanique* to appreciations by Winston Churchill, Graham Greene, and many more.[104]

As a consequence, Chaplin served as a primary source for gags in the work of a wide range of scholars. Even in works dating back well before the 1960s rise of film studies, Chaplin's gags appear as examples of the "artistic use of projections upon a plane surface" for Rudolf Arnheim, who described gags used by Chaplin that were dependent upon camera angles and the restriction of visual information for their comic effects.[105] Later on, Chaplin likewise served as a primary source of examples for several of the categories in Noël Carroll's influential typology of sight gags, with the mimed metaphor and switch movement categories drawing the vast majority of their examples from Chaplin's early silent shorts.[106] If Carroll's work is more well-known within comedy studies, Chaplin also served as a major reference point for lesser-known gag scholarship. In Václav Havel's "The Anatomy of a Gag," a Chaplin gag serves to introduce the essay while Chaplin shorts and silent features are prime sources throughout of

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104 See *The Essential Chaplin*: *Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian*, ed. Richard Schickel, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, for the Churchill and Greene examples as well as a host of others.

105 Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 1933, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957, p. 35-37, 51-52. I should note that, while originally published in German in the 1930s, the English version of Arnheim's work (cited here) was published in the late 1950s, making it yet another work of film theory influencing the understanding of film comedy that was published around this particular time.

106 Noël Carroll, "Notes on the Sight Gag," *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew S. Horton, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. 30-36.

examples that support Havel's characterization of the nature of the gag.[107] And although Chaplin

is no longer as central a figure as he once was, more recent work continues to use him to help

investigate gags, as when Donna Kornhaber discusses the relation of gags to slapstick as part of

her 2014 book on Chaplin's work as a director.[108] Although Chaplin's critical and academic

popularity has waxed and waned over the past several decades, he has remained a major focal

point for gag scholarship throughout this time.

Even more so than Chaplin, though, Buster Keaton likely benefited the most from the

revived interest in silent comedy during the 1960s, granting him a central place within the study

of film comedy. Keaton's transition to sound may have been disastrous in many respects, leading

him to more diminished and infrequent film roles in the 1940s, but small parts in films like

Sunset Boulevard (1950) and *Limelight* (1952) in the early 1950s and television appearances

during the same period kept Keaton in the public eye. This was especially true from the late

1950s until his death in 1966, as Keaton became more and more active in film and television

again, winning an honorary Oscar and publishing his autobiography in 1960. Keaton was also,

like Chaplin, a beneficiary of the attention paid to his silent work in popular film books of the

50s: *The General* appeared in both *Fifty Famous Films* and *Classics of the Silent Screen*, and the

latter also featured entries on *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and Keaton himself as a major silent star. Also

like Chaplin, Keaton began to receive more widespread, highbrow approval, culminating in his

starring role in the Samuel Beckett-written 1965 experimental short *Film*. All of these factors,

including Keaton's death at arguably the height of his rediscovered popularity, helped cement his

place within comedy studies. In the 1960s and 1970s, Keaton formed the basis of book-length

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107 Václav Havel, "The Anatomy of the Gag," 1966, trans. Michael Schonberg, *Modern Drama*, 23.1 (1980), p. 13-24.

108 Donna Kornhaber, *Charlie Chaplin, Director*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014, p. 62-66.

critical and theoretical works by Daniel Moews and David Robinson, a dissertation by George

Wead, and a study by French authors J.-P. Lebel and Jean-Pierre Coursodon.[109] These scholars

viewed Keaton's films through an auteurist lens, but they also tended to treat Keaton's work as

largely indicative of broader trends and issues in the study of film gags. In particular, Keaton's

films often served as a focal point for scholarly discussions of the interaction between gags and

narrative in books (in both Moews' and in Robinson's analysis of 1924's *Our Hospitality*) and

essays published during the 60s and 70s, notably Sylvain du Pasquier's analysis of Keaton's *Cops*

and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's analysis of *Our Hospitality* in the first edition of

their *Film Art*.[110] This material set the stage for the continuing legacy in film studies of work

devoted to Keaton and his gags.

At times, this led to explicit theories of gags or types of gags based on their role within

Keaton's work. This is on display in 1990s book-length studies of Keaton by Gabriella Oldham

(where, reminiscent of early theatrical discourse, she advocates for gags to build to a crescendo)

and, in particular, Robert Knopf's *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* (where he theorizes

in detail the relationship between gags and narrative in Keaton's films.)[111] Keaton also served as

a prominent figure in the gags versus narrative debate, discussed more momentarily, particularly

in Peter Kramer's 1989 analysis of *The Blacksmith*, and as the second most common source of

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109 Daniel Moews, *Keaton: The Silent Features Close Up*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. David Robinson, *Buster Keaton*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969. George Wead, *Buster Keaton and the Dynamics of Visual Wit*, 1973, Northwestern University, PhD Dissertation. J.-P. Lebel, *Buster Keaton*, 1964, trans. P.D. Stovin, London: A. Zwemmer Limited, 1967. Jean-Pierre Coursodon, *Buster Keaton; les films, la mise en scène, le gag, rapport au monde, rapport aux autres, thèmes keatoniens, la querelle du "comique pur*," Paris: Seghers, 1973. Note that the Coursodon book is only available in French.

110 Sylvain du Pasquier, "Buster Keaton's Gags," 1970, trans. Norman Silverstein, *Journal of Modern Literature* 3.2 (Apr 1973), p. 269-291. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979, p. 91-95. Bordwell and Thompson's analysis of *Our Hospitality* likely draws inspiration from Robinson's, as both reach similar conclusions about the film's tight integration of gags and narrative.

111 Gabriella Oldham, *Keaton's Silent Shorts: Beyond the Laughter*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996. Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

gag examples (behind Chaplin) for Carroll's examples typology of sight gags.[112] Indeed, for

Carroll, a major figure in film comedy studies, Keaton is particularly salient given his

prominence in "Notes on the Sight Gag" and Carroll's 2007 book *Comedy Incarnate*, an updated

version of his 1976 doctoral dissertation on Keaton's *The General*.[113] Together, these all show

Keaton's centrality to Carroll's work for over three decades. Along with more recent works that

continue to use Keaton as a primary reference point for the study of gags and film comedy,

scholars continue to keep alive the legacy of Keaton's 1960s reception today.

Other comics from the 1960s silent comedy resurgence beyond Chaplin and Keaton also

figured into film studies' focus on gags and comedy. While Harold Lloyd attempted to regain

prominence in the 60s via his work on compilation films, this did not translate to the same degree

of attention in early film studies given to Chaplin or Keaton. Still, Lloyd and *Safety Last* do both

make an appearance in *Classics of the Silent Screen*, and Lloyd frequently appears in historical

work on the silent era. Richard Koszarski's 1990 survey of silent features specifically identifies

Lloyd as a comedian attempting to merge high class character comedy with low class slapstick,

which, as we saw, found only limited success.[114] A more frequent reference point, and one

already on display in the popular discourse of the 1960s, is Mack Sennett and the Keystone

studio. Sennett and Keystone may not have figured into early film comedy scholarship as much

as other figures, given that they were often seen as a more "primitive" and less sophisticated

version of slapstick than the major silent comics of the 1920s. However, Keystone's presence

still lingered within gag scholarship, as in the studio's prominent placement within Donald

112 Peter Kramer, "Derailing the Honeymoon Express: Comicality and Narrative Closure in Buster Keaton's *The Blacksmith*," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 23 (Spring 1989), p. 101-116.
113 Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
114 Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*, New York: Scribner, 1990, p. 176.

Crafton's influential "Pie and Chase" essay.[115] Given subsequent push-back on the notion of

early cinema and early comedy as 'primitive', Sennett and Keystone have become more popular

in scholarship. Leo Charney cites Sennett as the source of all subsequent physical comedy in a

2005 essay on American film comedy, while Rob King's 2009 book studies Keystone and its

relationship to larger sociocultural debates about comedy and taste in the 10s and 20s.[116] Though

I do not wish to claim that all, or even most, of these scholarly works *directly* emerge from the

silent comedy nostalgia boom of the 50s and 60s, it is plausible that this popular resurgence was

key in, consciously or not, shaping later scholars' choices of these performers for study.

To further support this claim and the lack of adaptability it could entail, it is worth briefly

considering those that the silent comedy nostalgia boom and early film comedy scholarship did

not focus on, especially the role of women in silent comedy. While a number of women were

regular fixtures of silent film comedy in both supporting and starring roles, from the previously

mentioned Louise Fazenda to Marie Dressler, Mabel Normand, and many more, they do not

feature prominently, or often much at all, in the silent comedy boom of the 50s and 60s. This

may be due in part to the availability (or lack thereof) of films from female silent film comics

(especially starring vehicles) for retrospective screenings, use in compilation films, and research

by early film scholars. However, I would also argue that it is likely due to an implicit (or worse)

sexism by critics, archivists, journalists, and scholars that has served to marginalize women in

silent gag-based comedy for decades. While earlier feminist scholars often examined the role of

women in screwball and other comic types of the 1930s, it is only relatively recently that we

have seen a sustained body of work developing around the performers, performances, and

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115 Donald Crafton, "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy," *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 106-119.
116 Leo Charney, "American Film," *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, ed. Maurice Charney, vol. 2, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005, p. 78-92.

legacies of women in silent film comedy.[117] Inside and outside the academy, then, this continued

gap in scholarship likely serves as another, less welcome consequence of the birth of film studies

during the nostalgic silent comedy boom.

Later scholarship's focus on the relationship of gags and narrative also owes a large debt

to debates around gags and story within the trade press, from the silent and early sound era up to

the 1960s. As we have seen, gags and narrative were an important site of debate in the silent era,

especially in relation to taste, as producers favored a more "respectable" emphasis on narrative

and character over gags while critics offered more ambivalent preferences for both. At times,

though, exhibitors and audiences expressed a clear preference for gags *over* story, as in a 1930

Film Daily poll of exhibitors where over two-thirds of respondents saw gags as more important

than narrative in comic shorts, conveying clear audience preferences for low comedy and disdain

for "sophisticated" comic shorts across much of the country.[118] This discourse never really went

away in the 40s and 50s, but it too underwent something of a resurgence in the 1960s, likely as

part of the greater interest in gags. Take, for example, *Variety* singling out gags for failing to

make up for an otherwise weak narrative in the tendency of 1965's *The Loved One* to give its

"wavering story line" over to sight gags, thus making the film less coherent as a whole.[119] At

other times, though, gags were praised for *combining* with narrative, as when Richard Lester

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117 For earlier studies of women in 1930s film comedy, see Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, and Kristine Brunovska Karnick, "Community of Unruly Women: female comedy teams in the early sound era," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 13.1 (1999), p. 77-95. For recent work on women in silent comedy, see Kristen Anderson Wagner, *Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018; entries on Mabel Normand and Fay Tincher in *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*, ed. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017; and Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick & Silent Film Comediennes*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
118 "Patrons Demand Shorts, National Survey Shows," *The Film Daily*, 6 Apr 1930, p. 1, 4-6, 9-10. While I do not have the space to fully unpack this poll here, it is a fascinating snapshot of the intersection of gags, story, and taste in the early years of sound.
119 "The Loved One," *Variety*, 13 Oct 1965, p. 6.

"finally approach[ed] the ability to collect sight gags into a cohesive and structured whole" in his 1966 film *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.[120] There were even rare cases where "top-flight" sight gags could atone for a problematic narrative and make for a stronger overall film, as in the 1966 British film *Morgan*.[121] No matter their relation to a film's narrative, critics remained keenly aware of the connections between gags and narrative during this time.

This discourse helped lay the foundation for the gags and narrative debate in the film comedy scholarship as well. It is central to several aforementioned works, especially discussions of Keaton by Robinson, Moews, Bordwell and Thompson, Knopf, and du Pasquier, among others, but the debate over gags and narrative came to particular prominence in the late 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s. On one side, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik explicitly separate gags from what they call "comic events" based upon their integration with a film's plot. For them, gags "constitute digressions or interruptions in the progress of a plot or a piece of purposive narrative action" while comic events are defined "by the extent to which it can exist only within a narrative context," thus framing gags in opposition to the unfolding of a film's narrative.[122] Donald Crafton takes this position even further, arguing that gags in silent slapstick intentionally separated themselves from narrative "to keep the two elements antagonistically apart," allowing gags to stand out as their own form of audience appeal.[123] On the other hand, Tom Gunning sees gags as "a clearly structured comic action" more akin to narrative and further refutes Crafton by arguing that gags do not digress from a narrative but subvert it via the ways they are *integrated* with a film's plot, allowing gags to both serve as an element of and a complication to narrative.[124]

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120 "Viva Maria," *Variety*, 8 Dec 1965, p. 6. "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," *Variety*, 28 Sep 1966, p. 6.
121 "Morgan (A Suitable Case for Treatment)," *Variety*, 13 Apr 1966, p. 6.
122 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 52, 44.
123 Crafton, "Pie and Chase," p. 107.
124 Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and The Origins of American

However, the applicability of Gunning and Crafton's debate may be limited by the fact that each focuses almost exclusively on silent comedy *shorts*, leaving a gap in this debate about how their observations may or may not fit for feature length comedies.[125]

While these contributions provide a good sense how the poles of the gags versus narrative debate have been defined, other scholars fall somewhere in between these two camps. For instance, Henry Jenkins agrees with Crafton that "gags may be opposed to narrative in some slapstick comedies," but he also argues that gags still *can* "also serve narrative purposes" in films, including motivating future plot developments.[126] Geoff King's later overview of film comedy likewise strikes a middle ground in his discussion of gags, which largely revolves around their relation to narrative. He acknowledges that "comedies have often been *constructed around* gags as much as plots," especially in the silent era, but he also agrees with Neale and Krutnik that "gags are often dependent for their effects on narrative preconditions" and are thus usually found in narrative rather than gag-centered films.[127] Most important for our present purposes, though, is the way in which these scholarly debates work to replicate and advance discussions of gags and narrative in popular discourse from the first half of the twentieth century. Such debates were not formed *ex nihilo* by film scholars, but were the result of film theory and analysis being combined with a complex set of borrowings, conscious or not, from popular discourse.

Although some scholars do discuss gags in the context of film comedy writ large, Crafton

Film Comedy," *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 93. Tom Gunning, "Response to 'Pie and Chase'," *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 121.
125 See also Kramer, "Derailing the Honeymoon Express" for another approach to gags and narrative that remains rooted in the context of a silent short.
126 Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 102.
127 Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, London: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 31. Emphasis in original.

and Gunning's debate in *Classical Hollywood Comedy* showcases another major consequence of film studies' debt to the silent comedy boom of the 1960s: a tendency to limit the study of gags to *silent* cinema. I have cited some important counterexamples, from Henry Jenkins' *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* to the range of examples in Neale and Krutnik's *Popular Film and Television Comedy* or work on the films of Jerry Lewis and Frank Tashlin, but studies of gags dedicated to the sound era remain in the minority.[128] In addition, there is a tendency for such scholarship to struggle, if not actively avoid, trying to adapt to later contexts where we find gags. We can see this trend in action in works that are not specifically discussing silent era comedians, as both Carroll and Havel theorize gags in a much broader, more widely applicable sense, but still almost exclusively draw their examples from silent film comedy. Similarly, although Geoff King's work does certainly allow for discussion of gags and narrative beyond the silent and early sound periods, it does so only briefly by noting the spate of gag-based spectaculars of the mid-1960s. Instead, he draws from Jenkins and from Steven Seidman's concept of "comedian comedy" to explore in more detail how narrative and moments emphasizing *performance*, rather than gags themselves, interact in later comedies.[129] While likely done unconsciously and by no means necessarily hostile to post-silent gags, this tendency has the unfortunate effect of replicating the trades' willful ignorance in the mid-1960s of gag comedy from the 1930s and on. While a number of other factors likewise influence these choices, the overwhelming trend of connecting gags to sight gags, and sight gags to silent comedy, in popular discourse undoubtedly played a role in pushing film scholars to favor these works over later sound-era examples.

  Additionally, with this focus on silent comedy came a lasting emphasis on theorizing gags

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128 For the latter two, see Chris Fujiwara, *Jerry Lewis*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009, and Ethan de Seife, *Tashlinesque: The Hollywood Comedies of Frank Tashlin*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.

129 Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, p. 32-42.

in strictly (or at least overwhelmingly) *visual* terms, often at the expense of sound effects, music, wordplay, or other audiovisual avenues for gags. On the one hand, such an approach is fitting given the emphasis in popular discourse on gags and the role of the gag man in creating visual humor of the 1910s and 1920s. However, the revival of interest in gag-based silent comedy in the 1960s seemed, in many ways, to gloss over the role of gags in the intervening decades, both within popular discourse *and* for early film scholars. As I have indicated, definitions of gags may have shifted somewhat over the course of the 30s, 40s, and 50s, but the trades continued to display a flexibility in referring to gags as *both* visual and verbal humor across these years. Radio comedy's popularity in the 1930s certainly influenced the understanding of one-liners or other types of jokes and puns as gags, no doubt aided by the films of radio stars such as Bob Hope and Jack Benny, but the trades also evinced a parallel, implicit debate about whether gags were visual or verbal during this time. Reviews of both early, vaudeville-inspired sound shorts and later Bob Hope vehicles like *The Ghost Breakers* (1940) see the gag as synonymous with a funny line or wise crack, much as it would have been on the stage or on radio.[130] Others are unclear as to whether the verbal gag is *separate from* or *complementary to* visual humor and slapstick, though, as when *Variety* discusses the balance between "the purely vocal gag and the more vigorous play of the slapstick school" in a 1931 British comedy or conflates "burlesque, slapstick, and fast-talking gag stuff" in Abbott and Costello's *The Naughty Nineties* (1945).[131] It may be unclear whether the trades primarily saw gags gags as verbal, visual, or both, but they still clearly acknowledged that verbal and sonic humor *did* have a place within film gags.

However, this allowance for a wide variety of gags in popular discourse largely did not

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130 "Talking Shorts: Flo Lewis," *Variety*, 13 Feb 1929, p. 13. "'The Ghost Breakers'," *The Film Daily*, 13 Jun 1940, p. 5.
131 "Mischief," *Variety*, 29 Dec 1931, p. 169. "'The Naughty Nineties' In Abbott-Costello Groove," *Box Office Digest*, 23 Jun 1945, p. 8.

translate into critical and scholarly approaches to film comedy in the 1960s and 1970s. As early as 1959, Joe Franklin in *Classics of the Silent Screen* reaffirmed the notion that sight gag comedy of the silent era was superior to most sound comedies and the "dialogue-requirements of comedians who came from radio."[132] This line of thinking was shared by many early writers studying film comedy, in practice if not explicitly in theory. While Havel's approach to the gag does not explicitly limit it to either verbal or visual humor, and Moews explicitly allows for both in his discussion of gags, each only deals with visual examples of gags in their work.[133] The emphasis on gags as visual rather than verbal humor is also evident in early dissertations on comedy, both Carroll's on *The General* from 1976 and Wead's 1973 dissertation on Keaton and "visual wit." These may both explicitly center around a primarily silent film comic, but the frequent lack of attempts to account for gags in the forty-plus years of sound cinema prior to their writing leaves a noticeable gap in their work, especially when picked up on by those theorizing gags more generally. In addition, while one could point to the rise of the term "sight gag" in the 1960s as supporting this critical and scholarly tendency to favor visual over sonic or verbal gags, this ignores the fact that non-visual gags *were* still present in the popular discourse of the time. For instance, a May 1965 *Variety* story on Hollywood scriptwriters explicitly positions gags as, along with dialogue and literary effects, an element "for which the writer is the main vehicle of delivery," strongly implying an understanding of gags as being largely verbal.[134] This approach to gags, while certainly not completely absent within early film scholarship, was clearly minimized throughout the 60s and 70s.

The consequences of this for gag studies continues to be felt. In terms of critical

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132 Franklin, p. 249.
133 Moews, p. 19.
134 Robert B. Frederick, "Scripts That Pass in Sight," *Variety*, 5 May 1965, p. 7.

approaches to comic figures overlapping with the blockbuster era, this has led to an understanding of Woody Allen's earlier, more gag-based comedies as making him "the true heir of Chaplin and Keaton and Langdon" more so than to sound comics like the Marx Brothers or W.C. Fields (or, for that matter, Bob Hope, whom Allen has frequently acknowledged as a prime comedic inspiration).[135] In debates about gags versus narrative, the exclusive focus on visual gags in silent shorts by Crafton and Gunning struggles to effectively account for how sound can alter the interactions between gags and narrative in feature films. Similarly, the emphasis on sight gags in Carroll's work, both "Notes on the Sight Gag" and his explicit connection of gags to a film's imagery in *Comedy Incarnate*, have had the effect of minimizing the study and theorizing of verbal or sonic gags.[136] Even though there is a long history of popular discourse referring to the use of sound in gag-based comedies, their infrequent use in scholarship led Marijke de Valck in 2005 to specifically *add* the term "sound gag" to the comedy literature so as to be able to discuss sound and sound effects in gags, highlighting the pervasiveness of this emphasis on sight gags.[137] And, although there has been a greater willingness to engage more with sound-era gag-based comedy in recent years, scholars still often struggle to effectively incorporate or discuss non-visual gags in their work. Kristen Anderson Wagner's 2018 work on women in silent comedy is invaluable for its additions in terms of gender and comedy, but it too only allows imported stage comedians (such as the Marx Brothers) to have explicitly "verbal gags," continuing to minimize the role of sound in discussing gags.[138] Whether due to the influence of the 1960s silent comedy boom or other factors not discussed here, this legacy still

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135 Jean-Pierre Coursodon, *American Directors*, vol. 2, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983, p. 12.
136 Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate*, p. 3.
137 Marijke de Valck, "The Sound Gag: The Use of Sound for Comic Effect in the Films of Jacques Tati," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 3.2 (Nov 2005), p. 223-235.
138 Wagner, p. 234.

affects and limits the study of film comedy as a whole. Addressing it will allow us to better acknowledge and address these limitations in our approaches to gags.

Conclusion: Gag Comedy on the Cusp of the Blockbuster

Before moving into the blockbuster era to examine the industrial and discursive status of gag-based comedy during these decades, I want to end by briefly sketching out the state of gags in popular discourse at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s. Some trends continued to develop the same emphasis on sight gags as in earlier scholarly discourse, while others helped to shape the later study of gags by further aligning gags, taste, and specific audiences. Although I briefly highlighted the connections between gag-based humor and lowbrow taste and appeals in the classical era, these connections greatly expanded by the start of the 70s. They also often took the form of an increasingly explicit connection between gags and *juvenile* audiences. If gags were, briefly, the province of highbrow taste in the late 60s, by 1973 trade reviews promised that kids would be the ones to "eat up" the "gallons of sight gags" in Disney's *The World's Greatest Athlete*, and by 1974, *Variety* described an Argentinian box office hit as featuring gags "to entertain both the moppet and less-discriminating adult audiences."[139] While there were occasional connections of gags to children in the classical era, these brief mentions point to the ways in which popular discourse increasingly worked to connect family audiences in general, and juvenile audiences in particular, to gags in the early 70s.[140]

Films with arguably more highbrow gags were still produced (such as 1972's *What's Up, Doc?* or 1975's *Smile*), but the general discursive trend was toward aligning gags with

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139 "The World's Greatest Athlete," *The Independent Film Journal*, 5 Feb 1973, p. 20. "La Gran Aventura," *Variety*, 31 Jul 1974, p. 18.

140 For kids and gags in classical Hollywood, see comedy as "the exhibitor's strongest weapon" for appealing to children in E.W. Hammons, "The Kids and the Box Office," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, 12 Jul 1930, p. 31, and a Laurel and Hardy review that claims "kids should go for it in a big way" due to its gags in "'The Bohemian Girl'," *The Film Daily*, 6 Feb 1936, p. 9.

unsophisticated audiences, directly clashing with the discourse of just a few years before. Given

this, what are some of the reasons for this change in attitude towards gags and audiences? One

likely possibility is the connection of kids to gags in contemporaneous television discourse. At

the end of the 1960s, multiple stories explicitly saw the popularity of the show *Laugh-In* (1967-

1973), known for its fast paced and gag-driven humor, as partly due to its appeal to children:

Broadcasting claimed it attracted more kids than any other TV program and *Variety* saw the

recently-premiered children's television show *Sesame Street* (1969-) as owing "a certain debt" to

Laugh-In's style as well, a connection that scholar Michael Z. Newman has echoed more

recently.[141] The revival of silent and early sound comedy shorts on television in the 1950s and

1960s, including the "rediscovery" of the Three Stooges through TV syndication, also worked to

retroactively strengthen ties between these films and children, especially for authors who grew

up watching these shorts on TV.[142] Additionally, a similar discursive shift in the realm of

animation began to tie animated Hollywood cartoon shorts to juvenile viewers during this time.

While many animation practitioners and scholars did not see the form as necessarily tied to

juvenile audiences during its original theatrical exhibition, the connection of animation and kids

became entrenched in the popular imagination during the 1960s. This is likely due to the rise of

Hanna-Barbara's limited animation style for television, seen as primitive and thus suitable 'only'

for children, and the revival on TV of classic cartoons like *Looney Tunes* in the 60s, which

popular discourse began to increasingly associate with children.[143] Combined with the increasing

141 Eugene S. Mahany, "Partners for Profit: Children, Toys, and TV," *Broadcasting*, 30 Jun 1969, p. 18. Les Brown, "'Sesame Street': Wunderkind," *Variety*, 24 Dec 1969, p. 23. Michael Z. Newman, "New Media, Young Audiences and Discourses of Attention: From *Sesame Street* to 'Snack Culture'," *Media, Culture & Society*, 32.4 (2010), p. 585.

142 Peter Brunette, "The Three Stooges and the (Anti-)Narrative of Violence: De(con)structive Comedy," *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew Horton, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. 177.

143 See, for example, Jason Mittell, "From Saturday Morning to Around the Clock: Industrial Practices of Television Cartoons," *Genre and Television: From Cops to Cartoons in American Culture*, New York: Routledge,

alignment of animation to gags and sight gags in the 60s and 70s, as seen in reviews citing the centrality of gags to Disney's 1973 film *Robin Hood*, this further strengthened the link between gags, visual humor, and appeals to specifically juvenile audiences.[144] These links between gags and juvenile or "undiscerning" audiences may have began as a form of discursive adaption, but they soon developed into a narrow, limited association that continues today.

Another possible reason for this shift relates to the shifting industrial role of gag-based comedy in the New Hollywood era. The institution of the MPAA ratings system in 1967 led to a rise in adult-oriented fare within the Hollywood industry, helping to shift the market for gag-based comedy somewhat. While some films connected with the New Hollywood, such as Robert Altman's *Brewster McCloud* (1970) or the aforementioned *What's Up, Doc?*, retained a connection with gags and gag-based forerunners like *Looney Tunes*, the brief vogue for highbrow gags largely did not carry over to the more adult fare of this period.[145] Instead, references to gags in the trade press tended to revolve around their use in family-oriented films of the 1970s, especially for live-action family comedies distributed by Disney (under the Buena Vista label) during the decade. While I will develop the role of industry and this discourse more in the next chapter, the alignment of gags with comedies marketed as family films further served to align gags with 'lower', less prestigious, and often juvenile, audiences.

As this indicates, though, my examination in this chapter serves largely as a prologue to my subsequent investigation of gag-based comedy across the blockbuster era of Hollywood cinema. By examining the discursive ebb and flow of gags, I hope to remind us that the idea of

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2004, p. 56-93. See also chapter 5 for more on the relationship of classical cartoons to gag comedy.

144 See "Robin Hood," *Variety*, 7 Nov 1973, p. 19 and "Robin Hood," *The Independent Film Journal*, 12 Nov 1973, p. 17-18.

145 See "Brewster McCloud," *Variety*, 18 Nov 1970, p. 67, and "Brewster McCloud," *Variety*, 9 Dec 1970, p. 14 for examples of the connection between this film and *Looney Tunes*, especially Roadrunner cartoons.

"gags" in film has been, and remains, a slippery and unstable construction. This history highlights a series of tensions around what constitutes a gag, how they interact with narrative, and how they relate to popular notions of taste in the classical era. Discourse may have adapted to the industrial shifts for gag comedy over these decades, but it also established particular connections and connotations that have remained surprisingly unyielding in later years. The influence of this, particularly in relation to the resurgence of interest around silent comedy in the 1960s, shaped early film comedy scholarship around gags and continues to both inform and limit it today. Thus, while most critics and scholars do not explicitly acknowledge this fact, every reference to a gag carries with it the weight of over a century of accrued definitions, debates, and other discursive trends. And although I have highlighted several of the most salient topics within this discourse, it is by no means a complete or perfect unpacking of how concepts of the gag have evolved over time. Nevertheless, to ultimately understand the ways in which gags continue to be an important component of Hollywood comedy today, we need to continue developing a better sense of this history and its implications for us moving forward.

Chapter 2

"Funny or Die: Gag-Based Comedy's Adaptations in the Blockbuster Era"

As we have seen, understanding gags and gag-based comedy in classical Hollywood is a complicated endeavor as the shifting economic and industrial landscape of the classical era helped to shape discursive understandings of the term "gag" and its application to comedy. In the 1920s, we saw struggles to position gag comedy as compatible with the maturing studio system and attempts by both creators and critics to balance gag comedy's broad appeal with calls for more "respectable" forms of comedy. In the 1930s, the Depression helped lead to a rise in connecting gags to exploitation gimmicks, while the impact of radio comedy created an even wider and varied understanding of gags as both visual and verbal. Additionally, a mid-century nostalgia for silent film comedy served to create a connection in both popular and scholarly discourse between gags, the silent cinema, and major silent comics, often to the detriment of later gag-based forms. Together, these various industrial and discursive historical contexts for gags continue to shape our understanding of the term today, especially the relationship between narrative and gags and between gags and shifting notions of taste and audiences.

At the same time, though, gags function somewhat differently in the age of the blockbuster. Industrially, gag comedy continues to adapt to shifting industrial currents, but discourse can struggle to keep pace, at times receiving gags in more flexible ways and at other times continuing to approach them via increasingly ossified means that date back to the 1960s and earlier. As gag-based comedy has risen and fallen over the blockbuster era, we thus need to better situate it within the larger industrial, transmedia, and discursive trends of comedy as a whole over this time. This is particularly important given the rapidly shifting avenues for film

comedy in the twenty-first century, with home video, streaming, internet comedy, and a host of other media providing additional platforms, and additional challenges, for the dissemination of gags. Taking all these into account, where does comedy fit into the current industrial landscape of Hollywood cinema? What is the place of gag-based comedy within this larger whole across the blockbuster era? In what ways do recent trends such as the exponential growth of international markets help explain the rise and fall of gag comedy across this time? How has comedy's increasing movement across a wide array of transmedia forms likewise altered the status of gags in film comedy? And how does the reception of gag-based comedy continue to frame our understanding of gags, both complicating and developing the discourse that we have already seen around issues like audiences and taste? Addressing these questions is key to better understanding the state of Hollywood comedy as a whole, the place of gags within it, and the ways gag comedy has adapted (or struggled to) over this time.

In order to better answer these questions, I explore the adaptations on display in gag-based comedy's trajectory from three major perspectives. I begin by providing a broad overview of the industrial landscape for Hollywood comedy in the blockbuster era and the ways in which gag comedy fits into that larger picture. Investigating comedy's relationship to box office, profitability, major production trends, and shifting global markets (particularly the rise of international players like China) serves to showcase gag-based comedy's rise and its decline. Additionally, this highlights how gag comedy has changed in response to constantly morphing industrial pressures, allowing it to remain a force within Hollywood comedy. I then move to look in more detail at some of the changes wrought by the shifts in transmedia comedy during the twenty-first century, focusing on the impact of Netflix, the rise of online shorts and their role

in fostering comic talent, and the evolution of the online video comedy site Funny or Die. By examining the effects of transmedia comedy on the economics of Hollywood comedy as a whole, and the flexible space it provides gag-based comedy in particular, we can better get a sense of how transmedia provide new opportunities for the distribution and exhibition of contemporary comedy while potentially limiting the economic flexibility for gag-based film comedy at times as well. Finally, I end by linking back to and continuing my overview of gag discourse from the previous chapter, examining in more detail several major trends that highlight how discourse around the reception of gag-based comedy continues to both evolve and stagnate. Many of the observations throughout this chapter will be necessarily broad, alternating between comedy as a whole and gag-based comedy specifically, but these three approaches together serve to elucidate a number of the ways in which gags have industrially and discursively evolved, have struggled to adapt, and how they have been at times limited in the blockbuster era.

The Path of Gag-Based Comedy in the Contemporary Hollywood Industry

When tracing trends around the role of comedy and gags within the industrial landscape of blockbuster era Hollywood, one revealing method is to examine the shifting box office viability of both gag comedy and comedy as a whole. At the start of the blockbuster era in the 1970s, genres like science fiction (*Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, both 1977), horror (1973's *The Exorcist*, 1975's *Jaws*), and musicals (1978's *Grease*, 1977's *Saturday Night Fever*) may first come to mind when thinking of major box office successes, but several comedies also feature among the decade's top domestic box office draws. Highest among these is 1973's Oscar winner for Best Picture *The Sting*, a crime comedy that was the 6th top domestic grosser of the decade and, adjusted for inflation, is still the biggest domestic box office comedy

of all-time.[1] Beyond *The Sting*, comedies like *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978),

Smokey and the Bandit (1977), *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *American Graffiti* (1973), and *Every*

Which Way But Loose (1978) all also place within the top 20 domestic grossing films of the

decade. Each took in over $100 million in unadjusted dollars, comparable to non-comic 70s hits

like *Rocky* (1976), *Love Story* (1970), or *Airport* (1970). The first three (*Animal House*, *Smokey*,

and *Blazing*) stand out as being either gag-based or containing a strong strain of gag-based

humor, and each of these were among the decade's biggest box office grossers while being

produced on modest budgets of about $2.5-4.5 million per film.[2] These costs are right at or

below the average production cost for a feature at this time, about $2.5 million for a 1974 studio

film and about $5 million for one in 1979.[3] Even a star-driven period film like *The Sting* only

cost an estimated $5.5 million, about 2-3 times the average production cost of a film at the time

but still less than half the reported totals for other blockbusters of the decade like *Star Wars*,

Jaws, or fellow 1973 film *The Exorcist*. This serves to show how comedy, and gag comedy in

particular, could develop into a force within the blockbuster industry by being a relatively cheap

mode of filmmaking with the potential, when successful, to be extremely profitable.

These box office trends continued in the 1980s, as comedies made up 9 of the decade's

top 20 domestic hits, grossing (from highest to lowest) between $242 and $148 million:

Ghostbusters (1984), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Tootsie* (1982),

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all box office data and rankings taken from box office website The Numbers. While it does have numerous issues (such as an eclectic genre classification system and highly questionable international box office data before the mid-1990s), it is still the most accessible and in-depth source I have found for popular box office data and comparisons.

2 Estimated production budgets: *Blazing Saddles* ($2.6 million), *Animal House* ($3 million), *Smokey and the Bandit* ($4.3 million, taken from IMDB).

3 For average production costs, see Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*, London: Wallflower, 2005, p. 65, and Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000, p. 20.

Crocodile Dundee (1986), *3 Men and a Baby* (1987), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), *Beverly Hills Cop II* (1987), and *Gremlins* (1984). Some were expensive productions, but others were again cheaper and highly profitable films. They could garner top grosses on budgets ranging from under $10 million (*Crocodile Dundee*'s reported $8.8 million) to $10-15 million ($11 million for *Gremlins*; $15 million each for *Tootsie*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *Three Men and a Baby*) and up to $20 million ($19 million for *Back to the Future* and $20 million for *Beverly Hills Cop II*). This feat is even more impressive given how average production costs for the industry as a whole soared over the decade, from $9 million in 1980 to $23 million in 1989. Of these seven films, six were within 25% (above or below) of the average production costs for their respective years while *Crocodile Dundee* was 50% *below* the average cost of a film in 1986.[4] Admittedly, these numbers do not include marketing costs for each film, but they do not include revenues from ancillary markets either. For a merchandising bonanza like *Gremlins*, ancillaries could include dozens of licensed products (ranging from infant-wear to beach towels to kites) from 33 licensees, providing the potential for numerous other profitable revenue streams.[5] And while international box office tallies for the decade are spotty, several of these films found a degree of success globally as well, with *Back to the Future*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, and *Beverly Hills Cop II* each adding well over $100 million more in international markets. While not all of these films are gag-based, several of them, including some of the most profitable, *are* clear gag comedies (*Gremlins*) or feature strong strains of gag-based humor (*Ghostbusters*, *Back to the Future*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*).

Several films on this list also highlight trends that further shaped comedy and the larger

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4   All average production cost data from Prince, p. 20-21.
5   See "Licensee List," container 10, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.

Hollywood industry in subsequent years. Although some of the 1980s' top comedies were more traditional (*Tootsie*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *3 Men and a Baby*), many more were hybrids combining comedy with science fiction (*Back to the Future*), horror and fantasy (*Ghostbusters*, *Gremlins*), and action (the *Beverly Hills Cop* entries). While by no means new, comic hybrids were increasingly central to the 80s, serving as a key way gag comedy adapted to major box office successes that we still see today. In addition to comic hybrids, films like *Tootsie* and the *Beverly Hills Cop* series that were clearly oriented around central star performances (Dustin Hoffman and Eddie Murphy, respectively) also foreshadowed the role of comedian comedies that would further drive box office success in the 90s and early 2000s.[6] Both hybrids and comedian comedies showcased another issue that would greatly affect the industrial viability of comedy later, though: rising costs. *Ghostbusters* may have been the most successful comedy of the decade in terms of domestic box office, but it was also one of the most costly, as the reported $30 million production budget needed to create the film's range of visual effects was over double the average production cost of a 1984 film. While budgets for the first two *Beverly Hills Cop* films were relatively modest at $15-20 million, near industry averages for the time, the success of *Beverly Hills Cop II* led Paramount to strike a new five-picture deal with Eddie Murphy that guaranteed him nearly $16 million per film, ensuring that later Murphy vehicles would be far more costly to produce.[7] If the profitability of gag-based and other comic forms helped them become a major box office force at this time, then, the rising costs of effects and stars would soon cut into those profit margins and help to limit gag comedy's prominence within the industry.

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6 Of course, types of comic star vehicles will vary as well: the Murphy films clearly fit as examples of comedian comedy, whereas the Hoffman film does not.

7 On Eddie Murphy's Paramount deal, see Prince, p. 172. According to The Numbers and IMDB, estimated production budgets for Murphy's next four Paramount films did indeed rise a great deal, each costing between $30 and $40 million.

Perhaps most indicative of later trends, though, is arguably the second most gag-based film on the list: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* A feature-length combination of traditional animation and live-action, *Roger Rabbit* was a costly, painstaking film to produce, and its estimated production budget of $70 million outstripped the production costs of *Crocodile Dundee*, *Gremlins*, *Tootsie*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *3 Men and a Baby* combined. For the film's producers, then, two things were necessary to ensure that such a costly production could still be profitable. First, although the film at times flirted with more salacious and adult material, it needed to remain accessible to family audiences for maximum market potential and thus had to stay within the bounds of a PG rating. Second, the film's extremely high cost meant that, even with a domestic gross of over $150 million, its production and marketing costs would make for only modest domestic theatrical profits at best.[8] However, the film grossed even more internationally than it did domestically, as Box Office Mojo and The Numbers estimate a foreign gross of $173 million and nearly $200 million, respectively, by a wide margin the highest international take of any of the 80s' top grossing comedies. The particular combination of higher production costs and the concomitant need to appeal to broader audiences at home and abroad so as to maintain profitability also became increasingly important by the 2000s, further limiting the viability of traditional comedy as a major box office force.

In the 1990s, however, comedy continued to drive numerous high performing domestic box office hits. Five of the decade's top 20 domestic grossers were live-action comedies (1994's *Forrest Gump*, 1990's *Home Alone*, 1997's *Men in Black*, 1993's *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and 1999's *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*) with each taking in over $200 million. Several other

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8   Of course, the film's merchandising potential and anticipated success in ancillary markets meant that *Roger Rabbit* would still likely do well domestically, but further data on this is beyond the scope of my inquiry here.

gag-heavy films (1997's *Liar Liar*, 1998's *There's Something About Mary*, 1992's *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*, 1999's *Big Daddy*, and 1998's *The Waterboy*) likewise each notched over $150 million domestically. Trends from the 1980s continued to feature prominently as hybrids like comedy-drama *Forrest Gump* and sci-fi-comedy *Men in Black* were expensive to make ($55 million and $90 million respectively) but produced some of the decade's biggest comic hits, especially when factoring in even greater international grosses that gave them $580-$680 million worldwide takes. Similarly, star vehicles continued to drive a number of notable successes, either in hybrid comedies (Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*, Will Smith in *Men in Black*) or for more traditional films in the comedian comedy mold (Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Jim Carrey in *Liar Liar*, Adam Sandler in *Big Daddy* and *The Waterboy*). These films also reached their grosses on relatively small budgets of $23-$40 million, all well within the average production costs for the time (from $29.9 million in 1993 to $51.5 million in 1999).[9] Low-cost sleeper hits continued to have an impact as well, as the first two *Home Alone* movies combined to gross around $450 million domestically and $350+ million internationally on below-average budgets of, respectively, $15 and $20 million. Even though costs continued to rise, the potential for high profitability, especially in gag-heavy films, helped comedy maintain its dominance during the decade.

However, the 1990s featured several key shifts too. The domestic and international box office resurgence of Disney animation helped popularize a trend for films that borrowed heavily from comedy but are generally separated from it in discourse, which instead tends to lump together under the (overly) broad umbrella of "animation" or the family film.[10] These films often

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9   Average production costs from *International Motion Picture Almanac*, 81st ed, ed. Eileen S. Quigley, Quigley Publishing Company, 2010, p. 13.

10   For more on the family film as a genre see Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012.

do make use of comedy, including gags, but given this discursive fuzziness I largely eschew focusing on animation in favor of live-action or live-action/animation hybrids throughout this chapter.[11] Most consequential to the future of Hollywood comedy, however, was the growing importance of international markets and their preferences, or lack thereof, for certain types of gag comedy. As studios sought to maximize profitability, especially for expensive, effects-heavy blockbusters, international markets were vital to help turn tentpoles like *Men in Black* into profit machines. International prospects for star-driven comedian comedies could be much trickier, though. Some stars performed well, as the biggest and often most gag-based hits for Jim Carrey (*Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* and *Dumb & Dumber*, both 1994) earned almost as much internationally as domestically. Other films, for both Carrey and Eddie Murphy, found even more success abroad than at home as Carrey's *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Mask* nearly doubled their domestic takes internationally, as did Murphy's *The Nutty Professor* (1996) and *Doctor Dolittle* (1998).[12] However, in other instances international takes lagged behind domestic totals, as when Carrey's *Liar Liar* grossed $181 million domestically compared to $121 million internationally. Even more notably, Mike Myers' two biggest hits of the decade, *Wayne's World* (1992) and *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, each grossed only about half as much internationally as they did domestically, while Adam Sandler's biggest hits, *The Waterboy* and *Big Daddy*, respectively made $161 and $163 million domestically but only $65 and a mere $28 million internationally.[13] Discrepancies in the appeal of stars to various markets may not have

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11 See chapter 5 for a more in-depth consideration of the relationship between animation, live-action, and gags.

12 Domestic vs international box office for each, in millions: *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* ($108 vs $104); *Dumb & Dumber* ($127 vs $120); *The Mask* ($119 vs $231); *The Truman Show* ($125 vs $138); *The Nutty Professor* ($128 vs $145); *Doctor Dolittle* ($144 vs $150).

13 Domestic vs international box office for the Myers films, in millions: *Wayne's World* ($121 vs $61); *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* ($206 vs $106). *The Waterboy*'s international failure is likely due to its focus on American football, a tough sell internationally. Sandler's other football film, 2005's *The Longest Yard*, performed similarly, with $158 million domestic versus only $33.5 million internationally.

been a major concern at the time, but they again foreshadow the limits of comedy's adaptability in a way that would become more pressing in the 21st century.

A closer look at the 1998 hit *There's Something About Mary* further highlights the challenges of international markets for comic genres. Despite a lack of top level stars, *Mary* was the year's third highest grossing film domestically and fourth worldwide, and it stands out for featuring strong elements of gag-based, grossout, *and* romantic comedy.[14] The trades were particularly impressed with the film's international clout: a front page *Variety* story on *Mary*'s global success repeats the common industry wisdom of the time that "American lowbrow laffers haven't always translated well overseas," implying that gag comedy (often lumped in with "lowbrow") was a nonstarter globally, which, as we have seen, is only partially true.[15] *Variety* also notes other elements of the film that they had expected would limit its international prospects, including "political incorrectness," more extreme grossout humor than that in other "lowbrow" international hits (like Jim Carrey's), and a narrative payoff dependent upon audience recognition and knowledge of American football star Brett Favre. However, *Mary* also fit in with other international trends, from Germany's fondness for lowbrow American comedy to the struggle of Hollywood comedy in Asian markets, as *Mary* underperformed in Southeast Asia (due in no small part to local censorship issues) and failed to break out in other areas like Hong Kong and South Korea.[16] This weak Asian performance again points to an incipient industrial trend, as China's exponential box office growth in the 2000s and 2010s would serve to be another factor limiting global box office returns for many Hollywood gag comedies.

Beyond *Mary*, industry discourse at this time was often predicated around hyperbolic

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14 *Mary* trailed only *Saving Private Ryan* and *Armageddon* domestically and *Armageddon*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Godzilla* worldwide.

15 Don Groves, "'Mary' Gels With Overseas Auds," *Variety*, 9 Nov 1998, p. 1.

16 Ibid., p. 45.

boom and bust cycles for Hollywood comedy globally, as comedies alternated between failing to connect internationally *and* becoming surprise hits in the same markets every two or three years. Although this would soon change, an early 2001 *Variety* story is indicative of industry truisms of the time. In it, New Line co-chairman Rolf Mittweg noted that comedies depend on domestic grosses to cover costs and "whatever comes in from abroad is gravy," largely summing up the studio approach to most comedy from the 80s to the early 2000s.[17] This story also outlines industry tips for making comedy that appeals to "finicky" international markets, including emphasizing slapstick and grossout (a potential drawback just two-and-a-half years earlier for *Mary*) over verbal humor and carefully assessing individual markets outside of Germany and the U.K. given the less predictable comic preferences in other European countries and Japan.[18] If this speaks to the challenges of comedy in international markets, the discourse's boom and bust cycle can be best illustrated by how, only one week later, *Variety* headlines proclaimed that comedy was "sweeten[ing] the o'seas B.O. pot" rather than proving a hindrance for studios.[19] Although the industry was on the verge of major changes, contemporaneous industry discourse still struggled to adapt by indicating the direction those changes would ultimately take.

Although it would soon face a steep decline, the late 90s and early 2000s were one of the most successful times for comedy in recent decades. In addition to aforementioned hits from 1997-1999, the early 2000s featured several other live-action or live-action/animation comedies that topped the $150 million mark domestically: *Scary Movie*, *Meet the Parents*, *What Women Want*, and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (all 2000); *Rush Hour 2* (2001); *Scooby-Doo*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *Men in Black 2*, *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (all

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17 Anthony D'Alessandro, "U.S. Laffers Find Int'l Funny Bones Finicky," *Variety*, 22 Jan 2001, p. 18.
18 Ibid., p. 18, 29.
19 Don Groves, "Comedy Hits Sweeten the O'seas B.O. Pot," *Variety*, 29 Jan 2001, p. 8.

2002); *Elf*, *Bruce Almighty* (both 2003); *Meet the Fockers* (2004); and *The Longest Yard*, *Hitch*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Wedding Crashers* (all 2005). And if there were fewer comedies that reached this level domestically over the rest of the decade, there were still notable exceptions, particularly *The Hangover*, a massive 2009 summer sleeper success that spawned the highest grossing comedy series of the period.[20] However, comedy's box office clout in these years also began a decline that would accelerate in later years, especially when considering the number of live-action comedies in the top 20 domestic grossers of the 2000s. Although the 1970s featured 6 such films, the 1980s featured 9, and the 1990s featured 5, *no* live-action comedies cracked the top 20 for the 2000s, with the highest placing films (*Meet the Fockers* and *The Hangover*) coming in at, respectively, 31st and 32nd. In fact, while the 1990s placed 5 in the top 20, the 2000s only featured 5 live-action comedies in the top *50*. Simply put, live-action comedies could no longer match the rapidly increasing returns for popular science fiction and fantasy franchise films that now dominated the upper echelons of the box office. In fact, the only comedies that *could* compete in this landscape were computer-animated family films with comic elements like 2001's *Shrek 2* (the 3rd highest grossing domestic film of the decade), 2003's *Finding Nemo*, 2007's *Shrek the Third*, 2009's *Up*, and 2001's *Monsters, Inc.*, each of which topped the tallies of *Fockers* and *Hangover*.

Of course, some of this is due to larger box office shifts from the 70s to the 2000s. As indicated earlier, average budgets soared in the 1980s and have continued to do so at varying rates since then. After jumping from $9 million in 1980 to $23 million in 1989, average film

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20 Other 2006 to 2009 live-action comedies or live-action/animation hybrid comedies with $150+ million domestic box office takes (from lowest to highest): *Sex and the City* (2008), *The Proposal* (2009), *Wild Hogs* (2007), *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* (2009), *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (2007), *Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakuel* (2009), *Night at the Museum* (2006), and *The Hangover* (2009).

budgets rose to $51.5 million by 1999 and $71.3 million by 2008.[21] On top of this, marketing

costs went through a similar, even more dramatic rise, from about $9 million in 1989 to $25

million in 1999 and $36 million in 2008, further raising overall costs and the grosses needed

(domestic *and* international) for a film to break even.[22] Traditional comedies, even those

appealing to a relatively wide audience, thus struggled to garner the necessary box office to

compete with "event" films that topped the decade's charts. Gag comedies struggled even more.

In general, they could take the familiar route of Mel Brooks or ZAZ-style parody, discursively

framed as appealing to a more and more limited audience, or they could continue to blend gags

with other genres and comic forms so as to create hybrids with wider appeal. In the 2000s,

Scary Movie and other films in its mold followed the first option before becoming financially

untenable later in the cycle. Spoofs *Date Movie* (2006) and *Epic Movie* (2007) likely remained

profitable with reported worldwide grosses and video sales of about $105 million each on $20

million budgets, but most other late 2000s spoofs were not so fortunate. *Superhero Movie* (2008)

took in about $86 million in worldwide box office and domestic video, but on a higher $35

million budget, while *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007) and *Dance Flick* (2009) could

only muster $37 million worldwide/video and $32 million domestic box office on budgets of $35

million and $25 million, respectively.[23] As the average marketing cost for a wide release was

over $35 million by this time, it seems reasonable to assume that even if the marketing for spoofs

fell well below the average, such weak returns would make future entries financially non-viable

by the early 2010s. It is unsurprising, then, that there are few primarily gag-based comedies

among the top grossers of the 2000s, as most films with gag-based comedy combined those

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21 1999 and 2008 figures from *International Motion Picture Almanac*, p. 13.

22 Prince, p. 21. *International Motion Picture Almanac*, p. 13.

23 The Numbers does not have worldwide or video grosses for *Dance Flick*, but it seems highly unlikely that
    combined they would come close to, much less exceed, the film's domestic gross.

strains into increasingly hybrid, and thus more financially viable, forms.

These trends were further exacerbated in the 2010s. Several comic animated films were among the top 20 highest grossers (2018's *Incredibles 2*, 2016's *Finding Dory*, 2019's *Toy Story 4*), but the top placing live-action comedy was action-adventure hybrid *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* at 26th, and the highest placing traditional live-action comedy was 2011's *The Hangover Part II* at 74th, grossing about $25 million less than the first film. A number of live-action or hybrid comedies continued to perform well, particularly if one includes comic superhero movies like the *Deadpool*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and *Ant-Man* films, but their numbers pale in comparison with the performance of such films in previous decades. Given the shifting value of a box office dollar, comedy clearly lacked the same industrial impact in the 2010s as it did in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. This was, if anything, doubly true for gag-based comedies: if the 2000s still placed at least one clear example in the decade's top grossers (*Scary Movie*), none cracked the 2010s' top 100. Even the number of films with clearly gag-based strains, including sustained usage of gags and/or multiple gag-based sequences, were infrequent in the top 100, only applying to a handful of animated films and hybrid, effects-driven comedies like the *Jumanji* series. Gags have adapted to remain relevant for many top films, but they are generally more scattered or isolated than in past top grossing examples, making up only a small part of the many generic and comic approaches for such films.

The fate of comedy internationally also highlights the limits of gag-based Hollywood comedy's ability to remain prominent in current global blockbuster cinema. There *are* major success stories: *The Hangover* trilogy, grossing over $1.4 billion worldwide combined, over half of which came internationally; the partially gag-based *Night at the Museum* trilogy, taking in

almost 60% of its combined $1.3 billion worldwide gross internationally; the *Meet the Parents*

trilogy, earning over $1.1 billion with almost half of that from international markets; and the

recent *Jumanji* films (*Welcome to the Jungle* and 2019's *The Next Level*) grossing $960 and $800

million respectively worldwide, with a majority again coming internationally. Based solely on

these examples, one might be tempted to think that gag comedy can still perform well

worldwide. However, traditional comedies with strong international success are the exception

rather than the rule, making the *Hangover* and *Parents* trilogies notable outliers. Films like the

Jumanji or *Night at the Museum* series both utilize more clearly gag-based elements, but they are

also hybrid comedies that foreground action, adventure, and fantasy elements as much as

comedy (and often more so) in their marketing, both domestically and abroad.[24] Here too, then,

we see gag comedy largely eschewing classical forms and adapting to the needs of hybrid films

that are far more effective at reaching a wider global audience.

The fate of other films further highlights the limits of Hollywood comedy's potential

internationally, especially for raunchy, often gag-heavy comedy. *The Hangover*'s hard-R comic

approach is again an outlier, as such comedies are usually much more hit-and-miss

internationally. If *Mary* surprised as an international hit *because* of its grossout elements,

leading to expectations of raunch for comedies in 2001, by 2006 it was again surprising that

"even raunch" could help American comedies in foreign markets, showcasing a discursive

instability that rapidly oscillated between seeing hard-R comedy as a plus and as a negative

internationally.[25] Box office numbers, though, indicate that raunchy comedy is generally more

limiting than not. Even international R-rated comedy hits like *American Pie 2* (2001) or *Scary*

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24 See the emphasis on action stars Dwayne Johnson and Karen Gillan, as well as the film's action-adventure
    narrative, in *Welcome to the Jungle*'s main trailer, the *Night at the Museum* films' increasingly fantastical posters,
    and for *Secret of the Tomb*, the action-adventure-oriented international trailer.
25 Dave McNary, "Int'l Comedy No Laughing Matter," *Variety*, 26 Jun 2006, p. 50.

Movie grossed less abroad than they did domestically, and the fate of other R-rated domestic comedy hits is even starker. Like *Scary Movie*, $150+ million R-rated grossers *Neighbors* (2014), *We're the Millers* (2013), *Bridesmaids* (2011), and *22 Jump Street* (2014) all took in only about 70-80% as much internationally as they did domestically. Others managed less than half as much internationally, including *Superbad* (2007), *21 Jump Street* (2012), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *The Heat* (2013), while 2005's summer smash *Wedding Crashers* made $209 million domestically and a mere $74 million elsewhere. The most extreme example of this trend is 2013's *Identity Thief*, which took in $134 million domestic compared to just under $41 million internationally, a total only about 30% as much as its domestic take. Although numerous factors account for these discrepancies, including differing comic preferences, acceptability, and censorship in different international markets, the trend clearly seems be against many, if not most, R-rated comedies, including those (*Scary Movie*, *The Heat*, or the *Jump Streets*) with notable gag-based elements.

Adding to this, some popular domestic comedy stars also struggle internationally when making more adult (as opposed to family) PG-13 and R-rated comedies. This is particularly true of Will Ferrell's films. His work varies wildly in terms of domestic returns, but he has starred in eleven live-action films that have made at least $75 million domestically, ranging from 2003's *Old School* to 2017's *Daddy's Home 2*. However, while other performers have had at least some greater successes internationally, *none* of those eleven Ferrell vehicles had an international gross reach even 70% of their domestic take. Three actually grossed less than *20%* as much (*Old School*, 2004's *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, and 2006's *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*) while others tallied about 25-50% as much internationally.[26] And if

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26 Domestic vs international grosses for the 3 films cited, in millions: *Old School* ($75 v $11), *Anchorman* ($84 v

Ferrell's filmography is atypically imbalanced toward domestic returns, his fate fits with some other types of comedy more broadly. A 2005 *Variety* story claims that successful "adult-oriented" comedies (a fuzzy term that here simply seems to apply to both PG-13 and R-rated, young-adult skewing gag-based and comedian comedy) generally can only expect international grosses that are about half as much as their domestic ones.[27] While discourse has struggled at times to effectively reflect Hollywood's shifting industrial realities, this observation seems right on target in noting the ceiling for worldwide grosses in such gaggy, "adult" comedies.

This story is also largely on-point when reiterating the contemporary industry truism that positioned Asia as the toughest market for American comedy. In a feature on the 2005 American Film Market, Push Worldwide sales agency rep Jelena Tadic notes that, while American comedies rarely hit in European markets, they "almost don't work at all in Asia," reinforcing the idea that Asian markets exacerbate the already extreme hit-or-miss tendencies of comedies abroad.[28] A later report on American studio expansion into the then-burgeoning Chinese marketplace likewise noted that most American comedy does not work in China, save for a few family-oriented comedies (including 2003's *Cheaper by the Dozen* and, somewhat oddly, 2000's *Big Momma's House*). This was likely due to the lack of a rating system in China that required films to be suitable for *all* audiences, eliminating many PG-13 and R-rated American comedies from consideration.[29] If this continued rejection of most American comedy (either culturally or via censorship and film quotas) still holds true, it helps to explain the greatly decreased viability of American comedy internationally in recent years. The worldwide box office ceiling for most comedies, gag-based or otherwise, would be far lower than for other types of films if what is

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$5), *Talladega Nights* ($148 v $14).
27 Dave McNary, "Can Laffers Travel?," *Variety*, 5 Sep 2005, p. 15.
28 Matthew Ross, "Product Trends," *Variety*, 31 Oct 2005, p. 35.
29 Patrick Frater, "Quota Fix Leaves H'Wood Hanging," *Variety*, 2 Jan 2006, p. 8.

currently the world's largest (and still growing) market finds them unsuitable for release.[30] It also

provides a rationale for gag comedy's flexibility to become even more insistently hybridized in

recent years, allowing it to remain a part of blockbuster cinema (albeit a supporting one) while

foregrounding family suitability that allows for a potentially easier and greater global reach.

While the growth of global box office has proven to be a major challenge and limitation

for contemporary Hollywood comedy, other trends have provided space for further adaptation

and flexibility. This is particularly true of transmedia shifts within the industry over the past two

decades, especially in terms of distribution via DVD and streaming services. The rise of home

video in the 1980s has been well documented, and its impact on the Hollywood film industry has

been (and continues to be) huge.[31] For comedy in particular, trades emphasize how home video

(specifically DVD) served to augment the success of certain films and performers, including

several gag-based ones. Although the number of R-rated films dropped in 2004/2005, studios

could still have it both ways with teen-oriented raunchy comedy by releasing PG-13 versions in

theaters and unrated versions on DVD, maintaining a broader appeal while also incentivizing

audiences to seek out both versions.[32] If *Variety* noted the struggle of raunchy comedies to find

an international audience in the mid-2000s, they also rhetorically wondered whether studios

should even care about international box office given the "assured" profits from "hefty DVD"

sales for domestic hits like *Wedding Crashers*.[33] When noting the profitability of lower budget

raunchy comedies like *Knocked Up* compared to high budget failures like *Evan Almighty* in the

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30 Again, superhero hybrids may prove to be an exception here: *Deadpool 2*, both a hard R-rated film and at least in part a gag-based comedy, performed well in China, only slightly trailing the UK as the largest international market for the film.

31 See, for example, "The Brave New Ancillary World" in Prince, p. 90-141, and Frederick Wasser, "Ancillary Markets – Video and DVD: Hollywood Retools," *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, eds. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, Malden: Blackwell, 2008, p. 120-131.

32 Gabriel Snyder, "Don't Give Me an 'R'," *Variety*, 21 Feb 2005, p. 45.

33 McNarry, "Can Laffers Travel?," p. 15.

2007 summer season, *Variety* noted that *Knocked Up* had the potential to generate over $330 million of revenue from box office *and* video sales, a figure that The Numbers further breaks down as nearly $150 million domestic box office, $70 million international, and another $120 million (over 1/3 of its total take) via video.[34] *Knocked Up* may be exceptional in this regard, but several other gag-heavy comedies from this period also notched strong video sales, nearly half of the domestic box office take for *Borat* (2006), *Norbit* (2007), and *Pineapple Express* (2008) and about 60-70% of domestic grosses for *Talladega Nights* and *Jackass: Number Two* (2006). Although the discursive claim that DVD and Blu-Ray sales made international grosses a moot point was short-lived at best and flat out wrong at worst, such sales still offer a useful way of trying to measure the appeal of gags, comedy, and their commercial viability during the 2000s.

Further underlying these observations is industry wisdom that comedies can be profitable due not only to their low production costs, but because of their potential for huge home video returns (potentially 50-100% as much again in grosses) as well.[35] This seems to hold true for a number of successful comedies on home video during the 2000s: aside from those already mentioned, other gag-heavy comedies that fit within this 50-100% window include *Night at the Museum* ($251 million theatrical, $156 million video); 2006's *Nacho Libre* ($80 million theatrical, $47 million video); *Bridesmaids* ($169 million theatrical, $95 million video); and 2012's *Ted* ($219 million theatrical, $132 million video). However, reliable home video sales numbers are difficult to find and do not include key revenue streams, like VOD and other streaming sales, making them an inconsistent measure for the 2010s and on. Still, available data by the early 2010s do show how the previous, frequently strong connection between comedy and

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34 Pamela McClintock, "Many Happy Returns," *Variety*, 23 Jul 2007, p. 1.

35 Estimated home video sales for a pair of other Apatow-produced comedies from the same period, *Superbad* and *Talladega Nights*, highlights this potential further: both films outgrossed their impressive domestic box office on DVD and Blu-Ray, with *Talladega Nights* exceeding its box office by $5 million and *Superbad* by $20 million.

video sales was becoming more erratic. By 2009, *Variety* singled out comedy as "notoriously inconsistent" in terms of home video revenue, citing the struggles of recent box office hit *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* to sell well on DVD and Blu-Ray as making it more difficult to factor in such revenue when budgeting comedies.[36] This was also particularly true for gag-heavy films in the 2010s, with *22 Jump Street* ($192 million theatrical, $28 million video), 2015's *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* ($163 million theatrical, $25 million video), 2013's *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* ($127 million theatrical, $15.5 million video), and 2014's *Dumb and Dumber To* ($86 million theatrical, $13 million video) all earning a mere fraction of their domestic theatrical grosses in video sales. While streaming likely picked up *some* of the slack for these films, the limits of unstable ancillary revenue *and* a lack of strong international box office has forced Hollywood comedy as a whole, and gag-based comedy in particular, to adapt more and more by combining with or transitioning into alternate forms.

Contemporary Gags in Transmedia Comedy

The above may paint a particularly bleak picture of the industrial role gag comedy has within Hollywood, but the rising importance of transmedia comedy provides new potential avenues, both artistically and economically, for gags to thrive. To thoroughly unpack the relationship of transmedia comedy to contemporary Hollywood cinema would require a separate project of its own, and I point to the work of others for further perspectives on this topic, especially the ways in which Nick Marx and Alex Symons each trace how various gag-centric performers have successfully maneuvered their comedy across media forms.[37] Nevertheless, I want to at least briefly examine some of the ways transmedia comedy has shaped the current

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36 Susanne Ault, "You Do the Math," *Variety*, 7 Sep 2009, p. 6.
37 See Nick Marx, "'The Missing Link Moment': Web Comedy in New Media Industries," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 68 (Fall 2011), p. 14-23, and Alex Symons, *Mel Brooks in the Cultural Industries: Survival and Prolonged Adaptation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

comic landscape, starting with Netflix's movement into feature film production. Although Netflix has had a profound effect on the film and television industry since its early days as a mail-order DVD rental service, it is its later role as a streaming juggernaut that has brought the most systemic changes to the comedy landscape. After moving into online streaming of selected films and television shows in the late 2000s, Netflix rapidly became *the* premier streaming service, frequently accounting for a hefty chunk of total internet usage at any given point in time.[38] This growth, and a concomitant rise in the fees studios and distributors charged to stream their work, pushed Netflix to aggressively invest in creating original content in the early-to-mid 2010s. While the push began with TV shows such as *House of Cards*, the company made headlines when it announced an aggressive push into film production and distribution in 2014, notably including an exclusive, four-film deal with comedy star Adam Sandler.

The deal may have grabbed headlines, but many were skeptical that signing Sandler was a major coup for Netflix. For one, while Sandler had been one of the top comedy box office draws of the late 90s and early-to-mid 2000s, including several films with gag-based elements, he was a big *domestic*, but not necessarily *international*, draw. Furthermore, at the time of the Netflix deal Sandler had recently suffered a string of box office disappointments, from the weak domestic tallies of the 2013 sequel *Grown Ups 2* and the 2011 vehicle *Jack & Jill* to the clear flop of 2012's *That's My Boy*.[39] Given this recent lack of success, some within the industry were ambivalent toward the deal. One talent agency executive told *Variety* that "tens of millions of people" still want to watch Sandler but also admitted that he is "a star who may not be as

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38 As of 2015, it comprised up to 35% of peak US and Canadian internet traffic ("Video Streaming," *Consumer Reports Money Advisor*, 12.5 (May 2015), p. 7), and as of late 2018, it accounted for 15% of global internet bandwidth ("Netflix Consumes 15% of the World's Internet Bandwidth," *Fortune*, 2 Oct 2018).

39 However, as a further complication, several of his recent films at the time (and subsequently) actually began to show stronger international clout, with *Grown Ups 2* slightly bettering the initial film's international take and *Jack & Jill* making more internationally than domestically.

bankable as he once was," seemingly praising Netflix for signing a viable star while also implying that Sandler fits because he is no longer *theatrically* viable, and thus 'only' good enough for streaming.[40] British trade journal *Screen International* provided similar hesitation when noting that, in signing Sandler, Netflix may not be "depriving exhibitors" of major box office because Sandler "is a patchy commercial prospect who has never been Hollywood's biggest export."[41] As is often the case with industry discourse, both responses are ultimately ambivalent, positioning Netflix's deal with Sandler as *potentially* important while hedging their bets by noting that it also may not be since Sandler was no longer a "real" major star.

Why pursue Sandler and comedy, then, as Netflix dove into becoming a major film producer? Along with the nebulous "tens of millions" who wanted to see Sandler, he could also appeal to Netflix for the type of industrial flexibility his films could represent. At the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, Netflix COO Ted Sarandos claimed that the budgets for their upcoming films, presumably including those under the Adam Sandler deal, were in the range of $15-50 million, fitting comfortably into what the industry calls mid-range films.[42] One rationale for the Netflix/Sandler deal, then, is the guaranteed production backing and distribution for a class of film, the mid-budgeted mainstream release, that according to received industry wisdom was steadily vanishing. While the trades had been announcing the death of mid-range films for years, they still held out comedy as a potential exception as late as 2009, with a *Variety* recap of the summer movie season pointing to the success of *The Proposal* and *The Hangover* as evidence that mid-range films could still outgross more expensive blockbusters.[43] However, given the inability of more recent comedy (and many other mid-range films) to reach such levels, shifting

40 Brent Lang and Todd Spangler, "Aggressive Netflix Muscles Into Movies," *Variety*, 7 Oct 2014, p. 17.
41 Jeremy Kay, "Hollywood shaken up by Netflix ambitions," *Screen International*, 3 Oct 2014.
42 Ramin Setoodeh and Patrick Frater, "Netflix's Vision Includes China," *Variety*, 16 May 2015, p. 71.
43 Pamela McClintock, "H'W'D Summer School," *Variety*, 17 Aug 2009, p. 29.

the mid-range movie to Netflix makes sense both for them and Sandler. Sandler's production

budgets had swelled by the early 2010s, with his 2006 to 2011 wide release starring vehicles all

budgeted at between $75 and 90 million, and so it was increasingly difficult for his films to turn

a profit given the limits on comedy's box office returns. The Netflix deal would thus give him a

guaranteed platform and a more reliable return on his films, although at the cost of lower

budgets. Meanwhile, for Netflix, they would garner the name recognition of a still relatively

major comedy star and his likewise generally reliable built-in audience for some of their earliest

original film content, giving them the viewers (and subscribers) to make the deal a win for

everyone involved.

That being said, the power of Netflix over film and television comedy creates other issues

as well. As part of his review for Netflix's *Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp*

(2015), prequel to the 2001 cult comedy film, *Variety*'s Brian Lowry mused that part of Netflix's

strategy for success came "from showcasing talent that has a good track record of subscribers

streaming their work," which he credits with not only making *First Day of Camp* a success but

also as a prime rationale behind the company's Sandler deal.[44] In other words, Netflix's data

showed that their subscribers tended to stream Sandler films, meaning that their move into film

production could simply give viewers more of what they already wanted. However, Netflix's

notorious tendency to not share, or to share only selective and potentially misleading, hard data

on what subscribers are *actually* watching also makes it more difficult for creators and the

industry at large to gauge the success or failure of content delivered via Netflix. As *New York*

magazine implies in their June 2018 profile of the company, this is due to Netflix following a

typical logic of major tech companies that "growth begets more growth begets more growth,"

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44 Brian Lowry, "Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp," *Variety*, 22 Jul 2015, p. 84.

encouraging the creation of more and more content to garner more subscribers, gain more

revenue, glean more data to help create more content, and so on.[45] Under such a model, Netflix

data need only be shared within the company itself to help it prioritize content creation,

potentially cutting others (including those actually creating the content) out of the loop, making

it more difficult for them to provide demographic data to help them secure funding for non-

Netflix work. What is more flexible for Netflix, then, may ultimately prove to be limiting for

comedy as a whole.

At the same time, though, Netflix has also given a platform to a number of gag-based

comic creators in recent years. This is especially true for David Wain-related projects, with

multiple TV series appearing on Netflix based on Wain's 2001 gag-based film *Wet Hot American*

Summer (*Wet Hot American Summer: First Day of Camp* and 2017's *Wet Hot American Summer:*

Ten Years Later) and a spinoff of the gag-heavy, Wain co-created series *Childrens Hospital*

(2008-2016) with 2020's *Medical Police*. And although Wain's own film for Netflix (the 2018

comic biopic *A Stupid and Futile Gesture*) depends less on gags, others with a gag-based lineage

have released new films through the service that replicate, at least at times, their previous gag-

based work. Beyond Sandler, this includes a number of frequent Sandler collaborators like

David Spade (2018's *Father of the Year*) and Kevin James (2016's *True Memoirs of an*

International Assassin), as well as *Scary Movie* vet Marlon Wayans (2017's *Naked* and 2019's

Sextuplets). In addition, Netflix is far from the only streaming service to provide space for gag-

based material. Amazon has also recently served as a distributor of sequels by Eddie Murphy

(2021's *Coming 2 America*) and Sacha Baron Cohen (2020's *Borat: Subsequent Moviefilm*, which

Amazon also produced) that build off of prior, partially gag-based material. Though both films

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45 Josef Adalian, "The Netflix Binge Factory," *New York*, 11 Jun 2018.

were released during the COVID pandemic when theatrical distribution was not a viable option, given the struggles of comedy (and both stars Murphy and Cohen) in recent years, it is plausible that they would have been a theatrical risk anyway and would have struggled to reach their predecessors' box office returns. In cases like these, streaming provides a more stable platform than theatrical release likely would, a position that seems to be reinforced by Netflix recently announcing a new four film, up to $275 million deal with Sandler, with the company claiming that viewers have watched over 2 billion hours of Sandler's films on the service since 2015.[46]

Of course, while streaming services do provide a major platform for current Hollywood comedy, gag-based or otherwise, they are by no means the only place for it. Other sources of online video have been instrumental in providing an outlet for numerous comic writers, performers, and properties that have subsequently moved into television and film comedy. We see examples of this as early as 2002, when the gag-based comedy *Undercover Brother* moved from an animated internet series to a live-action feature film.[47] Nearly a decade later, *Broad City* (2014-2019) started as a web series on YouTube before morphing into a five-season long TV series on Comedy Central and featuring numerous personnel (co-star and co-creator Ilana Glazer, frequent show director Lucia Aniello, frequent writer Paul W. Downs) who would write, direct, and co-star in the 2017 comedy *Rough Night*. Jenny Slate, who first found success in various comic forms such as stand-up and web comedy, moved into *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) appearances, recurring television roles (perhaps most notably as Mona-Lisa on *Parks & Recreation* (2009-2015)), and success in films as both a voice actor (*Zootopia*, *The Secret Life of Pets* films) and in live-action roles (2018's *Venom*). And in arguably the most gag-based

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46 Jordan Ruimy, "Netflix Signs Adam Sandler to $275 million/4 Movie Deal, Claims Its Viewers Spent 2 Billion Hours Watching His Movies," *World of Reel*, 31 Jan 2020.
47 I discuss *Undercover Brother* more in chapter 6.

example, comedy-rap group the Lonely Island began making web shorts in the mid-2000s before

finding huge success with digital shorts for *Saturday Night Live* and having individual members

(Andy Samberg in the TV series *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-2021) and the Sandler film *That's*

My Boy) or the group as a whole (from the 2007 film *Hot Rod* to the 2016 film *Popstar: Never*

Stop Never Stopping and the 2019 Netflix short *The Unauthorized Bash Brothers Experience*)

star, write, or direct numerous film and television projects.[48] These successes show how online

shorts serve as a key avenue for expanding into other forms of media comedy for a variety of

comic creators and approaches, from the goofiness of the Lonely Island to the feminist comedy

of the *Broad City* crew.

Beyond this, video shorts and web series can also give comic creators a greater flexibility

to maintain their popularity or expand their audience base as they move between media. For

Broad City, not only did their web series give them the exposure needed to ultimately get picked

up by Comedy Central, but co-stars/co-creators Glazer and Abbi Jacobson continued to create

online "bridge content" to help maintain fan interest in the series between the show's seasons.[49]

Comic duo Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim likewise used online content to supplement their

work in other media, running their own online humor site and a Comedy Central-sponsored web

series in advance of (and in conjunction with) their cult Adult Swim sketch series *Tim and Eric*

Awesome Show, Great Job! (2007-2017) and partaking in a variety of web projects to support

their 2012 feature film debut *Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie*.[50] For Wain, along with

several acting alumni from the 1990s MTV sketch comedy show *The State* (1993-1995), web

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48 For more on Andy Samberg, the Lonely Island, and their history, see Ethan Thompson and Ethan Tussey, "Andy Samberg's Digital Success Story and Other Myths of the Internet Comedy Club," *Saturday Night Live & American TV*, eds. Nick Mark, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 233-253.

49 Brian Steinberg, "Laugh Riot," *Variety*, 28 Jan 2015, p. 67.

50 Janelle Brown, "10 Comics to Watch," *Variety Plus*, 17 Jul 2006, p. A4.

series like *Wainy Days* (My Damn Channel, 2007-2012) and *Childrens Hospital* (TheWB.com, 2008, co-created with Rob Corddry and Jonathan Stern) provided an outlet for a particular gag-heavy brand of absurdist comedy that was both successful in its own right (as *Childrens Hospital* was quickly picked up for a seven season run on Adult Swim) and created/maintained interest in Wain's work between other film and television projects. For these comic creators, then, online shorts served as simply one media among many in which to work, offering less widespread cultural exposure than film or television but to a more targeted audience that could create a core fanbase to help support their work in other, more traditional media.

As with Wain's work, online shorts serve as an important medium for gag-based comedy that is similar to the types of heterogeneous, modular, short form comedy central to precedents ranging from vaudeville to sketch TV. For a group like the Lonely Island, shorts and feature films provide space for a wide range of gags than would be possible only in mainstream feature films. Gags can be in audio-only songs (their descriptions of the havoc wreaked for a phantom music video in "Japan"), songs with accompanying music videos online ("Threw It On the Ground"), or an important aspect of films such as *Hot Rod* (Rod's absurdly extended fall down a mountainside; the "cool beans" remix gag) or *Popstar* (across numerous music videos and concert performances in the film; the penis signing gag). Together they allow for a wide range of media that can also comfortably accommodate a wide range of gag types and gag integration with, depending on the media form, even lower production, distribution, or marketing costs. Likewise, comedy duo Key & Peele, veterans of the sketch comedy shows *MadTV* (1995-2009, 2016) and their own *Key & Peele* (2012-2015), make use of a modular approach that is well suited to gags both simple and complex that can stand alone or that can be integrated into a

narrative feature film format, as in the numerous gags around Clarence's obsession with pop star George Michael or Rell and Hi-C's encounter with Anna Farris in the 2016 film *Keanu*. These examples are but a small sample showing how increasingly intertwined transmedia comedy fits within a long lineage of gag-based film comedy inspired by other media. Much like predecessors from Keaton and Chaplin to the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope, Mel Brooks, Richard Pryor, and more, contemporary comics continue to use a variety of media to test out and pursue an array of gags in an array of industrial contexts that can also inform their film comedy.

When transmedia comedy enters the film industry landscape, though, it highlights economic challenges that can limit the reach of such web and television comedy, especially as it transitions to film. The previous examples of creative personnel who have moved between online comedy, TV, and films share one common variable: a lack of significant box office success. For the *Broad City* alumni in *Rough Night*, the film was at best a very modest success, with a worldwide gross of about $46 million (just over half of that figure coming internationally, likely due to the draw of star Scarlett Johansson) on a reported $20 million production budget. Outside of her supporting roles as a voice actor in mainstream animated films, Jenny Slate has likewise found only modest success in starring roles, most notably the $3.3 million gross on a $1 million budget for her starring role in the 2014 abortion dramedy *Obvious Child*. With the exception of his most mainstream film, 2008's *Role Models* (an estimated $134 million in worldwide gross and home video sales on a $28 million budget), Wain's work has found little box office success, needing video and streaming to turn *Wet Hot American Summer* into a cult "hit." Key & Peele's *Keanu* (just over a $20 million gross on a $15 million budget) and the Lonely Island's *Hot Rod* ($39 million box office gross and home video sales on a $25 million

budget) both likely suffered at least modest losses when ancillary revenues and marketing costs are taken into account. Still, these are all better than the fate of *Tim & Eric's Billion Dollar Movie* (less than a $250,000 gross on a $3 million budget) and *Popstar* (an estimated $11.5 million in worldwide box office *and* home video sales on a $20 million budget), clear financial disasters by any measure. In each of these examples, comic creators and performers have subsequently returned to predominantly (and generally more successful) web and television roles, supporting film roles, or, for Jordan Peele, great critical and commercial success outside the realm of sketch comedy with the horror films *Get Out* (2016) and *Us* (2019). Although transmedia forms may provide some flexibility for these creators, their lack of financial success starkly highlights the economic limits of moving gags from online realms into Hollywood films.

This lack of success nevertheless fits a larger trend of mid-2000s and 2010s films that failed to translate the potential of widespread online buzz into actual box office results. While this was most famously exemplified by the soft box office of two films that were widely hyped online, *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), other comedies have suffered a similarly underwhelming, if far less dramatic, fate.[51] The build up to the December 2013 release of *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* involved a huge online marketing blitz that led *Variety*'s Andrew Wallenstein to muse that Paramount was "either flirting with serious overexposure or reinventing how digital entertainment marketing is done." However, he also noted how such an approach was feasible due to Will Ferrell's comic improvisation skills that kept his Ron Burgundy character from wearing out his welcome.[52] In the end, neither of Wallenstein's predictions for Paramount seemed to come true: the film did not appear to suffer

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51 It is worth noting that both films had relatively healthy estimated home video sales, in each case just shy of their domestic box office. This likely made *Snakes*, but not the much more expensive *Scott Pilgrim*, a modest success.
52 Andrew Wallenstein, "There Is No Escaping Ron Burgundy Online," *Variety*, 10 Dec 2013, p. 26.

from serious overexposure and flop like some belated sequels to cult comedies (see 2016's

Zoolander 2), but it also did not single-handedly change the way movies were marketed online.

With a production budget double that of the original *Anchorman* (but still relatively modest at

$50 million), the sequel earned a little less than double the worldwide gross of the original ($172

million versus $89 million) due in large part to a worldwide take that, while small, was still

much larger ($44 million) than the original's paltry $5 million. Thus, the digital presence of

Ferrell and the Ron Burgundy character seems to have neither greatly helped nor greatly hurt the

sequel, which ended up a respectable, but only modest, success.

However, Wallenstein's characterization of *Anchorman 2*'s marketing approach as

'revolutionary' is also somewhat misleading due to previous efforts by Ferrell to utilize the web

site Funny or Die (FOD), co-founded by Ferrell along with director Adam McKay and Chris

Henchy, to promote his films. As a (literal) site where online and film industries interact, I want

to briefly examine how Funny or Die's changing fortunes over the last decade and a half

illustrate the previously discussed flexibility and limits of transmedia comedy. Ferrell, McKay,

and Henchy began FOD in 2007, initially striking viral video gold with the short "The

Landlord," featuring Ferrell being verbally abused by a foul-mouthed landlord played by

McKay's not-quite-2-year-old daughter, which had over 85 million views as of the site's tenth

anniversary in 2017.[53] Within less than a year, Ferrell was using FOD to help promote his 2008

film *Semi-Pro* (and vice versa) on his stand-up tour "Will Ferrell's Funny or Die Comedy Tour

Presented by 'Semi-Pro'," showcasing up-and-coming comics (including Zach Galifianakis and

Demetri Martin) and promoting both the Ferrell film and the website to college audiences around

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53 Todd Spangler, "Alive and Kicking," *Variety*, 11 Apr 2017, p. 49.

the country, even using FOD videos in the show itself.[54] Five years before the *Anchorman 2*

blitz, then, we already see Ferrell utilizing digital tools to help market his films, albeit with less

then impressive results: *Semi-Pro* remains one of the lowest grossing of all Ferrell's wide release

starring vehicles.

Funny or Die was, according to McKay, started for only $50,000, but "The Landlord"

helped secure a $15 million dollar investment that allowed FOD to expand its business and

tackle the most difficult aspect of digital content: monetization.[55] This was largely achieved not

only through the site itself but also through a series of high profile investments in FOD that

allowed them to transfer their online brand into more traditional media forms. While an

unnamed NBC insider declared that FOD still "isn't doing that great" financially in October of

2008, the site had undertaken a partnership with HBO in June of that year and, by December,

FOD was offering the first episode of season two of HBO's show *Flight of the Conchords* (2007-

2009) for a limited-time run in advance of the series' official HBO season premiere, the first time

FOD offered a full-length TV program on its site.[56] By 2010, FOD was releasing a 10-episode

series (*Funny or Die Presents*) on HBO that further solidified the link between online and

traditional television media, and despite the unknown NBC insider's warnings, a *Variety* cover

story cited the website as one of only a select few that had effectively monetized online video

enough to expand their operations, crediting it with helping the web become a "launchpad for

content that can migrate to mainstream media." Not only was FOD creating content for HBO,

but they were also splitting rights with the cable giant, with HBO owning the TV show and FOD

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54 Cynthia Littleton, "Roll Out the Ferrell," *Variety*, 25 Feb 2008, p. 6, 42.
55 Spangler, "Alive and Kicking," p. 49.
56 Alex Weprin, "'SNL' in Talks for New Video Site," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 13 Oct 2008. Alex Weprin,
   "Conchords Flies to Funny or Die," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 15 Dec 2008.

taking certain web rights, adding to their potential revenue from the series.[57] Irrespective of their financial status in 2008, by this time FOD seemed to have clearly found some degree of success at monetization, providing a potential template for similar online comedy repositories to follow.

Funny or Die continued to grow, expanding into film and television production by 2011 and further developing programs like *Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis* (2008-) into its first Emmy-winning show in 2014. It also expanded into political activism, garnering attention for shorts humorously weighing in on health care in 2009 and the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Agency in 2010, as well as Galifianakis' *Between Two Ferns* interview with president Obama to promote the Affordable Care Act in 2014.[58] At the same time, though, it also moved further and further into garnering revenue from the creation of branded content, leading *Broadcasting & Cable* to call FOD "essentially a branded content studio for Turner [Broadcasting, who had entered into an ad deal with the site in 2012]" by 2014.[59] More recently, FOD CEO Mike Farah noted that the site had done over 60 ad campaigns for various brands in 2018 alone, indicating that such branded comic advertising remains a central component of FOD's economic strategy.[60] FOD continues to play a key role in the contemporary comedy landscape as Netflix released a *Between Two Ferns* film in September 2019, and it provides a clear success story, but perhaps one that is exceptional rather than typical. While FOD has offered exposure for its creators and stars, its success may largely be due to its comic star power (Ferrell and McKay) and a business plan that blurs the line between entertainment and branded marketing even more than in much traditional film comedy. As with other transmedia forms,

57 Peter Caranicas, "Waiting for Web Wonder," *Variety*, 29 Nov 2010, p. 1.
58 See Ted Johnson, "Biz Activists Tread Lightly," *Variety*, 2 Nov 2009, p. 78, and Ted Johnson, "Seriously Funny," *Variety*, 23 Aug 2010, p. 21, for discussion of the first two FOD videos.
59 Jon Lafayette, "Turner Offers Data-Driven Products to Upfront Clients," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 21 Apr 2014, p. 18.
60 Farah qtd in Chris Green, "The Cover: Mike Farah," *Produced By*, Feb/Mar 2019, p. 40.

these limits prevent on online platform like FOD from providing a clear space to where gags can migrate. Instead, they have adapted by carving out space between a variety of media, including films, settling gag into a more secondary, but still present, role today.

Discourse and Reception of Gag Comedy in the Blockbuster Era

While the above points to the ways in which gag comedy has adapted and evolved industrially, how has the discourse around blockbuster era gag comedy likewise shown both instances of adaptation and a larger inflexibility? Although I will predominantly focus on the popular reception and framing of gag-based comedy, I want to begin by briefly sketching out how scholarly discourse has approached gags in the 1970s and on, even if it has largely done so only infrequently. Given his numerous writings on gags in the 1960s and 1970s, especially on gags in silent comedies, it is unsurprising that Jean-Pierre Coursodon would also theorize the gags of later filmmakers in the second volume of his *American Directors* anthology. For Woody Allen's *Bananas* (1971), Coursodon questions the outrageousness of some of the film's war-related gags, asking if gags such as a line of prisoners taking a number to be shot function to distance them from reality, thus 'defusing' them, or if they are actually *more* realistic by overlapping with the frequently absurd ironies present in reality.[61] This and his later characterization of Blake Edwards' gags as taking on a "metaphoric significance" that enhances their social satire offer intriguing, if underdeveloped, stabs at relating gags, realism, and satire that I will address more later in this dissertation.[62] And while I have previously noted how Coursodon primarily linked Allen to silent predecessors like Chaplin, he does also see "impossible" and intertextual gags in Allen's *Love and Death* (1976) as akin to gags in the Bob

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61 Jean-Pierre Coursodon, "Woody Allen," *American Directors: Vol. II*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1983, p. 17.
62 Coursodon, "Blake Edwards," p. 126. See chapter 7 for a discussion of gags and satire.

Hope/Bing Crosby *Road* films. If this draws a more direct line from Allen to the gags of his late classical era antecedents, though, the potential slippage here between impossible and referential gags can create confusion, and Coursodon is simply wrong when referring to the *Road* films as "probably the first comedies to introduce such in-jokes."[63] In this way, we again see discourse serving to inadvertently erase or rewrite the history of gag comedy, limiting future discussions of it at the same time as it opens up new avenues (like the relationship of gags and satire) to explore.

Unlike Coursodon's explicit, albeit sketchy, discussion of gags in the 1950s-1970s, scholarly work on gag comedy in post-classical Hollywood often discusses gags much more implicitly. William Paul's influential concept of "animal comedy," discussed more in the next chapter, framed the form as emphasizing physical over verbal humor to create a "return to screen slapstick on a fairly grand and insistent scale" akin to the "lower-class" forms of broad physical comedy that had previously been the purview of the Bowery Boys and the Three Stooges.[64] Paul does curiously elide the role of verbal humor (particularly malapropisms) in the Bowery Boys' work, the highly physical slapstick of Jerry Lewis and Frank Tashlin, and the slapstick-heavy (literal) animal comedy in *Looney Tunes*, Tex Avery, and other cartoons here. Nevertheless, by characterizing animal comedy as, in part, revolving around broad physical humor, Paul strongly aligns animal comedy with gags and gag comedy. This framing also anticipates the connection between "lower class" appeals and the frequently gag-based "dumb" and "grossout" comedies of the 1990s and 2000s. As we will soon see, these films featured physical, animal-style comedy and were also positioned discursively, in increasingly limited ways, as only appealing to or as

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63 Coursodon, "Allen," p. 21.
64 William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 86.

only suitable for less sophisticated audiences.

Although taste is only occasionally theorized as such in the scholarly discourse on gags, often in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's seminal study, taste as a broad construct of presumed, demographic-driven assumptions about audience appeals and audience responses is constantly below the surface of gag comedy.[65] We see this both in previous chapter and in Paul's framing of animal comedy, each of which highlights a tension in comedy as a whole, and even more so in gag comedy, between exploiting "lowbrow" appeals and not straying too far from more mainstream, middlebrow tastes. Elsewhere, Dave Kehr's 1982 lambasting of (often gag-based) contemporary comedy as "actively hostile to most of the established critical values" stands as an important, explicit example that works to associate gags and low class taste.[66] Another from the same year is J. Hoberman's essay on what he called "vulgar modernism," attempting in an overtly highbrow manner to champion a strain of mid-century comedy, including the gag-based work of Jerry Lewis and Frank Tashlin, as a form of modernism that is vulgar in both the sense of the popular and the crude.[67] Following this, some scholars have subsequently attempted to engage more with gag comedy in the vein of Hoberman's vulgar modernism, but many continue to reinforce a connection between gags and lowbrow taste that shapes the reception of gag-based comedy and even the gags themselves.[68] In this way, then, academic and popular discourse tend

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65 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. Also see references to Bourdieu and taste in Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 43-45, and Paul, p. 434-435fn19, among others.

66 Dave Kehr, "Funny Peculiar," *Film Comment*, 18.4 (Jul-Aug 1982), p. 9.

67 J. Hoberman, "Vulgar Modernism," 1982, *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, p. 32-40.

68 See Henry Jenkins, "Mel Brooks, Vulgar Modernism, and Comic Remediation," *A Companion to Film Comedy*, eds. Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 151-171, and Henry Jenkins, "'I Like to Sock Myself in the Face': Reconsidering 'Vulgar Modernism'," *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 153-174 for examples.

to overlap in framing gag-based comedy as a matter of predominantly low taste.

Academic and popular discourse overlap in other ways as well, especially when we consider discourse around the role of gags in narrative. As we have seen, this often centered around silent and early sound comedy, but some have applied it to later comedy as well. Henry Jenkins' work on Mel Brooks and his usage of *Mad* magazine-style "chicken fat" gags or Ernie Kovacs-like "blackout" gags hovers on the periphery of this debate. Jenkins sees such gags as working to disrupt a film's larger structures, threatening to draw attention away from a film's narrative.[69] The work of Jerry Lewis also provides an entry point into gags and narrative for several prominent writers. For instance, Raymond Durgnat characterizes Lewis' directorial work as "liberating" the gag from the needs of a story, while Coursodon provides a more in-depth analysis of the gag and narrative structures (or lack thereof) within Lewis' most prominent directorial works of the 1960s.[70] Although these examples may not expand greatly beyond the parameters of the gags and narrative debate by Gunning, Crafton, or Neale and Krutnik discussed in the previous chapter, they still showcase an ability for scholarly discourse to examine the relationship of gags and narrative beyond the silent era.

Academic discourse around gags and narrative also generally (though not entirely) avoids being prescriptive or advocating for a particular relationship between the two. Popular discourse, on the other hand, more freely rebukes films that emphasize gags at the expense of "proper" narrative development. This can be an explicit reason for a film's failure, from Roger Ebert's complaint that 1982's *Airplane II: The Sequel* is "all sight gags, one-liners, puns … there's no story" to Justin Chang's review that positions the gags in 2016's *Ride Along 2* as only

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69 Jenkins, "Mel Brooks." Borrowing from Will Elder, Jenkins defines "chicken fat" gags as stand-alone gags that are "often stuck in the background of an already cluttered environment" rather than the central focus (p. 158).
70 Raymond Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the American Image*, London: Faber, 1969, p. 235. Coursodon, "Jerry Lewis," p. 189-200.

working to abuse the audience rather than serving any narrative purpose.[71] Perhaps the apex (or

nadir) of this approach is scriptwriter David Mamet's 2007 book *Bambi vs. Godzilla*, where he

bombastically prophesies that "the day of the dramatic script [that is, the classical narrative] is

ending … in its place we find a premise, upon which the various gags may be hung," a harbinger

of doom for narrative film in general.[72] Critics are often much less explicit, not to mention far

less hyperbolic, but they still tend discursively frame gags as a poor substitute for a classically-

developed narrative. It lurks just beneath the surface in a *Variety* review of 1983's *Easy Money*

that complains the writers never "gave any thought to how individual gags might be melded into

a plot" or a *Boxoffice* review of 1992's *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot* that sees it as an example of

"moviemaking by the numbers" due to its tendency to focus "on the sight gags and one-liners"

with no concern for story.[73] Even when seeing a positive relationship between gags and

narrative, a similar discursive inflexibility is often on display. Jimmy Summers' observation that

"by simply having a beginning, middle and end" the 1986 film *Back to School* is "light years

ahead of most gag-oriented comedies around today" resorts to Aristotelian language to frame the

film as utilizing *both* gags *and* classical (if simplistic) narrative development.[74] In each case,

reviewers reinforce a limited and limiting discursive framework that sees such films as failures

or successes due in part to their deployment of classical narrative, often at the expense of gags.

Perhaps more interesting and potentially more flexible is when some critics sidestep the

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71 Roger Ebert, "Airplane II – The Sequel," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12 Dec 1982. Justin Chang, "Ride Along 2," *Variety*, 19 Jan 2016, p. 105.
72 David Mamet, *Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2007, p. xi. I do acknowledge that there may be a slippage in Mamet's usage here between the gag as a comic unit and the gag as a gimmick, but I would argue that comic gags are still a salient reference point in his attack.
73 "Easy Money," *Variety*, 24 Aug 1983, p. 14. Alan Karp, "Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot," *Boxoffice*, Apr 1992, p. R-30.
74 Jimmy Summers, "Back to School," *Boxoffice*, Aug 1986, p. R-86.

issue of strong narrative entirely. We see this when *Variety* praises 2015's *Pitch Perfect 2* for

using "a concentrated supply of riotous gags" and an emphasis on female empowerment to

effectively fill any "void" left by the film's light narrative.[75] Rather than depending upon

classical notions of narrative, here gags can instead be a satisfactory *substitute* for narrative

engagement. On occasion, critics may even call for *more* gags and *less* narrative. James White

of *Empire* argues that Will Ferrell vehicle *The Other Guys* (2010) is less "consistently

entertaining" than his previous collaborations with director Adam McKay *because* "it also tries

to hew to the plot," implicitly arguing that certain types of comedy (like Ferrell's sketch and

improv-derived work) should focus more on clever gags than on a strong narrative.[76] The proper

balance between gags and narrative also displays a broader approach for individual films, as is

the case for 2014's *Neighbors*. *Variety* saw the film as having "an almost oppressive volume of

outrageous gags" along with a "lack of anything resembling a coherent story arc," but *Screen*

International highlighted the film's effective balance of gags, jokes, set pieces, and narrative with

"a subtle display of heart underneath," hinting at a space for gags *and* narrative in the film rather

than gags *instead of* narrative.[77] If critics do favor a limited discursive framing of narrative over

gags at times, responses like these show that there is also a wider range of discursive approaches

that can better adapt to the variety of gags and their usage on display in these films.

This range of critical responses to gags and narrative can also correspond to the varying

scholarly positions on the two, but with a more consistent emphasis on critical prescription and

judgment. As Summers' comments on *Back to School* indicate, though, there is also curiously an

often stronger, and often less adaptive, implicit narratology in popular discourse on gags and

75 Guy Lodge, "Pitch Perfect 2," *Variety*, 12 May 2015, p. 120.
76 James White, "The Other Guys," *Empire*, Oct 2010, p. 58.
77 Andrew Barker, "Zac Shows Knack for Laffs in 'Neighbors'," *Variety*, 18 Mar 2014, p. 74. "Neighbors," *Screen International*, May 2014.

narrative than in scholarly work. Beyond the recourse to Aristotelian language and notions of

"classical" narrative, this is most evident in the variety of ways popular discourse frames

effective gag-based humor as necessarily being subservient to broad notions of character. This

discursive strain dates back to the 1970s in reviews that point to a film's *lack* of characterization

as undermining its comic effectiveness. An *Independent Film Journal* review of 1975's *Royal

Flash* sees its "inspired" slapstick and sight gags as ultimately undermined by the lack of "strong

characters and firm narrative underpinning" it, while Roger Ebert characterizes 1979's *The Jerk*

as "all gags and very little comedy" because its gags "don't grow out of … character, or

contribute to it," which is what he sees as "true" comedy.[78] In both cases, critics strongly imply a

connection between character development and narrative integration, requiring that gags be

integrated with character (and not just "milked for one-time laughs") to create a stronger

narrative whole.[79] Here again, then, critics continue to push a millennia-old Aristotelian

approach, valuing traditional adherence to character and unity with little ability to adapt to the

input of isolated gags in their reception.

At times, critics will go so far as to explicitly praise the 'proper' subordination of gags to

character. Marjorie Bilbow lauded 1979's *The In-Laws* for "never letting broad farce intrude to

destroy the integrity of the characterisations," serving to make "even the most outrageous visual

gag" seem plausible.[80] For 1990's *Back to the Future Part III*, *The Film Journal* likewise noted

how the film's "wild visual gags take a back seat to character development," implicitly a key

reason for why it worked "to recapture much of the audience goodwill lost" on the second *Back

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78 "Royal Flash," *The Independent Film Journal*, Oct 1975, p. 33. Roger Ebert, "The Jerk," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1
    Jun 1979.
79 Ebert, "The Jerk."
80 Marjorie Bilbow, "The In-Laws," *Screen International*, 15 Sep 1979, p. 14.

to the Future film, implicitly framed as favoring gags over character.[81] Later films evince a

similar preference for characterization over gags. *Boxoffice* reviewers praise two Robert De Niro

comedies, 1999's *Analyze This* and 2000's *Meet the Parents*, for effectively favoring character

over gags. For them, the former is "a character piece" that gets its humor from the leads "rather

than the sitcom-style cavalcade of prepared jokes and slapstick gags" while the latter sees De

Niro "focusing his legendary intensity on character rather than the gags."[82] This approach also

underlies the plaudits for superior characterization in Judd Apatow's 2000s films in place of (or

perhaps in spite of) their gags, a phenomenon I will explore more in chapter three. These

examples all feature two major assumptions: for effective comedy, gags must necessarily be

secondary to narrative, and gags must be *integrated* with character to create a proper "unified

whole" that again invokes Aristotelian narrative theory. Critics and scholars may focus on

different elements of gags and narrative, and the emphasis on narratology in popular discourse is

curious, but narrative and gags remain a site where each discourse can struggle to adapt.

Another interesting adaptation in popular discourse over the blockbuster era is the

frequent linking of gags to children and other "unsophisticated" audiences. This did appear at

times in the classical period, and I provided some potential reasons for why discourse connected

gags and children at the end of chapter one, but these links have strengthened and ultimately

ossified in recent decades. In the 1970s, this was particularly true for the live-action family

comedies released by Disney under the Buena Vista label. Reviews of a spate of 1979 films cite

The North Avenue Irregulars' use of "clever" sight gags, the dependence in *The Apple Dumpling

Gang Rides Again* on sight gags and physical humor, and the use of anachronistic sight gags in

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81 Kevin Lally, "Back to the Future Part III," *The Film Journal*, Jun 1990, p. 41.
82 Wade Major, "Analyze This," *Boxoffice*, May 1999, p. 55. Michael Tunison, "Meet the Parents," *Boxoffice*, Dec 2000, p. 60.

Unidentified Flying Oddball, all emphasizing gags in films explicitly framed as targeting family

and/or juvenile audiences.[83] Even when critiquing the appropriateness of certain films for

families, the connection between gags and family films remained relevant, as when *Variety* noted

how the potentially troubling sexual undertones of 1976's *Freaky Friday* were hidden behind a

"continual barrage of sight gags."[84] The alignment of gags and children seemed to peak at the

end of the 70s and early 80s, best summarized by BJ Franklin's offhand comment that the 1983

Disney movie *Trenchcoat* featured humor "on the level that kids like – sight gags, that kind of

thing," the clearest, most blunt link between gags and children I have found in the trade press.[85]

If this discursive strand has faded somewhat in intensity, it continues to assert itself in

popular gag comedy discourse. The connection of gags to kids may have waned throughout the

1980s and 90s in part due to the rise of other major gag comedy cycles during this time, but it

still continued and pointed toward a resurgence of such discourse in the 2000s and 2010s. Critics

noted an increased density of gags in family-oriented animation, observing as early as 1995's *Toy*

Story that the film filled "the screen with more action and gags than can be absorbed in one

viewing."[86] Early 2000s entries like *Chicken Run* (and its "barrage of sight gags") and *Shrek*

(with its *Toy Story*-esque "gag-filled approach") further developed this trend, but it wasn't until

the mid-to-late 2000s that such observations became a staple of animated family film reviews.[87]

2006's *Chicken Little* was singled out for its use of "fast gags" and visual gags "in the style of the

knockabout cartoons of the '40s and '50s," and gags in 2008's *Horton Hears a Who*'s were

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83 "The North Avenue Irregulars," *Variety*, 17 Jan 1979, p. 21. "The Apple Dumpling Gang Rides Again," *Variety*, 20 Jun 1979, p. 19. James K. Loutzenhiser, "Unidentified Flying Oddball," *BoxOffice*, 6 Aug 1979, p. 20.
84 "Freaky Friday," *Variety*, 22 Dec 1976, p. 30. The review goes on to call the film "Disney's version of 'Lolita'."
85 BJ Franklin, "Hollywood Hotline," *Screen International*, 12 Mar 1983, p. 8.
86 Kevin Lally, "Toy Story," *The Film Journal*, Jan 1996, p. 47.
87 Kevin Lally, "Chicken Run," *Film Journal International*, Jul 2000, p. 76. Kim Newman, "Shrek," *Sight and Sound*, Jul 2001, p. 54.

likewise compared to "Tex Avery-grade nuttiness" that was "mostly just great, great fun."[88] This particular discursive trend continues through the 2010s and up to today, on display in reviews of, among others, 2014's *The Lego Movie*, 2016's *Zootopia*, and 2021's *Tom & Jerry*.[89] If the tentative connections of the 1960s hinted at a potential flexibility in response to the shifting use of gags, popular discourse today is more likely to show an inflexibility in continuing to link animation, gags, and children at the expense of gags in other forms.

However, this tendency adapted in other ways as well, as evinced by a discursive thread from the 1990s and on that credited gags with providing entertainment for adults in otherwise kid-centric family fare. If critics mostly noted how the gags in earlier family films would please the "small-fries," they later took pains to emphasize the appeal of pop-culture gags for adults in 1992's *Aladdin*.[90] By the 2000s, such observations were common in the reception of family-oriented animation and live-action comedies, both positively (in reference to adult-oriented gags from 2000's *Rugrats in Paris*, 2014's *Penguins of Madagascar*, or *Zootopia*) and negatively (seeing the failure of gags to connect with adult audiences in 2002's *The Master of Disguise* or 2009's *The Pink Panther 2*).[91] While critics still assessed whether gags would connect with children, this trend highlights a shift toward a more balanced consideration of the appeal of gags for kids *and* adults. It also reflects greater shifts in the industry between the Disney live-action comedies of the 1970s, likely aimed at children to draw family audiences away from television

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88 Andrew Osmond, "Chicken Little," *Sight and Sound*, Mar 2006, p. 54. Ed Hulse, "That's One Uptight *Chicken*," *Variety*, 6 Mar 2006, p. 13. John Anderson, "Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!," *Variety*, 17 Mar 2008, p. 29.

89 Peter Debruge, "'Lego Movie' Enhances Toy Joy," *Variety*, 11 Feb 2014, p. 76. Anthony Lane, "Now Playing: Zootopia," *The New Yorker*, 21 Mar 2016, p. 26. Roger Moore, "Movie Review: 'Tom & Jerry' Terrorize NYC," *Movie Nation*, 26 Feb 2021.

90 "Aladdin," *The Film Journal*, Dec 1992, p. 26.

91 Matthew Leyland, "Rugrats in Paris The Movie," *Sight and Sound*, Apr 2001, p. 56. "Penguins of Madagascar," *Screen International*, 12 Nov 2014. Bob Verini, "From 'Hell' to 'Crown' and All in Between," *Variety*, 3 Jan 2017, p. 98. Keith Perry, "The Master of Disguise," *Sight and Sound*, Feb 2003, p. 54. Anna Smith, "The Pink Panther 2," *Sight and Sound*, Mar 2009, p. 70. It is interesting to note that, in these examples, the positive reception is limited to animated films while the negative reception is limited to live-action films.

entertainment, and the family films of the 1990s and on, which became huge grossers that were almost obligatory for parents of families with young children to attend.[92] Given this, it makes sense that critical discourse would likewise become more attuned to the appeal of gags for adults in family films of recent decades.

Beyond the connection of gags and children, popular discourse foregrounds relationships between gags, taste, and other audiences as well. Some of this discourse is reminiscent of the classical period, but it often focuses on different areas or utilizes different language to frame gags and taste. It also often relates to major comic genres and cycles that I will discuss more in the following chapter, but a few observations are worth highlighting here, especially for the spate of parodies and spoofs of the 1980s and 1990s. While early exemplars like *Blazing Saddles* or 1980's *Airplane!* were widely praised, a growing 'silliness' in 1980s and 1990s parodies/spoofs and increased associations with less sophisticated audiences helped lead to an increasingly hostile and inflexible critical reception. A *Film Journal* review of 1984's *Johnny Dangerously* framed its appeal as specifically for teenagers "in search of some light and slightly naughty entertainment" while *Variety* saw the 1987 (PG-rated) horror spoof *Pandemonium* as using an "endless series of gags" to replace gory genre tropes that were "merely juvenile and silly rather than funny."[93] Later films, particularly in what *Variety* termed Leslie Nielsen's "lowbrow franchise," carried similar implications of "lesser" audiences, as in a characterization of the 1990 film *Repossessed* as "entertaining enough to keep an undemanding audience happy."[94] Perhaps most striking in this regard, however, is the *Police Academy* series: its first, R-rated entry may

92 See, for instance, Noel Brown's discussion of the impact of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* on Disney's 1970s family film strategies on p. 157-160.

93 Maitland McDonagh, "Johnny Dangerously," *The Film Journal*, Jan 1985, p. 28. "Pandemonium," *Variety*, 25 Feb 1987, p. 281.

94 Greg Evans, "Spy Hard," *Variety*, 27 May 1996, p. 66. "Repossessed," *Variety*, 24 Jun 1990, p. 82.

have been derided as being silly and dumb in 1984, but by the time of its (PG-rated) 5th film in

1988, critics thought it had "become little more than a series of sight gags for five-year-olds."[95]

Warner Bros. seemed to agree, announcing plans that same year to spin *Police Academy* off into

an animated TV series, one explicitly compared to other "toy-driven" (read: kid-oriented)

animated shows.[96] Though certainly not the only comic property to undergo a similar shift at this

time (see 1986's *The Real Ghostbusters* and 1989's *Beetlejuice* animated TV series, for example),

this reinforces the notion that the post-*Airplane!* cycle was increasingly dumbing down its gags

to the detriment of more "sophisticated" adult viewers.

 This trend also highlights a key difference between notions of "silliness" or "zaniness"

and audiences in the classical and contemporary periods, one that is worth briefly unpacking. By

the 1970s, the screwball comedy of the 1930s and early 1940s had emerged as an increasingly

prominent classical comedy subgenre that was predicated, in part, on its emphasis on slapstick-

style physical comedy and "zany" action. While partly a contemporaneous discursive genre and

partly a critically created one, screwball comedy became known for its emphasis on zany, silly,

and eccentric characters/situations *and* its sophisticated adult appeal, with the romantic couples

in such films being characterized as "sophisticates gone silly."[97] And while not a fully gag-based

genre, its borrowings from slapstick ensured that most screwball comedies did feature a notable

strain of gag comedy, present at least in comic set pieces if not entire films. They were also

discursively received as combining sophistication and slapstick at the time of their release; a

review of 1940's *He Married His Wife* calls it "part screwball, part ultra-sophisticated farce, part

just plain slapstick" while a 1941 story of the staying power of top stars credited frequent

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95 "Police Academy 5: Assignment Miami Beach," *Screen International*, 9 Apr 1988, p. 16.
96 "WB Enters Firstrun Syndie With Cartoon 'Police Academy' Spinoff," *Variety*, 13 Apr 1988, p. 62.
97 Wes D. Gehring, *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*, Lanham, MD: The Oxford Press, 2002, p. 7.

screwball heroine Carole Lombard with making "slapstick sophisticated" when "she became a screwball," aiding her popularity.[98] Later comedies that consciously updated the screwball form (1972's *What's Up, Doc?*, 1988's *A Fish Called Wanda*, 2003's *Intolerable Cruelty*) likewise featured a good deal of zany action and silly gags, but they have also escaped being received with the same baggage of appealing only to younger or unsophisticated audiences.[99] Thus, silliness in the context of screwball comedy, both historically and more recently, does not have the same association with less discerning audiences, making contemporary, increasingly rigid connections between the two in other gag-based comedies further stand out.

A possible reason for this may be in the reception of the second wave of films by parody stalwarts David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker (ZAZ) in the late 80s and early 90s. If the humor of the 1988 ZAZ film *The Naked Gun* was "at the level of Three Stooges," a long-standing critical signifier of lowbrow taste, this was not a major issue for *Screen International*.[100] However, by the time of Abrahams' 1991 *Hot Shots!*, such concerns would tank the film's critical reception. While *The Film Journal* saw it as having "enough gags to satisfy an undemanding audience out for some laughs," *Variety* disdained the film's gags as *always* being stupid, ranging from "irresistibly" to "numbingly" so and making the film a failure.[101] Sequels *Hot Shots! Part Deux* (1993) and the David Zucker-co-written *Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult* (1994) found some success but either used implicitly lazy comedy (as the parody had become "comic routine" for the former) or remained unremittingly stupid, even if the latter is "stupidity done right."[102]

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98 "'He Married His Wife' Fun Riot Headed for Sock B.O.," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 13 Jan 1940, p. 3. Sonia Lee, "The Golden Dozen: Why They Stay on Top," *Hollywood*, Aug 1941, p. 43.

99 In the interest of space I will not cite any specific reviews here, but a sampling of major trade reviews for any of these films highlights a clear lack of connection between them and juvenile or unsophisticated audiences.

100 "The Naked Gun," *Screen International*, 17 Dec 1988, p. 24.

101 Ed Kelleher, "Hot Shots!," *The Film Journal*, Aug 1991, p. 20. Brian Lowry, "Hot Shots," *Variety*, 5 Aug 1991, p. 93.

102 Jem Axelrod, "Hot Shots! Part Deux," *BoxOffice*, Aug 1993, p. 56. Edmond Grant, "Naked Gun 33 1/3: The

Thus it seems that it is not simply the silliness of these gag-based comedies that makes them discursively appeal to unsophisticated viewers but their *combination* of silliness and stupidity that, unless handled very delicately, made them déclassé for critics. As opposed to the "silliness done right" of screwball comedy, by the 1990s stupidity and exclusively lowbrow appeals had become a greater point of emphasis that served to increasingly narrow the presumed audiences for such films.

Even more so, this approach informed much of the response to the "dumb" and "grossout" comedy cycles of the 1990s and 2000s. Though I will also discuss this cycle more in the next chapter, it is worth noting how the Farrelly brothers and, later, Judd Apatow, served as key innovators in each cycle and became critically positioned (especially in the wake of *There's Something About Mary* and *Knocked Up*) as making dumb or lowbrow comedy acceptably mainstream. *Screen International*'s review of *Mary* specifically highlighted how the film should successfully broaden the Farrellys' "core audience of young males," while Paul Spinrad's piece on lowbrow comedy in *Sight and Sound* linked the Farrellys with an ancient tradition of low comedy and saw them as helping to free the "low-comedy scene" from the grip of increasingly stale parodies.[103] This approach, framing major commercial and critical successes as examples of "respectable" or more "grown-up" vulgar comedy, was repeated in the 2000s with Judd Apatow. *Variety* praised Apatow's *Knocked Up* for "balancing the … high-testosterone farce with the … chick flick" and for using humor dependent on character more than on sights gags or slapstick, fitting in with the critical tradition of implicitly rebuking the latter comic forms.[104] Along similar

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Final Insult," *The Film Journal*, Apr 1994, p. 27.

103 John Hazelton, "There's Something About Mary," *Screen International*, 24 Jul 1998, p. 19. Paul Spinrad, "How Low Can You Go? What Have the Farrelly Brothers and the Coen Brothers Got in Common? A Taste for Low Comedy, That's What," *Sight and Sound*, Oct 1998, p. 30-33.

104 Joe Leydon, "Preggers Can't Be Choosers," *Variety*, 19 Mar 2007, p. 21.

lines, a contemporaneous *Film Comment* profile on Apatow praised *Knocked Up* for frontloading its "bigger, raunchier gags" so it could focus more on character and drama later in the film, likening Apatow's films (minus the jokes) to "male weepies."[105] The discourse around the Farrellys and Apatow perform similar functions here, framing these raunchy comedies as the ideal to which other grossout comedies should aspire via their emphasis on longstanding critical valuations of character over gags. Popular reception may have thus adapted to allow for positive considerations of new comic forms, but largely by continuing to depend upon inflexible traditional criteria.

Conclusion

Ultimately, though, the threads of industry, transmedia, and popular discourse are all tightly intertwined. Take, for example, one other minor trend in the popular discourse on gag-based comedy that connects greater gag density to increased rewatachability for gag-based comedies. *Film Journal*'s previously cited *Toy Story* review gestures in this direction, but it is far from the first to connect gags and multiple viewings. Jimmy Summers' review of *Airplane II: The Sequel* offers an even earlier example, pointing to the film's jokes, gags, and puns as being more "than the mind can register in one sitting," while a later *Variety* review of 1988's *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* more explicitly pointed to a need for rewatching because the film's fast pace and number of sight gags "make a second viewing worthwhile."[106] These connections and others implied by aforementioned reviews of animated family films and their increased pace of gags showcase one small, but intriguing, instance where industry and discourse align. Popular discourse seems to be implicitly arguing that gags are increasing, in part, to encourage the

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105 Mark Olsen, "3 Dimensional Man," *Film Comment*, 43.3 (May-Jun 2007), p. 32.
106 Jimmy Summers, "Airplane II: The Sequel," *Boxoffice*, Feb 1983, p. 49. "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka," *Variety*, 21 Dec 1988, p. 14.

rewatching of such comedies. This meshes well with conventional industry wisdom that points to animated family films as top-sellers for home viewing, not to mention the aforementioned example of gag-based comedies that likewise found success in ancillary markets, increasing their value within a changing comic industry.

The line between media, industry, and discourse likewise remains increasingly complex and blurred across contemporary Hollywood comedy. Take, for instance, the relationship between Funny or Die and the 2014 Taika Waititi comedy *What We Do in the Shadows*. FOD initially partnered with the producers of the film and pledged to use their social media presence to support it both during its Sundance premiere and when it would later find a distributor. Following the film's cult success (fostered in part by its exposure on streaming services), the film was picked up for a television series order by FX that, having now completed its third season, has become a major critical success. As part of its reception, it has also carved out a fair degree of pop culture cachet, visible in the rise of "superb owl" references (to a season two episode of the show) around the time of 2021's Super Bowl LV.[107] All of this highlights the degree to which all of the transmedia phenomena mentioned in this section (Netflix, Funny or Die, online to film to television and back again, and back *again*) are intimately intertwined, not only with each other, but with the comedy industry at large and with popular discourse as well. Together, these point to the difficulties, and ultimately the folly, of trying to disentangle them or focusing solely on film when bringing an examination of blockbuster era Hollywood comedy up to the present.

However, this may be doubly true for gag-based comedy, especially when considering the ways in which it has adapted and/or been limited as it phases in and out of sync with Hollywood

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107 For FOD partnership, see Jeremy Kay, "Sundance: Dinosaur 13 Finds Home," *Screen International*, 17 Jan 2014. *What We Do in the Shadows* was available on Netflix in certain territories, and appears to have been available for free streaming on Amazon Prime for a time (and is of course still available to rent there.)

comedy as a whole over the past few decades. If low production costs and the potential for massive profits helped make gags economically viable for a number of partially or fully gag-based hits in the 70s through 90s, the theatrical floor has fallen out for gag-based comedy as a whole since the late 2000s, meaning that it now must take an increasingly supporting role in major films or be spread out across various transmedia forms to adapt and survive. At least in part, this helps to explain why a number of the case studies in this dissertation come from the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, what we might call a (somewhat minor) golden age of gag-based film comedy with relatively widespread commercial appeal and success. Still, while industry and discourse have provided both opportunities to adapt and limits on gag comedy's ability to maintain this level of prominence, gags remain a present and vibrant source of comedy today. While gag-based comedy may have a profoundly altered place within the contemporary industrial landscape, there always will be a place for gags, both in film and across media, that are worth studying and unpacking.

Chapter 3

"Between *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Animal House*: Genre, Narrative, and Reception in Gag-Based Comedy"

For audiences, critics, and scholars alike, gag-based comedy in blockbuster era Hollywood cinema usually evokes particular comic genres. Whether in the context of whole films (the parodies and spoofs of *Airplane!* (1980), *Scary Movie* (2000), or most any Mel Brooks film) or individual gags (the eponymous hero being "birthed" by a full-size plastic rhino in *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* (1995) or the infamous hair gel gag from 1998's *There's Something About Mary*), gag comedy often aligns with specific comic genres and cycles. They can range from parodies, special effects comedies, and comedian comedies to grossout comedies, dumb comedies, and more. Many directors and performers central to gag comedy often favor such comic genres and cycles as well, including the aforementioned Mel Brooks, the Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker (henceforth ZAZ) team, the Farrelly brothers, Leslie Nielsen, the Wayans family, Joe Dante, and so on. Given this, a discussion of the relationship between genre and blockbuster era gag-based comedy appears to be relatively straightforward. As with many seemingly self-evident truths, though, deeper examination reveals a much more complicated tangle. Gag comedy often *does* frequent certain comic genres, but we also see it combined with less typically gag-oriented ones like the romantic comedy. The ebb and flow of particular gag-based comic cycles highlights issues like their critical instability, the relationship of gags to narrative across comic genres, and tension between the industrial function of such cycles and discursive presumptions about them. These issues point to a far more complicated discursive intersection of gag-based comedy and genre than is immediately evident. Typical associations between gags and various genres are not necessarily inaccurate, but they only tell half the story.

To help develop the other half of that story, then, I will investigate the relationship of blockbuster era Hollywood gag comedies to genre, narrative, and their critical reception. While I argue that they are not a genre themselves, how do gag-based comedies align with concepts of genre more broadly and with comic genres specifically? In what ways has gag comedy adapted industrially so as to better relate to shifting cycles and approaches to genre? How has gag-based comedy been explicitly connected to, and at times positioned as going against, various comic genres and cycles in the blockbuster era? In what ways have these genres been characterized critically in relation to narrative? Do gag-based comedies diverge from classical narrative norms, or do they simply offer further variation of the continued reliance on classical norms that we see in much of contemporary Hollywood cinema? In what ways have the critical (and, at times, scholarly) reception of major gag-based comic cycles served to both reflect and construct assumptions about gags, comic genres, and their connections to taste and presumed audiences? By addressing these questions, I unpack the ways that gag-based comedy and genre mutually inflect each other to help define (and, at times, complicate) the role of gags within contemporary Hollywood cinema. I argue that although gags can showcase a high degree of adaptability by blending with various genres and by helping to renew various comic cycles, their discursive reception struggles to match that adaptability, providing both new ways of approaching gag-based genres while also reinforcing a narrower and more limited understanding of gag comedy.

To do this, I start by briefly sketching out the ways in which comedy and genre have been framed within scholarship. As I have elsewhere, I continue to position gag-based comedy not as a full-fledged genre of its own but as a comic type that can (and does) often favor particular generic frameworks. In particular, I summarize the literature around the comic genres of parody

and the romantic comedy (or romcom) to trace how the former has been positioned as much more gag-centric than the latter. This particular discursive framing both acknowledges some of the ways in which gags have adapted to fit within the blockbuster era industry, but it also has the effect of limiting the reception of gags to overly narrow generic forms, eliding their role in other types of comedy. Given that a key difference between the parody and the romcom in both scholarly and critical discourse is the degree to which they favor narrative, I also examine the role of narrative in gag-based comedies. I do this by exploring how gags and narrative have been framed in recent decades before using Kristin Thompson's four-act model of narrative structure to compare a gag-based romantic comedy (*There's Something About Mary*) with a non-gag-based one (Thompson's own analysis of 1993's *Groundhog Day*). I end by examining the reception of three particular gag-based cycles (the parody cycles of the 70s-2000s; the "dumb" comedy cycle of the early-to-mid 90s; and the "grossout" cycle of the late 90s to the the mid 2000s) to unpack how these cycles were framed in relation to taste and presumed audience appeals, especially those based around gender. Ultimately, while gag-based comedy is often aligned with parody, weak narratives, and young, white, male audiences, I argue that these discursively constructed categories struggle to adapt to the rise of gag-based romantic comedies that challenge these associations. They may have discursive and, to at least an extent, industrial salience, but they are still only part of the story when it looking at gags and blockbuster era comic genres.

Gag-Based Comedy and Comic Genres

Across various scholarly approaches to genre, comedy stands out as a particularly thorny subject. For some, consideration of comedy as a genre centers primarily around its relation to narrative: the bulk of Steve Neale's entry on comedy in *Genre and Hollywood* reiterates the gags

vs. narrative debate in comedy studies and proposes a general move from earlier, gag-oriented slapstick to later, more narrative-oriented romantic comedy.[1] In Leo Charney's discussion of American film comedy, he eschews explicitly connecting comedy to genre, but his focus on eight "overlapping tendencies" of Hollywood comedy (physical comedy, anarchic comedy, dialogue comedy, parody, personality comedy, satire, romantic comedy, and grossout/violent/"animal" comedy) clearly intersects with several previously defined comic genres and cycles even if he does not frame it as such.[2] When other scholars like Geoff King *do* explicitly address comedy's relationship to genre, it is to reject the notion that comedy is a genre per se, instead seeing it as more of a mode or "a manner or presentation," which King sees as a more fluid and effective approach to the broad scope and differing historical contexts of comedy than are afforded by more fixed notions of genre.[3] King's approach does provide a logical rationale for understanding comedy in this way, but it also highlights how uneasy comedy's relationship is to genre. It may make sense to view comedy as a mode in *theory*, but doing so struggles to explain why and how comedy remains frequently identified as a genre in *practice* across scholarly, critical, and industrial discourse.

Academic approaches to specific comic genres tend to both alleviate and exacerbate the difficulties of reconciling comedy and genre. Irrespective of whether scholars see comedy as a mode, a loose genre, or even a type of master genre, there is widespread agreement that comedy contains numerous subgenres, if not entire genres in their own right, within it. One notable approach is Steve Seidman's influential concept of the "comedian comedy" as a comic genre. Writing in the early 1980s, Seidman described comedian comedy as a genre that stretches back to

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1   Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 59-65.
2   Leo Charney, "American Film," *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, ed. Maurice Charney, vol. 1, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005, p. 78.
3   Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, London: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 2.

the silent cinema, foreshadowing Rob King's critique of the "reification of silence" as he criticizes the "denial of tradition from silent comedians to sound comedians" in the literature on comedy.[4] Seidman also saw comedian comedy as favoring performers who came to film from other media (including vaudeville, radio, and nightclubs) and "maintained the *essence* of their performances from these other media, namely, their awareness and acknowledgment of the audience" in moments often featuring gags.[5] William Paul's concept of "animal comedy" as a dominant comic form of the 1970s and 1980s is likewise implicitly aligned with gag comedy. Paul saw animal comedy as a "return to screen slapstick on a fairly grand and insistent scale," implying a greater emphasis on gags than in previous decades, that was exemplified by the success of films ranging from *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *Animal House* (1978) to *Porky's* (1981) and *Bachelor Party* (1984).[6] Featuring broad physical humor, including specific gags, that appealed to both lower-class and masculine audiences, Paul's approach to animal comedy served as an important precursor to the ways many would approach gags, taste, and audiences in later blockbuster era gag comedies, as we will soon see.

While these two are particularly salient approaches to modern comic genres, there are innumerable others as well. This includes a variety of hybrid genres that combine comedy with other recognizable generic forms, such as the literature on horror-comedy that has particularly developed in recent years.[7] It also can include forms that utilize comedy in conjunction with a larger "master genre" that can incorporate and/or align with a wide variety of genres and film

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4   Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981, p. 8. Also see his discussion of comedian comedy as a genre on p. 2.
5   Ibid., p. 3.
6   William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 86.
7   See *The Laughing Dead: The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland*, eds. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

types, as in the family comedy.[8] Not all of these approaches have been taken up systematically

by other scholars, and others that have, like comedian comedy, faced criticism for being

ahistorical in their treatment of genre, but together they highlight the wide range of comic genres

that scholars have identified.[9] However, in popular discourse the range of comic genres is even

more plentiful. From widely accepted hybrids such as the action-comedy to innumerable and

elaborate one-off labels like that of the "science fiction-comedy-espionage thriller" given to

1987's *Innerspace*, comic genres are, and have been, a staple of film criticism and industry

terminology for over a century.[10] Although such generic labels are often even messier than

scholarly definitions, the interaction between academic and popular discourse has made them a

central, if unstable, feature in discussions of film comedy and its generic developments.

This is particularly true for two comic forms that have been prominent areas of study for

blockbuster era comedy: the parody and the romantic comedy. For parody, although it may not

always be identified as a genre per se, many approaches to it in scholarly and popular discourse

remain genre-like in the way they approach parody as a specific form of comedy. Dan Harries

explicitly defines parody as a discursive mode rather than as a genre (or a meta-/anti-genre) due

to his interest in the functions rather than the content or themes of parody, essentially separating

parody from textualist approaches to genre in the process.[11] This may be in part a response to

Wes Gehring's writing on parody that explicitly labels it a genre without providing a clear

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8 See Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*, London: I.B.
   Tauris, 2012, particularly his discussion of the family film as a "master-genre" on p. 11.
9 For sample criticisms, see Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville
   Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 10-11, and Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry
   Jenkins, *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, New York:
   Routledge, 1995, p 3.
10 Hal Lipper, "A great, if gimmicky, escape into 'Innerspace'," *St. Petersburg Times*, 1 Jul 1987, p. 1D. See also
   Neale, *Genre*, p. 221-222 and 231-233 for an overview of the vast range of genre labels given to Hollywood
   films by critics in both the 1930s and 1980s.
11 Dan Harries, *Film Parody*, London: BFI Publishing, 2000, p. 7.

rationale as to *why* it should be understood this way, instead choosing to approach it as a genre

due to what he sees as a series of textual themes and content that serves to imitate other familiar

genres or auteurs in such films.[12] Harries' approach to parody as a mode rather than a genre also

anticipates Jason Mittell's subsequent anti-textual definition of genre itself, arguing a few years

later that genre is best defined not via textual features, but primarily via a discursive approach

shared by audiences, critics, creators, and the interactions among them.[13] Approaching parody as

a discursive mode a la Harries, then, still allows parody to operate much in the same way that

genre does within Mittell's framework. Doing so thus keeps parody well within the realm of

genre and genre studies without necessarily labeling it a genre as such.

Although Harries' and Gehring's are the primary book-length works specifically on film

parody, they are of course far from the only approaches to parody and genre. Focusing on *The

Simpsons* and television parody, Jonathan Gray likewise argues that parody is not a genre but

instead more of a style or process. He sees parody as relating to other genres through a form of

critical intertextuality that serves to educate viewers about genre conventions, which in turn

opens up the ability to critique and potentially disrupt genres and forces us to change or

reexamine our understanding of them.[14] In a similar vein, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik

separate parody from comedy's inherent affinity for genre hybridization because they see parody

as not *combining* generic conventions so much as *subordinating* them to the conventions of

comedy as a broader genre, leading them to label parody a comic *mode* rather than a genre.[15]

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12 See introduction to Wes Gehring, *Parody as Film Genre: Never Give a Saga an Even Break*, Westport, CT:
    Greenwood Press, 1999, p. 1-24, for more on his approach to parody as a genre.
13 Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, New York: Routledge,
    2004.
14 Jonathan Gray, *Watching With the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, New York: Routledge, 2005,
    p. 44-46.
15 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 18-19.

They may employ more of a textual than discursive approach to genre (unlike Gray, who combines both), but Neale and Krutnik agree that parody views other genres *through* comedy rather than as a separate, distinct genre merging *with* comedy. However, as Harries argues in borrowing from Peter Wollen, parodies also seem to be inherently hybrid texts, complicating the notion of parody as *subordinating* target genres to comedy, especially given the increasing attention on comic genre hybrids in recent decades.[16] As the work of these various scholars shows, there is both a fair degree of overlap and a large degree of disagreement as to exactly how parody functions in regard to comedy and genre.

On the other hand, there is not the same degree of generic debate in relation to romantic comedy, almost unquestionably the contemporary comic genre most frequently examined by scholars. In addition to the numerous studies of romantic comedy in the classical Hollywood era, including the overlapping and/or variant genre of the screwball comedy, contemporary romantic comedy has been the subject of numerous essays, books, and edited collections since the 1970s. From Brian Henderson's oft-cited analysis of the romantic comedy's decline in 1978 to more recent books that chart the romantic comedy's resurgence in the late 1980s, the genre has been examined from a range of perspectives including ideological critiques, gender, queer studies, and many more.[17] Across these, there has been a great deal of debate over issues like the reasons for romantic comedy's decline and resurgence, how best to periodize cycles of romantic comedy from the 1970s and on, and the relationship of romantic comedy as a whole to sub-genres or cycles like the "homme-com."[18] However, there is a distinct lack of the types of

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16 Harries, p. 24.

17 Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?," *Film Quarterly* 31.4 (Summer 1978), p. 11-23. For books, see *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, eds. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, and Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, London: Wallflower Press, 2007, among others.

18 On the homme-com, see Tamar Jeffers McDonald, "Homme-Com: Engendering Change in Contemporary

disagreement over whether or not romantic comedy *itself* constitutes a genre that we see with parody. Indeed, although scholars may acknowledge the fine line between the romantic *drama* and the romantic *comedy*, the romcom (as it is often colloquially called) is in many ways one of the more stable genres within film comedy, providing an appealing continuity that helps to explain the degree of scholarly analysis it has received.

As a consequence, fuzzier, less stable comic approaches like gag-based comedy tend to be overlooked in favor of more stable forms like the romantic comedy. This is even more true given the ways in which many define romantic comedy (explicitly or implicitly) as favoring less gag-based forms of humor. Even in the context of classical Hollywood comedy, Wes Gehring sees romantic comedy as more clearly based in reality than the (generally more gag-based) screwball form of romantic comedy, a distinction that still seems widely applicable to how many scholars and critics view romantic comedy today.[19] For instance, while gag-based humor is most often discursively connected to physical and visual humor, as we have seen in previous chapters, various scholars explicitly tie the romantic comedy to *verbal* forms of humor. Henderson highlights how language "has a special status" in romantic comedy, positioning it as the vehicle by which "all things occur, arise and are discharged or not" within the genre, resorting to the visual only "for the absolutely unsayable."[20] More subtly, work such as Tamar Jeffers McDonald's monograph on the pivotal 1989 romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally...* implies that much of that film's humor comes from its use of more complex forms of verbal humor like

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Romantic Comedy," *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, eds. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, p. 146-159, and Tamar Jeffers McDonald, "The View from the Man Cave: Comedy in the Contemporary 'Homme-Com' Cycle," *A Companion to Film Comedy*, eds. Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 217-235.

19 Wes Gehring, *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*, Lanham, MD: The Oxford Press, 2002, p. 7.

20 Henderson, "Romantic Comedy," p. 22.

wit, particularly from Harry. She also frames the film's influence on later romantic comedies as deriving from its "great written script" and the "inspired improvisation" by its lead actors, pointing again toward more elaborate forms of verbal humor and not the pithy one-liners and puns of verbal gags.[21] Along with this, there is a tendency to view romantic comedy as being essentially character-driven, a term that, as discussed in the previous chapter, has historically been framed in opposition to gag-based comedy. This is particularly salient for Geoff King's discussion of romantic comedy, where he sees narrative as "a function primarily of character and character relationships," thus framing romantic comedy as depending more on character-based than gag-driven humor.[22] While I will return to the relationship of narrative and the romcom in a moment, what these characterizations point to is a consistent and often inflexible, if also mostly implied, *opposition* between romantic comedy and gag-based comedy.

On the other hand, irrespective of whether or not it actually constitutes a coherent genre of its own, parody scholars often *do* align it with gag-based comedy. King sees a connection between the two when he notes how "some parodies offer good illustration of the problems associated with heavily gag-centered film comedy," particularly in relation to their ability to sustain narratives and audience interest across their gag sequences.[23] Gehring's approach to parody also highlights several points of connection between parody and gag-based comedy, particularly in regard to some of his characteristics of parody (the compounding of comic targets by parodying a variety of texts, or the tendency toward self-consciousness) that are common to gag-driven comic forms as well.[24] And, of course, the biggest link between gag-based comedy and parody lies in the films and filmmakers most often studied in relation to parody: *Blazing*

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21 Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *When Harry Met Sally...*, London: BFI Palgrave, 2015, p. 40-41, 79.
22 King, p. 51.
23 Ibid., p. 125.
24 Gehring, *Parody as Film Genre*, p. 13-16.

Saddles (1974), *Airplane!*, *The Naked Gun* (1988) and numerous other Mel Brooks and ZAZ

films; the variety of parody films starring Leslie Nielsen in the 1990s; and, for Harries' book,

more recent films such as the first two *Austin Powers* movies. Not only are many of these films

clear parodies, but they are often heavily centered around gags as well. Similarly, writing on the

parodic films of Mel Brooks and the (early) films of Woody Allen centers around works that

would clearly fit as gag-based comedies (*Blazing Saddles*, 1973's *Sleeper*, 1981's *History of the

World: Part I*) although gags are rarely addressed as such by name.[25] Although it would be too

simplistic to merely import the filmographies of these studies of parody and relabel them gag-

based comedy, any attempt to understand gag-based comedy in the blockbuster era of Hollywood

cinema necessarily needs to engage with many, if not most, of these works.

Given this, it may be tempting to see William Paul's characterization of Old Comedy

versus New Comedy as a fruitful way of framing this divide between the use of gags in parody

and in romantic comedy. For Paul, the frequently gag-driven form of animal comedy essentially

aligns with Northrop Frye's concept of Old Comedy and is in opposition to Frye's notion of New

Comedy, which Paul sees as less gag-driven form and as explicitly connected to romantic

comedy.[26] Aligning parody *with* gag-based comedy and romantic comedy *against* gags, however,

does not fully work either in theory or in practice. For example, although gags are *often*

associated with physical and/or visual humor, the frequent use of puns and other forms of

wordplay in the work of Mel Brooks or ZAZ highlight how verbal humor can be a vital part of

gag-based comedy as well. Perhaps it is this very emphasis on verbal play in such films that

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25 See Beth E. Bonnstetter, "Mel Brooks Meets Kenneth Burke (and Mikhail Bakhtin): Comedy and Burlesque in
    Satiric Film," *Journal of Film and Video*, 63.1 (Spring 2011), p. 18-31, and Nick Smurthwaite, *Mel Brooks and
    the Spoof Movie*, London: Proteus Books, 1982 for examples. Also note how neither title refers to parody
    explicitly; I explore this slippage between terms more in chapter 7.
26 Paul, p. 87-88.

leads Leo Charney to claim *parody*, not romantic comedy, is the genre that most foregrounds dialogue-driven comedy.[27] This position is clearly at odds with at least some other scholars, but it nevertheless does seem valid for a number of examples in the parodies of Brooks, ZAZ, and more. Also going against the scholarly norm, Celestino Deleyto suggests that part of the ongoing appeal of romantic comedies is their gags. He sees their comic sequences as providing pleasures irrespective of the films' ideologically-mandated happy endings, meaning that a romcom's gags can live on longer in our memories than their supposed "happy endings" of heterosexual coupling ever could.[28] Intuitively, this also makes sense: consider how the legacy of *When Harry Met Sally...*'s infamous "I'll have what she's having" gag seems to have much greater purchase in memories of the film by audiences and the industry alike than do the details of the film's ending.

Why, then, does the idea of gag-based parody being incompatible with character-based romantic comedy continue to evince such a hold on the academic and popular conceptions of these forms? A key clue may be how narrative relates to genre for each of them. While Deleyto is explicit in connecting his work on comic scenes in romcoms to the venerable gags versus narrative debate, this body of literature also seems to linger just below the surface for other scholars discussing parodies and romantic comedies.[29] For instance, a common issue for scholars of parody is the lack of classical narrative unity in such films. King sees contemporary parodies as favoring a scattershot approach in lieu of a cohesive narrative, leading to diminishing returns of audience investment and increasingly shorter run times.[30] These trends seem to be confirmed by the steady box office decline and atypically short running times for parodies in the 2000s, the

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27 Charney, p. 85.
28 Celestino Deleyto, "Humor and Erotic Utopia: The Intimate Scenarios of Romantic Comedy," *A Companion to Film Comedy*, eds. Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 176.
29 Ibid., p. 175-176.
30 King, p. 125.

years immediately after King's book was published. Harries likewise seems to predict the decline of parodies due, at least in part, to narrative concerns when he states that "one of the consequences of recognizing parody's status as a metasign is that its own textual patternings become normalized and create some predictability of how the narrative will transform the parodied text," hinting at the tendency toward a parody-by-the-numbers approach taken by later *Scary Movie* franchise entries or other _____ *Movie* films.[31] In these films, the narratives largely did not change drastically, only the major films parodied did. Although such considerations of parody and narrative do not explicitly invoke the gags versus narrative debates, the close alignment of parody with gag-based comedy, and the concomitant emphasis on gags in lieu of a strong narrative line, clearly work to help characterize the divide between gag-based parody and non-gag-based romantic comedy as, respectively, a matter of weak versus strong narrative.

Tracing Genre, Gags, and Narrative in *There's Something About Mary*

Given the ways in which these discursive trends shape our understanding of gags and genre, I want to focus more on their relation to narrative in academic and popular discourse on blockbuster era Hollywood comedies. As mentioned above, King implies that romantic comedy depends on character rather than gag-driven humor, and he explicitly connects the romantic comedy to strong narrative by calling it a genre that "entails a substantial integration of comedy and narrative."[32] Particular narrative analyses of contemporary comedy, such as McDonald's examination of the carefully constructed parallels in *When Harry Met Sally...* and Kristin Thompson's analysis of the film *Groundhog Day*, further link major romantic comedies and tight narrative structure.[33] Although Deleyto may challenge this notion somewhat, the positioning of

31 Harries, p. 119.
32 King, p. 50.
33 McDonald, *When Harry Met Sally...*, p. 7-9. Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 131-154.

the romantic comedy as a comic genre much more strongly integrated with narrative than the parody seems a plausible reason for why parody remained understudied until the late 1990s, with Gehring claiming that "parody gets the least respect of the comedy genres."[34] Indeed, this connection is even more pronounced when considering the greater emphasis on comedian comedy as a genre within scholarly literature of the 1980s and 1990s. As a form of comedy that itself often balances between gag-oriented performative sequences and clear (if often simple) narrative frames, King calls comedian comedy a "hybrid form, a mixture of 'classical' narrative integration and the performative/presentational."[35] Especially in light of the gags versus narrative debate during this time, the comedian comedy functions as a type of "hybrid" comic genre within comedy studies. Much like how the comedian comedy sits between the more narrative-driven romantic comedy and the more gag-driven parody in its combination of gags and narrative, so too does it occupy a middle ground of scholarly attention between the two.

Of course, academic discourse around genre, gags, and narrative only provides part of the picture. Critical discourse in the blockbuster era provides a far more complete sense of how the relationship between these elements is popularly perceived in ways that reinforce, and at times challenge, the connections between parody, romantic comedy, and narrative. A common refrain in the critical reception of parodies fits with how King and Harries characterize parody's potential narrative pitfalls. Although not often explicit, there is a clear connection between reviews of parodies and usually disparaging comments on their weak or nonexistent narratives. This is evident throughout the last several decades, with critics for *The Independent Film Journal* (*IFJ*) and *Variety* noting the thinness of narrative in multiple Mel Brooks films of the

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34 Gehring, *Parody as Film Genre*, p. 197.
35 King, p. 33.

1970s. *Variety* predicted that audiences would be too busy laughing at *Blazing Saddles* "to complain that [the] pic is essentially a raunchy, protracted version of a television comedy skit" while *IFJ* noted how its "nominal plotline … serves as a peg for anachronistic sight gags, quick skits and one-liners."[36] The latter frames the narrative as simply a vehicle for gag delivery in a way that would be repeated countless times (with surprisingly little variation) in subsequent reviews of other parodies and gag-based comedies. *Variety* saw *Silent Movie* (1976) as likewise featuring a "slender plot" that "is basically a hook for slapstick antics" and *IFJ* once again called the plot "a perfect peg for the plethora of disconnected gags and set pieces" that drove the film.[37] All of these, as well as *IFJ*'s supposition that audiences would not mind the plot deficiencies of *High Anxiety* (1977) because the gags were stronger than the plot they overshadowed, highlight the ambivalence with which many critics of the 70s seemed to approach Brooks' parodies.[38] According to critics, audiences would appreciate parodies for their quality gags *unless* they needed a strong plot to drive the film as well.

Such ambivalence continued with *Airplane!* and the rise of ZAZ-style parody in the early 80s. *The Film Journal* actually praised *Airplane!* for having "a more cohesive storyline and style than the numerous *Animal House* rip-offs that have glutted the market recently," explicitly contrasting it with a lack of narrative in other gag-based comedies of the period.[39] However, this is likely due at least in part to the ZAZ team's admitted use of the 1957 film *Zero Hour!* as a close narrative model for their film: in 1980, *Screen International* reported that the team had

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36 "Blazing Saddles," *Variety*, 13 Feb 1974, p. 18. "Blazing Saddles," *The Independent Film Journal*, 18 Feb 1974, p. 9.
37 "Silent Movie," *Variety*, 23 Jun 1976, p. 16. "Silent Movie," *The Independent Film Journal*, 19 Jul 1976, p. 12. I cannot tell if the reuse of the "peg" metaphor can be attributed to *Blazing* and *Silent* sharing the same *IFJ* reviewer as no credit is given for the *Blazing* review.
38 "High Anxiety," *The Independent Film Journal*, 20 Jan 1978, p. 7.
39 Edward Perchaluk, "Airplane!," *The Film Journal*, Aug 1980, p. 15.

agreed several years earlier that *Zero Hour!* "would make an ideal launching pad for a parody of stock cinematic clichés and American TV," providing a narrative model that their subsequent parodies often lacked.[40] David Zucker said as much in an interview following the critical and commercial failure of their 1984 film *Top Secret!*, telling *Film Comment* that *Airplane!* succeeded where *Top Secret!* failed because *Airplane!* "did have a coherent story – a love story – and a coherent plot, where you actually rooted for characters," elements that they did not "take seriously enough when we came to do *Top Secret!*," leading to the latter film's failure.[41] The ZAZ-styled (but not ZAZ-directed) sequel to *Airplane!*, 1982's *Airplane II: The Sequel*, seemed to suffer from similar issues, as Roger Ebert was willing to admit that he was "not saying a movie this silly needs to have a story" before immediately adding that "it wouldn't have hurt" in his mixed review of the film.[42] Given *Airplane II*'s critical and commercial struggles, it seems likely that contemporaneous audiences largely agreed with Ebert's assessment.

As the decade wore on, this ambivalence more frequently turned to critical hostility at the lack of coherent narratives in parodies, particularly in the wake of ZAZ's *The Naked Gun*. Given the filmmakers' previous outings, *The Film Journal* was prepared to admit that, while the plot is convoluted in "great *film noir* tradition," the presence of ZAZ clues us in that "the plot is not the thing" but "a convenient device upon which to hang all manner of delicious sight gags, outrageous situations and silly, often risqué lines," continuing to echo the previously seen sentiment and language of narrative as a peg/hanger for gags.[43] Other parodies were less fortunate: *Variety* saw the script for 1990's *Repossessed* as throwing in tasteless jokes and weak

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40 Adrian Hodges, "A flying start for the 'Airplane!' directors," *Screen International*, 23 Aug 1980, p. 23.
41 Qtd in Jack Barth, "Piz-ZAZ," *Film Comment*, 22.4 (Jul 1986), p. 28. Emphasis in original.
42 Roger Ebert, "Airplane II – The Sequel," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 Dec 1982.
43 Doris Toumarkine, "The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!," *The Film Journal*, Jan 1989, p. 28. Again, the use of similar language cannot simply be attributed to the writing habits of a single reviewer, as Toumarkine's name does not match the initials "S.K." credited in *IFJ*'s *Silent Movie* review.

gags to try and pad the film into feature length and later chided 1991's "stupid sci-fi spoof" *Suburban Commando* in part because the "filmmakers opted to sacrifice storyline for gags."[44] Beyond the the usual critiques of parody plots as only "an extended premise for the jokes," *The Film Journal* further objected to the choice of parodic targets in *National Lampoon's Loaded Weapon I* (1993) by citing an unspoken rule that "there's no point in spoofing something that's already funny," thus making the film's parody of *Lethal Weapon 2* and *3* pointless since those films already "were simply broad parodies of the first movie."[45] Some of the more colorful descriptions and repetitive phrasings can potentially be chalked up to critical shorthand or attempts to meet word count quotas, but the critical reception of parody was clearly becoming more hostile by this time. Whether due to the (continued) lack of a strong narrative, the lack of effective narrative models to parody, or simply oversaturation of the parody market by the early 1990s, narrative often remained a key sticking point in many critics' negative reviews.

To be fair, critiques of insufficient narratives were not only directed at gag-based parodies during this time but at other types of gag-based comedies as well. The *Police Academy* series, a favorite critical target as the series swelled to seven entries throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, were never known for their narrative strengths, but they too were increasingly chided for the lack of narrative cohesion in later entries. By *Police Academy 4: Citizens on Patrol* (1987), *Variety* was characterizing the film's script as "merely a collection of gags tied together by the slightest suggestion of a story."[46] Other films of the 80s, like 1986's *One Crazy Summer*, faced similar criticisms. *The Film Journal* berated it for being an "aimless string of gags and pratfalls" with a plot that was "steamrolled by a relentless incursion of one-liners and sight gags" and was

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44 "Repossessed," *Variety*, 24 Sep 1990, p. 82. Lawrence Cohn, "Suburban Commando," *Variety*, 14 Oct 1991, p. 245.
45 Edmond Grant, "National Lampoon's Loaded Weapon I," *The Film Journal*, Mar 1993, p. 68.
46 "Police Academy 4: Citizens on Patrol," *Variety*, 8 Apr 1987, p. 16.

thus more a series of revue sketches than a coherent film, while *Variety* simply, if painfully, claimed that it was "a film with a story so lame it needs crutches."[47] Nor were comic star vehicles immune, as various critics debated the effectiveness of the 1986 Tom Hanks film *The Money Pit* due to what they agreed was a thin narrative. For *Boxoffice*, the lack of a strong plot was not much of a detriment, since although "this slapstick epic surrenders any pretense of a cohesive plot to the wildly funny" gags, "you might be too busy laughing to mind" that it had no real story.[48] In contrast, *Screen International* raised warning flags that the film's appeal may be more limited because "plot lines of promise are introduced only to be left withering on the vine when the knockabout foolery takes over," implying that the gags are a poor substitute for the film's aimless story.[49] Irrespective of critics' ultimate conclusions, though, the reception of these films shows how critical discourse noted and chided weak narratives not only in gag-based parodies during this time, but in a wide range of gag-based comedies as well.

This thread of critical discourse, for both parodic and non-parodic gag-based films, continued in an increasingly similar fashion throughout the 1990s and 2000s. If *The Naked Gun* received something of a pass given its ZAZ pedigree, its sequels and other films in the ZAZ vein were received with increasing ambivalence, if not outright disdain, for their narrative shortcomings. For 1991's *The Naked Gun 2 ½*, Roger Ebert noted that "the plot exists to be disregarded" and that the film's dialogue was "so dumb you laugh twice, once because of how stupid it is, and the second time because you fell for it."[50] On the other hand, *Boxoffice* critiqued 1993's *Hot Shots! Part Deux* for having *too much* plot, thinking the film would have been better

47 Cynthia Rose, "One Crazy Summer," *The Film Journal*, Sep 1986, p. 47. "One Crazy Summer," *Variety*, 13 Aug 1986, p. 11.
48 Tom Matthews, "The Money Pit," *Boxoffice*, May 1986, p. R-46.
49 Marjorie Bilbow, "The Money Pit," *Screen International*, 5 Jul 1986, p. 23.
50 Roger Ebert, "The Naked Gun 2 ½: The Smell of Fear," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 28 Jun 1991.

served as simply a string of plotless gags.[51] Similar sentiments are evident in *Variety*'s review of

1996's *Spy Hard*, where "as it should be, plot is irrelevant, merely providing a backdrop for the

nonstop puns, sight gags and movie takeoffs."[52] Across these reviews, we see evidence of both

continuation and adaptation as critics shifted focus away from potential narrative issues, since

they recognized plots as not the prime motivators for parodies, and toward a perceived lack of

quality in the films' gags. Moving beyond ZAZ and Leslie Nielsen, other major parody

franchises of the late 90s and early 2000s likewise faced a mixed reception in regard to their

presence or lack of narrative. By the final Austin Powers film, 2002's *Austin Powers in*

Goldmember, *Variety* complained that this entry "feels like a bunch of gags tossed together" even

more than the previous films with a structure that "could not be more haphazard."[53] And if the

first *Scary Movie* displayed a "patchwork construction" but still had "something like a plot to

connect the assorted sight gags, satirical bits, rude remarks and sketch-comedy episodes," by

2013's *Scary Movie 5* critics declared that "a plot synopsis of *Scary Movie 5* is mostly irrelevant,

the setup just an excuse to satirize high-profile pop culture totems in a haphazard way," signaling

an exhaustion with the franchise's unchanging approach to narrative and its types of parodic

gags.[54] Here in particular we see the predictions of King and Harries coming true, as the lack of

variation in parody narratives led to increased critical, not to mention commercial, resistance.

A look at romantic comedy and gags tells something of a different story, though. A full

investigation of the critical reception of narrative in non gag-based romantic comedies is beyond

the scope of this chapter, but looking at some instances where discourse notes the overlap of

romantic comedy and gags highlights a degree of discursive adaptation via the more nuanced and

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51 Jem Axelrod, "Hot Shots! Part Deux," *Boxoffice*, Aug 1993, p. R-56.
52 Greg Evans, "Spy Hard," *Variety*, 27 May 1996, p. 66.
53 Todd McCarthy, "Austin Powers in Goldmember," *Variety*, 29 Jul 2002, p. 21, 28.
54 Joe Leydon, "Scary Movie," *Variety*, 10 Jul 2000, p. 19. "Scary Movie 5," *Screen International*, 12 Apr 2013.

conflicted reception of gags in a more traditionally narrative-focused form. Even if certain films,

were recognized as having strong romantic comedy elements, critics actually preferred their gags

to their narratives. While *Film Journal* noted that a love story provided the primary narrative

drive for 1984's *Splash*, they credited the film as "being best when humorous and weakest when

attempting to strike emotional chords," later calling its love story clichéd while reasoning that

"the hackneyed drama provides a framework within which the many gags, pranks and chases can

occur."[55] Likewise, *Variety* pointed to the plot of the 1987 gag-heavy romantic comedy *Blind

Date* as being "thin, but strong enough on which to hang some heavy talents" and characterized

the film as "essentially a running string of gags with snippets of catchy dialog in-between," again

highlighting how gags provided greater viewing pleasure than the romantic narrative ostensibly

at the heart of the film.[56] And for some critics, Edwards' next film, 1989's still gag-heavy (if

somewhat less of a romantic comedy) *Skin Deep*, the narrative was vastly overshadowed by a

single memorable, and highly marketed, gag sequence involving glow-in-the-dark condoms that

Boxoffice mused should "put a few extra million dollars in the bank just from word-of-mouth" all

by itself.[57]

However, one could easily object to these examples from the 1980s as being isolated

instances or as referring to films that do not comfortably fit discursive or textual definitions of

romantic comedy. Certainly, *Blind Date* is referred to by *Variety* not as a romantic comedy but as

a slapstick comedy in the vein of previous films by director Blake Edwards and, for unclear

reasons, is explicitly compared to the comedian comedy *Back to School* in reference to its light

narrative.[58] Its legacy is less clear, however: while absent from major studies of the

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55 Robert Seidenberg, "Splash," *The Film Journal*, Apr 1984, p. 39.
56 "Blind Date," *Variety*, 1 Apr 1987, p. 14.
57 Tom Matthews, "Skin Deep," *Boxoffice*, May 1989, p. R-23.
58 "Blind Date," p. 14.

contemporary romantic comedy (possibly since it was only modestly successful film and remains relatively little known), it is labeled both romance *and* comedy by online gatekeepers IMDB and Amazon. In contrast, a much clearer connection between romantic comedy, gag-based comedy, and narrative is visible in the reception of late 1990s and 2000s grossout romcoms. While remaining explicit in discussing the role of gags, in part or in whole, for these comedies, critical discourse was also much more explicit about their connections to romantic comedy, especially when compared to a forerunner like *Skin Deep* and its over-the-top, set piece gags. Although I will not consider grossout comedy as a distinct comic film cycle until the next section, looking at the function of narrative in grossout, gag-based romantic comedy further clarifies the role of gags in relation to narrative across these comic forms.

Central here is the 1998 Farrellys' film *There's Something About Mary*. A critical and commercial success at the time of its release, *Mary* proved a huge influence on subsequent romantic comedies given its success in combining the traditional romcom with grossout or animal comedy so as to allow audiences to "laugh at the bogus archetypes and worn devices of romantic comedy while still enjoying the buoyant uplift of a couple united."[59] I will again delve more into its use of gags, grossout humor, and discursive audience appeals in the next section, but beyond the film's influence, *Mary* is also important for the ways in which both critics and the Farrellys themselves foreground the role of narrative in the film. Not unlike the more acclaimed gag-based parodies of the 1980s, *Mary* (and the Farrellys' films more broadly) received an ambivalent critical reception in regard to its use of narrative. Roger Ebert says of the film's plot that further "description would be pointless" since "the plot exists, like all screwball plots,

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59 Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 171.

simply to steer us from one gag to the next," relating *Mary* both to gag-based comedy more broadly and a particular form of romantic comedy in the often gag-based screwball comedy, each positioned here as being less dependent on narrative.[60] For *Sight and Sound*, though, it was a "cheering discovery ... that the narrative logic, peripheral to many good comedies and virtually all bad ones, is persuasively coherent" in this film, with the review also striking a middle ground between story and gags in noting that the film's story benefits from its comic set pieces but does not *need* them to be effective.[61] Both reviews connect *Mary* to romantic comedy after a fashion, but with differing perspectives on how the romcom relates to its use of gags and narrative that seem to indicate the film can succeed both because of *and* in spite of its narrative.

This critical split is further reinforced by the divided approach to narrative that the Farrellys themselves display in interviews surrounding the release of *Mary*. Given that many critics noted the lack of a strong narrative in their debut film *Dumb & Dumber* (1994), it is not surprising that the pair tried to position subsequent films as addressing this weakness, with Peter Farrelly telling *Film Journal International* that it was in fact the the plot that drew them to their 1996 film *Kingpin* since they "knew what *Dumb & Dumber* was. It's a string of gags with a very loose plot, if any."[62] After *Kingpin*'s failure, Peter confessed to *Millimeter* that, while *Kingpin* "had a better plot than *Dumber* … it still rested on the jokes," unlike in *Mary* where "you could lift the gags … and still have a good movie."[63] By the time of their next film, 2000's *Me, Myself & Irene*, however, the brothers would quickly change course, with Bobby bluntly telling *Rolling Stone* that "our motto is: Plots are for pussies." When the interviewer notes that *Irene* still *does* have a plot, Bobby responds "it gets to a point where it's like, do we cut the plot or do we cut a

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60 Roger Ebert, "There's Something About Mary," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 Jul 1998.
61 Danny Leigh, "There's Something About Mary," *Sight and Sound*, Oct 1998, p. 58.
62 Qtd in Virginia Robertson, "Comedy Kingpins," *Film Journal International*, Jun 1996, p. 12.
63 Qtd in Matt Cheplic, "The 'Anti-Coens'," *Millimeter*, Aug 1998, p. 36.

joke? And the plot goes," signaling either a retreat from the (ambivalently) praised narrative strengths of *Mary*, a conscious shift by the Farrellys in how they position their comedy for different audiences (given that this interview was likely geared toward a more masculine, less romcom-focused audience for *Rolling Stone*), or a mixture of the two.[64] This is further complicated by critical appraisal around this time that praised the effective *absence* of narrative in the Farrellys' work. In a rare highbrow appreciation of their work, *Film Comment*'s Kent Jones aligned the brothers' work with a form of pure cinema since "in these movies, free as they are from the tight grip of narrative or any species of what we recognize as cinematic momentum, the pace and the rhythm of expectation and excitement is keyed to the gag structure," a fancier way of praising the prioritization of gags over narrative in the work of the men behind *Mary*.[65]

Across these discursive arenas, then, *There's Something About Mary* is positioned as both an example of a gag-based romantic comedy that does not need a plot *and* as a gag-based comedy that uses the romcom to help strengthen its plot. Since popular discourse is so divided on the film's narrative, how exactly does *Mary* operate in this regard, especially when compared to other, non gag-based romantic comedies? By analyzing the narrative of *Mary* and comparing it with narrative analyses of *When Harry Met Sally...* and *Groundhog Day*, we can better see how *Mary* attempts to negotiate the push and pull between its more plot-focused romantic comedy elements and its more gag-based ones. In terms of the romcom, Tamar Jeffers McDonald sees *When Harry Met Sally...* (hereafter *WHMS*) as having a "very schematic" story structure, and she examines the "pleasing symmetry" created by various parallels across the film.[66] She breaks the film's structure up into seven larger scale narrative segments that are separated by seven brief

64 Qtd in Mim Udovitch, "The Fabulous, Funny, Freaky Farrelly Brothers," *Rolling Stone*, 6 Jul 2000, p. 98.
65 Kent Jones, "A Class Act," *Film Comment*, 36.4 (Jul/Aug 2000), p. 28.
66 McDonald, *When Harry Met Sally...*, p. 7-9.

interludes of married couples discussing their romantic histories. By examining these seven segments, the symmetries and parallels among them, and the ways in which the interludes comment upon, reinforce, or conflict with the larger narrative, McDonald ultimately concludes that the film's narrative is a particularly tidy and orderly one. Such a conclusion seems fitting for *WHMS*, a prototypical blockbuster era example of what is generally seen as a particularly story-driven comic form.

That being said, while McDonald's analysis of *WHMS* provides an effective example of the narrative tightness in romantic comedy, it also lacks a clear narratological framework, making comparison with other films more difficult. By contrast, Kristin Thompson provides a particularly useful narratological model from which to work. She theorizes that the narratives of most contemporary Hollywood films follow a classical, four-act structure centered around large-scale narrative changes in character goals, leading her to divide narratives into those focused on a single protagonist, parallel protagonists, or multiple protagonists, based upon whose goals shape the film. Thompson further proposes that a film's four acts can be divided into the setup (establishing the initial situation and goals), complicating action (shifting the way in which the initial goals are pursued), development (struggling towards goals, often with key delays or setbacks), and climax (a final resolution of goals), often with an identifiable midpoint about halfway through the film that serves to divide the complicating action from the development.[67] In doing so, she argues that Hollywood films of 1980s and 1990s frequently make use of classical narrative techniques and a standardized structure akin to those of the classical era, thus framing contemporary films as still predominantly oriented around notions of narrative clarity

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67 Thompson, p. 45, 27-29, 31-32.

and coherence rather than the "post-classical" lack of narrative proposed by some scholars.[68]

While Thompson generally does not isolate comedy as a genre or mode of filmmaking with, at

least potentially, somewhat different narrative aims than many other forms, she does still analyze

several comedies as examples of the four-act structure in action.

In particular, her analysis of another major contemporary romantic comedy, *Groundhog Day*, provides a useful point of comparison with *There's Something About Mary*. Although

Thompson notes that the "high concept" nature of *Groundhog Day* (as protagonist Phil Connors

must inexplicably relive the same day over and over again) may make the film seem intuitively

"post-classical" in its approach, she nevertheless argues that it is "almost completely classical" in

its narrative structure, compensating for its potential narrative challenges with a high degree of

redundancy.[69] The film follows the goals of a single protagonist, and while it spends

proportionally more time in its first two acts (30.5 and 36.5 minutes, respectively) than its latter

two (16 and 16.5 minutes), she attributes this to the complex nature of setting up Phil's repeated

days and the way in which they serve to make the film's climax (revolving around Rita falling in

love with Phil, breaking his cycle of repeated Groundhog Days) efficient but believable. In

general, *Groundhog Day* is divided into repetitions of the eponymous day, how they characterize

Phil, how they shift his goals toward self-improvement, and how these changes lead him toward

his romantic goal with Rita. Although humor certainly factors into the narrative, and Thompson

hypothesizes that the desire to see Bill Murray's "mischievous persona" for longer may be part of

the reason why the film's complicating action is atypically long, the film's comedy is

nevertheless presented as clearly subsumed within the larger narrative, an approach befitting the

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68 Ibid., p. 8-10, 344-352.
69 Ibid., p. 152-154, 131.

general concept of romantic comedy as a whole.[70]

How, then, does a gag-based romcom like *There's Something About Mary* relate to Thompson's model and her analysis of *Groundhog Day*? Looking at *Mary*'s narrative reinforces the ambivalence toward classical narrative progression hinted at in the reception of gag-based films in general and *Mary* specifically as a gag-based romcom. On the one hand, *Mary* does feature clear structuring principles reminiscent of both *WHMS* and *Groundhog Day*. Akin to *WHMS*'s couch couples, *Mary* makes use of a tongue-in-cheek bard who functions as a sort of Greek chorus, appearing in the diegesis (with a lackadaisical drummer in tow) at several points to offer ironic musical commentary on the film's events and to help separate some of the film's major narrative turning points. In addition, *Mary* also echoes some of *WHMS*'s use of parallels across the film, as in the juxtaposition of Dom's seemingly perfect domestic bliss at 16 minutes into the film with the reveal of him as the still-Mary-obsessed ex-boyfriend Woogie at 1 hour 46 minutes, or the dangling cause of the other mysterious ex-boyfriend, Brett, at 29 minutes that is revealed to be NFL superstar Brett Favre in the climax at 1 hour 50 minutes. Finally, much like *Groundhog Day*, a chunk of the setup is devoted to Healy trailing Mary as she goes about her daily routines, introducing activities (her playing golf; visiting and helping out at a special needs facility where her brother, Warren, lives; discussing her idea of a perfect man over lunch with her girlfriends) that will provide fodder for Healy to try and woo Mary when he poses as her ideal partner in the film's complicating action. Although not as redundant in this regard as *Groundhog Day*, and likewise not as precise in its divisions or parallels as *WHMS*, we can still see ways in which *Mary* seems to fit the standard of narrative clarity associated with the romantic comedy.

On the other hand, though, *Mary*'s status as a mixture of gag-based and romantic comedy

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70 Ibid., p. 152.

conventions make it unbalanced under Thompson's narrative model, even more so than her example of *Groundhog Day*. In part, this is due to the film's somewhat atypical parallel protagonist structure: although initially following Ted in the 1985-set prologue and not introducing our second protagonist, Healy, until the 18 minute mark, the rest of the film oscillates unevenly between the two characters, for a time following Healy and only occasionally returning to Ted before reversing this tendency later in the film. The amount of time spent with each character, their shared goal of romancing Mary, and the ways in which the narrative shifts along with Ted and Healy's changes in trying to achieve that goal make *Mary* seem to clearly fit the parallel protagonist structure. However, this also creates a largely unbalanced narrative, with a 34 minute setup, a 39 minute complicating action, a 27 minute development, and a mere 14 minute climax and epilogue. Excluding end credits, this means that *Mary*'s first two acts occupy 73 of its 114 minutes, with the shift from the second to the third act well past the midpoint that Thompson identifies as common to classical narratives. And while one could instead argue that *Mary* breaks down into a three act structure, as Thompson notes that some films (including *WHMS*) tend to do, combining the development and climax into a 41 minute third act would require a tortuous redefinition of what the film's third act actually entails. There is a clear narrative shift leading to the climax of the film after Mary discovers that Ted had hired Healy to investigate her. Ignoring this shift to create one lengthy third act to fit this model would be disingenuous at best and seems to go against any reasonable, coherent narratological approach.

Instead, while there is some ambiguity over the *exact* shift from the setup to the complicating action and from the complicating action to the development, the use of the bard generally coincides well with changes in the protagonists' goals that divide up the narrative.

After Healy lies about Mary's current situation to Ted, the bard, last seen in the film's opening, reappears at 34 minutes, summarizing Ted's heartache at this point before the subsequent scene where Healy leaves Rhode Island for good to move to Miami. This is our first clear shift in the protagonists' goals, as the next act intercuts Healy's attempts to use imposture to win over Mary's affections with Ted's discovery of Healy's lie and his own misbegotten attempts to reach Miami and win Mary for himself. Although the bard does appear as part of a salsa band during Mary and Healy's date at 53 minutes, there is no clear shift in both protagonists' goals here to demarcate a move to the development. Instead, the reappearance of the bard later, at the 1 hour 13 minute mark, coincides with clearer changes: Healy, caught lying about his architectural career by yet another romantic rival, Tucker, ensures that Mary overhears a noble reason for his imposture, thereby solidifying their relationship, while after many delays Ted finally succeeds in getting to Miami. And although the bard does not appear again at the shift to the climax, Mary's discovery that Ted originally hired Healy to track her down, leading Mary and Ted to separate just as they were seeming to cement their relationship, serves as a clear set up for the finale where Ted, Healy, and Norm (aka "Tucker") show up to save Mary from the return of Woogie and force her to choose a romantic partner. The final appearance of the bard, after Mary chooses Ted, closes off the narrative and sums up the happy ending; in a very Farrellys-esque twist, the bard gets shot before the end credits start, to be replaced by a sing-along version of "Build Me Up Buttercup" with the film's cast.

Dividing the film's narrative in this way, we end up with four unbalanced acts that greatly strain Thompson's model, especially compared to the act timings of other comedies she analyzes, including romantic comedies (1977's *Semi-Tough*, 1996's *Jerry Maguire*, and 1993's *Sleepless in*

Seattle) and comedian comedies (1988's *Scrooged* and 1997's *Liar Liar*), all of which feature a much more balanced act structure.[71] How can we account for this deviation? I would argue that there are two primary reasons for *Mary*'s structural imbalance, each of which connects to the film's usage of genre and gag-based comedy. First, we can point to the ways in which *There's Something About Mary* attempts to explicitly combine romantic comedy conventions with the more heavily gag-based comic approach established in earlier Farrellys films. In practice, this leads to a frequent alternation of romantic comedy scenes/moments with gag-based scenes/moments, shifting from situational humor to physical slapstick and back again. For example, the opening prologue features an awkward Ted arriving to pick up Mary for the prom and having uncomfortable exchanges with her kooky stepfather, prototypical moments in a teenage romantic comedy. They are immediately followed by Warren, startled by Ted's attempt to "magically" pull a baseball from behind his ear, attacking Ted and wreaking havoc across the living room, more in line with a violent, Three Stooges-like, physical gag-based comedy. Such alternations continue across the film, as in the movement from Healy's imposture with Mary, fulfilling the common romantic comedy convention of one partner pretending to be something they are not, to Ted being stuck helping his boss' brother move, complete with him struggling to lug oversized furniture and prominent, cartoonish sound effects (again, very Three Stooges-like) as Ted injures his back. Even within the same scene we can alternate back and forth between typical romantic comedy and typical gag-based comedy. Consider the move from the absurd, over the top physical humor of Healy trying to resuscitate Puffy the dog to more romcom-like verbal miscommunication as Healy yells at Puffy to "Stay away from the light!," misinterpreted

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71 Ibid., p. 361-362. It is also odd that Thompson insists on a 4-act structure for *Groundhog Day*, given that combining the development and climax would divide the film into 3 almost perfectly balanced acts. She acknowledges this when she notes that the scriptwriters were likely "aiming at a three-act structure" (p. 152) but does not expand further upon this discrepancy.

by Mary in the kitchen as an admonition against grabbing a light beer from the fridge. Far more so than in conventional romantic comedies, then, *Mary* emphasizes its moments of pronounced gag-based humor along *with* moments of more familiar romantic comedy tropes.

The second reason for *Mary*'s unbalanced narrative structure relates to the first: this frequent insistence on highlighting gag-based moments is particularly prevalent in the first two acts, greatly increasing their length in comparison with the latter two acts. Similar to Thompson's supposition that the complicating action of *Groundhog Day* is longer due in part to a desire to feature Bill Murray's comic persona for longer than is narratively necessary, *Mary* takes this even further in its desire to deliver gag-based humor (physical, grossout, or otherwise) in the opening acts, pushing the narrative structure to its limits in the process. Although many of the film's gags do have narrative function (Warren attacking Ted in the prologue points to a key motif of Warren only allowing those he trusts to come close to touching his head; Ted moving furniture hurts his back, leading him to a chiropractor that first reveals Healy's lies about Mary to Ted), the time devoted to many of them far exceeds their narrative purpose, especially compared to comic moments in more conventional romcoms like *WHMS* or *Groundhog Day*. This is particularly true of moments such as the extended "frank and beans" gag in the opening flashback, Healy's attempts to resuscitate Puffy, or the entire thread where Ted, on his way to Miami, picks up a hitchhiker, is arrested and interrogated, and finally is freed from jail. The former examples may help set up or reinforce character (Ted's embarrassment around Mary, Healy as a sleazy bumbler), but these are traits that are already made abundantly clear elsewhere, and while the latter makes use of narrative delays to keep Ted from reaching Miami, their narrative import are again disproportionate to the amount of time spent on such moments. Less

like a typical romantic comedy and more like an action film that front loads its big set pieces and thus delays the start of its narrative proper, *Mary* foregrounds a number of major gags in earlier sections that skew its overall story structure. Ultimately, a closer look at this structure helps us better understand how the film could be seen both as a narrative step forward for the Farrellys *and* an example of their non-narrative strengths/weaknesses. In using both conventional romantic comedy tropes and conventional gag-based approaches, *Mary* ends up not only as a prime example of a film adapting to combine gags with a less gag-based form, but as a film stuck between the world of narrative-centered and gag-centered comedy as well.

Gag-based Cycles, Reception, and Presumed Audiences

Of course, as I have indicated elsewhere in this chapter, the production and reception of a film like *Mary* was also heavily shaped by the industrial and discursive context of contemporaneous comic cycles. To understand the intersection of gag-based comedy and genre, then, we must also look at how blockbuster era comic cycles interrelate with gags, especially given the central role of gag-based humor in several prominent cycles of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. In particular, the various cycles of parodies and spoofs across this time, the cycle of "dumb" comedy from the early-to-mid 1990s, and the cycle of grossout comedy of the late 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s all make significant use of gag comedy. In one sense, this showcases the industrial adaptability of gags as they continued to find success by morphing from one cycle to another over these decades. At the same time, however, the reception of these particular comedy cycles oscillates between adaptability and rigidity in a number of ways that are also worthy of further exploration. Within and across these cycles, popular discourse around gag-based comedies has frequently and consistently highlighted these films as exemplars of low taste and

presumed young, male audiences that had (and continue to have) a notable impact on how such films were made, marketed, and popularly received.

While parodies were a major part of the contemporary Hollywood comedy landscape from the 1970s until the late 2000s, there are three major, interrelated cycles of parody across these decades that particularly highlight the relationship of parodies to gags. Although there were a number of precursors in the 1960s and early 1970s, like the early, heavily gag-based films of Woody Allen (1969's *Take the Money and Run*, 1971's *Bananas*, and *Sleeper*), the first cycle drew its inspiration from the success of Mel Brooks' huge 1974 hit *Blazing Saddles*. His Borscht Belt-styled mix of visual humor, bad puns, bawdiness, and self-referentiality was quickly identified by critics and the trade press as a prominent form of gag comedy in the wake *Blazing* and a number of other parodies in the Brooks style. While some took issue with the lack of narrative in Brooks' films, his 1970s films were generally well received. However, critics also frequently made note of their use of "bad taste" humor in increasingly negative terms across the decade and into the early 1980s. *Variety* paid a backhanded compliment to the raunchy humor and language of *Blazing Saddles* by describing them as helping to conceal the "pic's fellowship with tv variety show entertainment," but later Brooks films increasingly came under fire for exactly this type of humor.[72] Although *Variety* saw *Silent Movie* as an effective comedy, they also noted that it featured a troubling strain of "adolescent" humor (including Three Stooges-reminiscent routines and bathroom jokes) that they warned "can't be mined forever" by Brooks and company.[73] Likewise, both *Variety* and *The Independent Film Journal* cited Brooks' *High Anxiety* as being weakest when it utilized such lowbrow humor: the former frames its lowest

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72 "Blazing Saddles," *Variety*, p. 18.
73 "Silent Movie," *Variety*, p. 16.

point as its use of "childish bathroom humor" while the latter characterized it as off-target when

it "stoop[ed] to 'Blazing Saddles'-type humor."[74] As this initial contemporary parody cycle

continued, then, its started to become synonymous with the types of gags and "low" humor that

critics least liked about them.

Responses to other films tapping into Brooks' style of parody during this time, notably

those by frequent Brooks collaborators Gene Wilder and Marty Feldman, often focused on their

abundance (or *over*abundance) of gags and concomitant lack of narrative development.

However, they occasionally noted the acceptability of their humor in similar terms as well, with

both Wilder and Feldman being explicitly compared to Brooks for emphasizing gags and lapsing

into questionable taste. The same year as Brooks' *High Anxiety*, 1977, saw critics chastising

Wilder's *The World's Greatest Lover* for its lack of discipline, "particularly in matters of taste,"

and Feldman's *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* for losing steam "under the weight of its cheerful

vulgarity" and importing "a few crude bits of bawdy excess" from Brooks.[75] By the time of

Brooks' 1981 film *History of the World, Part I*, though, we see something of a discursive shift on

the role of vulgar humor in his work. For *Screen International*, vulgar humor was the worst *and*

the best part of the film, as the bodily function-related humor was seen as the film's nadir while

the "magnificently over the top appalling bad taste" of the Spanish Inquisition musical number

was Brooks at his strongest.[76] Even more revealing is *Variety*'s approach, which noted the film's

vulgarity but framed it in the context of audience expectations and reception rather than simple

praise or critique. Instead, they mused that "the public doesn't seem to have lost its taste for

gross and outrageous humor" while questioning the film's prospects because Brooks' targets

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74 "High Anxiety," *Variety*, 21 Dec 1977, p. 20. "High Anxiety," *The Independent Film Journal*, p. 7.
75 "The World's Greatest Lover," *Boxoffice*, 5 Dec 1977, p. a7. "The Last Remake of Beau Geste," *The Independent Film Journal*, 22 Jul 1977, p. 9. "The Last Remake of Beau Geste," *Variety*, 13 Jul 1977, p. 18.
76 Marjorie Bilbow, "History of the World – Part I," *Screen International*, 29 Aug 1981, p. 19.

"may be too limited and rooted in both historical and show biz past to be fully appealing to the 'Animal House' crowd."[77] This confluence of taste and presumed audiences, here the implicitly less knowledgeable youth that had flocked to *Animal House*, would continue to be a key, and increasingly inflexible, element of critical discourse around gag-based comedy cycles throughout the succeeding decades.

We see this most proximately in the next major cycle of parodies and spoofs arriving in the early 1980s.[78] Although others continued to follow the Brooks approach to varying degrees, most notably Carl Reiner in films like *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982), this new cycle instead largely followed the similar blueprint of the hugely successful 1980 hit *Airplane!* The film spawned not only a sequel, but a whole host of films in a style that became associated with the film's directorial team of David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker. The ZAZ-style of parody overlapped with Brooks' in several ways (its emphasis on a constant stream of gags, frequent visual and verbal puns, etc), and the reception of *Airplane!* and other ZAZ-style parodies likewise echoed the response to the Brooks-style films. *Airplane!* may have escaped being explicitly labeled as tasteless or vulgar in several major reviews of the film, but ZAZ followup *Top Secret!* was not quite as lucky, with *Boxoffice* specifically finding fault with the film's "tendency to gravitate toward total tastelessness."[79] Low humor and audience appeals also featured in *The Film Journal*'s review of Amy Heckerling's 1984 ZAZ-style gangster parody *Johnny Dangerously*, which was criticized for sharing the flaws common to most contemporary comedies, including "a knee-jerk inclination to go for the low laugh," that would most likely find

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77 "History of the World – Part I," *Variety*, 10 Jun 1981, p. 18, 20.
78 I also want to acknowledge the importance of British parodies, particularly those coming from the Monty Python comedy troupe, during this time, but since my focus here is on Hollywood comedy, such films largely fall outside the purview of my approach.
79 Alan Karp, "Top Secret!," *Boxoffice*, Aug 1984, p. R-96.

viewers only in a "teenage audience in search of some light and slightly naughty entertainment."[80] Although implied in *Variety*'s invocation of the "'Animal House' crowd," this review makes explicit a critical connection between lowbrow humor and presumed teenage or young adult target audiences that would become increasingly ossified in later gag-based cycles.

Ultimately, much of this response may be tied to larger changes in critical values and the market for Hollywood comedy during this time. This is perhaps best summarized by Dave Kehr's 1982 *Film Comment* rant against contemporary film comedy, where he accuses contemporary comedies (including those by Brooks and ZAZ) as being "actively hostile to most of the established critical values" via their lack of narrative and an emphasis on broad, even "stupid," comedy, in contrast to what he sees as earlier, better eras of Hollywood comedy.[81] Kehr also singles out parodies in particular, implicating both the Brooks and the ZAZ parody cycles as not being "interested in their subjects as cultural artifacts, but rather as comic frameworks – vague sets of rules, archetypal characters, and cliches that gags can be hung on" and calling the strategy of contemporary genre parody "one of unfocused aggression" against their chosen subjects.[82] Kehr's sustained frustration with Hollywood comedy in the early 1980s is important because it not only echoes and codifies what we see hinted at in some of the reviews for parodies from these early cycles, but it also predicts the approach to gag-based parodies (and other gag-based cycles) that many later critics would take, especially an explicit dissatisfaction with the overtly "stupid" comedy of such films that would flourish in the 1990s.

Although Brooks' output faltered and ZAZ-style parody began to dissipate as the 1980s wore on, the success of ZAZ's *The Naked Gun* in 1988 breathed new life into both their own

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80 Maitland McDonagh, "Johnny Dangerously," *The Film Journal*, Jan 1985, p. 28.
81 Dave Kehr, "Funny Peculiar," *Film Comment*, 18.4 (Jul-Aug 1982), p. 9.
82 Ibid., p. 11.

parody cycle and the critiques of taste and audiences related to it. *Variety*'s review of *Naked Gun* noted that it downplayed bathroom humor and played up sexual humor before noting that "people offended by this most likely aren't the target audience anyway."[83] *Screen International*'s review opened by warning that theaters should "stock their concession stands with fake vomit, whoopie cushions, and other items of scatological interest" because the film "will attract that kind of a crowd," even explicitly linking the film's US success to "members of the lavatory humour contingent."[84] Both reviews stop short of explicitly identifying the film's audience as youth with low, vulgar taste, but given the developing associations between young audiences and offensive, scatological humor, it is clear that they are on reviewers' minds. And while the ZAZ trio and *Airplane!* and *Naked Gun* star Leslie Nielsen went their separate ways to make more parodies in the same style over the coming years, similar critical responses continued apace. *Variety* declared the Nielsen parody *Repossessed* to be "entertaining enough to keep an undemanding audience happy" (although "a little less green vomit … would have gone a long way in critical circles"), and they later predicted that the final *Naked Gun* film would "score a bull's eye with the teen and college crowd," explicitly naming that "undemanding audience" alluded to earlier.[85] By the mid-90s, the scholarly literature was reinforcing this as well, with Paul characterizing the largest audience for "run-of-the-mill Animal Comedy" as males in their teens and early twenties, though he does add that the most commercially successful animal comedies must have a wider appeal (presumably in terms of both age and gender) to explain their broader success.[86] As ZAZ and Nielsen's parodies continued into the early and mid 90s, they were increasingly seen as catering to the same, largely unvarying young adult audience

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83 "The Naked Gun," *Variety*, 30 Nov 1988, p. 12.
84 "The Naked Gun," *Screen International*, 17 Dec 1988, p. 24.
85 "Repossessed," p. 82. Brian Lowry, "The Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult," *Variety*, 21 Mar 1994, p. 57.
86 Paul, p. 86-87.

emphasized in mid-80s critical discourse as lacking in critical taste precisely because of their preference for such forms of lowbrow humor.

This form of humor connects to another major gag-based comic cycle in the "dumb comedies" of the early-to-mid 1990s. It partially overlaps with later ZAZ-style parodies, as *Variety* characterized the gags in 1991's *Hot Shots* as ranging from "irresistibly" to "numbingly" stupid while, as previously mentioned, Roger Ebert struggled with how to write about *The Naked Gun 2 1/2* due to its dizzyingly dumb dialogue.[87] *The Naked Gun 33 1/3* featured similar appraisals, from "stupidity done right" to "working from the presumption that if stupid is good, idiotic is better," positioning stupidity as a central tenet of the *Naked Gun* series and other parodies in this cycle.[88] However, if the *Naked Gun* and *Hot Shots* films, along with comedies like *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) and *Wayne's World* (1992), served as important precursors, the dumb comedy cycle can be traced most clearly to a pair of 1994 Jim Carrey vehicles: *Dumb & Dumber* and *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. The breakout success of these films spawned a host of other "dumb" or "stupid" comedies in their wake, often to the dismay of film critics. Jonathan Rosenbaum was one of several put into a state of "stupefied horror at the manic leers and terminally stupid gags" of Carrey in *Ace Ventura*, and if others offered more ambivalent or even positive responses to early films in the cycle, later examples were often found wanting in comparison.[89] For *Boxoffice*, the 1995 film *Bushwhacked* "sets off on the trail of stupid fun" but soon gets lost in bad toilet humor, and "preposterous" sight gags, while *Variety* found fault with 1996's *The Stupids* for not being stupid *enough*, "lacking both the sheer gross-out humor of 'Dumb and Dumber' and the carefully thought-through tone" of the recent *Brady Bunch* films,

87 Brian Lowry, "Hot Shots," *Variety*, 5 Aug 1991, p. 93. Ebert, "The Naked Gun 2 ½."
88 Edmond Grant, "Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult," *The Film Journal*, Apr 1994, p. 27. Lowry, "Naked Gun 33 1/3," p. 57.
89 Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Why Is This Movie a Hit?," *Chicago Reader*, 4 Mar 1994.

thus failing to be a distinctive enough entry in "the bonehead genre" of comedy.[90] In this comic

landscape, someone like Mel Brooks seemed old hat: *Variety* called his final film, the 1995

Leslie Nielsen-starring Dracula parody *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*, "positively understated"

when "compared with the recent glut of dumb, dumber and dumbest comedies" of the then-

popular cycle.[91] Although the terms may have varied, critics agreed that there was a shift toward

dumb comedy, decrying such a shift in more and more narrowly defined ways.

In addition, the discursive response to this particular cycle continued to define an

increasingly prominent assumed target audiences for such dumb comedies. The audience for

gag-based comedies may have previously been seen as young adults, but by the 90s critics were

quick to see dumb comedy as specifically targeting young, white, males. *Variety* bluntly

positioned *Wayne's World* as a film "aggressively pitched at a young white male audience," and

The Mask, Jim Carrey's third hit from 1994, combined dumb comedy with Tex Avery-borrowed

cartoon zaniness, leading some to muse that the film's ideal audience might be "twelve-year-old

boys," although "observant adults" could still enjoy the film as well.[92] Such observations

continued throughout the 1990s even as the dumb comedy cycle itself began to lose steam and/or

morph into other comic cycles. Both *Screen International* and *Film Journal International*

framed the 1998 David Zucker film *BASEketball*, which tapped into aspects of both ZAZ-style

parody and dumb comedy, as geared specifically to teenage males due to its emphasis on

sophomoric humor.[93] Likewise, *Variety* saw 2000's *Dude, Where's My Car?* as not only aimed

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90 Michael Lightcap, "Bushwhacked," *Boxoffice*, Oct 1995, p. 87. Derek Elley, "The Stupids," *Variety*, 26 Aug 1996, p. 60.
91 Joe Leydon, "Dracula: Dead and Loving It," *Variety*, 18 Dec 1995, p. 67.
92 Lawrence Cohn, "Wayne's World," *Variety*, 17 Feb 1992, p. 69. Ed Kelleher, "The Mask," *The Film Journal*, Sep 1994, p. 26.
93 John Hazelton, "BASEketball," *Screen International*, 7 Aug 1998, p. 23. Chris Grunden, "Baseketball," *Film Journal International*, Sep 1998, p. 65-66.

"at adolescents who might find 'Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure' too intellectually taxing," but took it as a sign that "this comedy is on the same wavelength as its aud [sic]" that several of its gags indicated how "adolescent males basically are afraid of women."[94] Race is largely unstated in these reviews, but whiteness, as the default assumed audience at the time for most critical outlets unless otherwise noted by the nebulous "urban" designation, remains strongly implied. In this way, the "young white male audience" of *Wayne's World* became cemented as the discursive "default" audience for gag-based comic cycles by the end of the 90s.

However, another discursive trend during this time serves to complicate this audience and hint at how a film like *There's Something About Mary*, from dumb comedy kings the Farrellys, could also be a romantic comedy with appeal beyond such a narrowly defined audience. In particular, several reviews of dumb comedies frame them as prime fodder for "date night" movie-going, implying that even if they were primarily geared for male audiences, they nevertheless still retained enough appeal to be a sufficient draw for young women as well.[95] Although less prominent than the discursive characterization of dumb comedy as targeting adolescent males, this approach is also in evidence early on in the dumb comedy cycle, with *Variety* seeing *Ace Ventura* as promising "dumb good times" that will "wield a strong lure for the Saturday night date crowd."[96] Adam Sandler, another key figure for dumb comedy, was likewise seen as appealing to date audiences later in the decade, with *Variety* explicitly noting that his 1999 film *Big Daddy* included both appeals to Sandler's "loyal male-teen aud [sic] core" *and* "solid date-movie material." This latter element is further framed as continuing a process started in Sandler's earlier *The Wedding Singer* (1998) where he and the female audience "discovered

94 Joe Leydon, "Dude, Where's My Car?," *Variety*, 18 Dec 2000, p. 24.
95 Given when this discourse was being written, it is safe to assume that critics had a stereotypical, heteronormative male/female couple in mind when discussing a film's "date night" potential.
96 Steve Gaydos, "Ace Ventura: Pet Detective," *Variety*, 7 Feb 1994, p. 40.

each other," presumably through an incorporation of more romcom-type material.[97] Although the review concludes that *Big Daddy* tries to please too many audiences to be fully effective, it still points to a more flexible position by critics that gag-based dumb comedy could appeal to both male *and* female audiences, even though they remained young and, given critical assumptions of the time, implicitly white.

These discursive threads seem to converge in *There's Something About Mary*, which served not only to marry the gag-based humor of the dumb comedy cycle with romantic comedy, but was also widely seen as kicking off the grossout comedy cycle of the late 90s and early-to-mid 2000s. In terms of *Mary* specifically, the Farrellys positioned themselves as setting out to make a mixture of romantic comedy and their previous brand of dumb comedy, with Peter Farrelly telling *Film Journal International* that the film was "sort of a cross between *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Animal House* – and that movie has not been made," evoking both the highly gendered world of romantic comedy portrayed in *Sleepless in Seattle* and the more traditionally masculine domain of *Animal House*'s gag-heavy comedy.[98] Many critics followed suit by implicitly framing *Mary* in mixed gendered terms, with *Screen International* predicting the film would help the Farrellys "reach their widest audience yet" because it combined "the brothers' gleefully tasteless humour with a cute romantic comedy storyline," strongly hinting that the film's use of romantic comedy tropes would make female viewers the greatest part of this new audience. However, they also noted that the casting of Cameron Diaz would "ensure loyalty of the Farrelly's core audience of young males," offering a strong explanation for why Diaz would be so central, and so objectified, in the film's advertising.[99] By playing up both the elements of

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97 Robert Koehler, "Big Daddy," *Variety*, 21 Jun 1999, p. 76.
98 Qtd in Kevin Lally, "Between Brothers," *Film Journal International*, Jul 1998, p. 14.
99 John Hazelton, "There's Something About Mary," *Screen International*, 24 Jul 1998, p. 19.

romantic comedy *and* their attractive female lead, the Farrellys could maximize their industrial

adaptability by attracting a new audience while retaining their old one. Elsewhere, *Sight and*

Sound thought the film's story "could easily support a conventional romantic weepie" and the

Village Voice saw *Mary* as a romantic comedy, "if not exactly the sort that Nora Ephron would

concoct," in both cases strengthening the link between *Mary*, the romcom, and an unstated

assumption that female audience appeal drove the genre.[100] These presumed audiences were still

young, but the gendered makeup of such audiences began to expand within critical discourse,

again displaying a space for discursive flexibility that the reception of later grossout comedy

would develop, codify, and occasionally push back against.

If dumb comedy centered around the stupidity of its main characters and the stupidly

simple humor of slapstick and bodily functions, grossout comedy amplified both trends while

largely focusing on the latter. This is perhaps best summarized by *Uncut*'s characterization of

Scary Movie as "a veritable symphony of fart'n'fellatio gags."[101] The grossout cycle was quickly

identified as trying to capitalize on *There's Something About Mary*'s massive commercial success

by emphasizing raunchy, R-rated comedy that foregrounded bodily functions and sexual humor,

often for a presumed teenage or young adult audience. At the same time, it was also notable for

the ways in which it fluidly worked within other contemporaneous comic genres (the comedian

comedies of Jim Carrey and Adam Sandler, romantic comedies, parodies, etc) to adapt and

extend its life over nearly a decade. Initially starting out as a hard R comic form in *Mary*, 1999's

American Pie, and *Scary Movie*, shifting industrial and cultural currents kept grossout present in

both hard R and in a somewhat softened, PG-13 form for Sandler films and later entries in the

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100 Leigh, "Mary," p. 58. J. Hoberman, "Boys to Men," *The Village Voice*, 21 Jul 1998, p. 115.
101 Chris Roberts, "Scary Movie," *Uncut*, Oct 2000, p. 113.

_____ *Movie* series of parodies inspired by *Scary Movie*. And while the *Movie* films point to the third and final major parody cycle within the contemporary era, given its frequent overlap with grossout comedy, I combine it with my following discussion of grossout as a whole.

Given the labeling of this cycle, it should come as no surprise that issues of taste and vulgarity became even more prominent in the reception of grossout comedy. At its best, critics saw grossout as potentially addressing class concerns and connecting to a history of blue-collar lowbrow humor, as Kent Jones does when noting that grossout moments in the Farrellys films are often connected to "characters' dire circumstances" (financial, psychological, or metaphysical), or when Jonathan Rosenbaum characterizes the Farrellys' grossout as "working-class taboo busting."[102] Such a response links up with Paul's work when he explicitly frames animal comedy's vulgarity as "part of a peculiar aspiration to *downward* mobility," emphasizing the raw and gross in its gags to better connect with the contemporary social existence of lower class American teens of the 70s and 80s.[103] Generally, though, critics labeled grossout a scourge as quickly, if not even more so, than previous major gag-based comic cycles. If *Mary* helped launch the cycle, subsequent Farrellys films struggled to reach the same critical heights due in large part to the baggage of their newfound reputation as grossout kings. Followup film *Me, Myself & Irene* received a mixed response as critics saw the Farrellys "obviously straining to top themselves in their patented gross-out gags" that served to "taint the good-natured spirit of the rest of the film," although one could, at times, also find genuine humor in their gags, "vulgar and juvenile as they may be."[104] Later films continued this trend: the PG live-action/animated hybrid *Osmosis Jones* (2001) was "a disappointment because it lacks the puerile outrageousness of their

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102 Jones, "A Class Act," p. 31. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Fever Pitch," *Chicago Reader*, 1 Apr 2005.
103 See Paul, p. 91-93, for a more in-depth characterization of the link between animal comedy and class.
104 Christine James, "Me, Myself & Irene," *Boxoffice*, Aug 2000, p. 58. Ed Kelleher, "Me, Myself & Irene," *Film Journal International*, Jul 2000, p. 77.

'adult' work" and *Stuck On You* (2003) was seen as a new low in grossout comedy, far from the "zenith" of the form in *Mary*, because it felt "like it bypassed the scripting stage and was filmed directly from the pitch."[105] By 2007, the grossout comedy landscape had changed so that *The Heartbreak Kid* looked "like a lumbering, blithely offensive relic from another age."[106] Although the Farrellys helped launch grossout as a distinct comic cycle, they soon found themselves out of step with the form.

The reason for this can largely be traced to two other major players in the grossout cycle. The first is the aforementioned *Scary Movie*-inspired parody cycle that, along with *Mary*, was frequently singled out as pushing the boundaries of taste to extremes (and beyond). Critical responses linked *Scary Movie* to the Farrellys and their style of grossout humor, with *Sight and Sound* positing that the film "has been such an immediate hit that it must have clicked more with mainstream audiences who appreciate the Farrelly Brothers - whose style of gross out humour is in evidence throughout - than with the sizeable [sic] but cult crowd who saw *Scream*," one of the film's prime parodic targets.[107] Unlike *Mary*, though, much of *Scary Movie*'s reception saw its grossout as coarsening contemporary comedy for the worse, from a more ambivalent take that the film stretches (if not shreds) "the outer limits of R-rated respectability" to an overwhelmingly negative one that sees the film, in abolishing "the distinction between comedy and horror gross-outs," as lowering "the bar on tastelessness with no discernible comic return."[108] If *Scary Movie* displayed a certain amount of industrial adaptability by blending grossout comedy and horror parody, not to mention being a major commercial success for a Black comic director as I discuss

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105 Jamie Russell, "Osmosis Jones," *Sight and Sound*, Jan 2002, p. 53. David Rooney, "Stuck On You," *Variety*, 8 Dec 2003, p. 52.

106 Kate Stables, "The Heartbreak Kid," *Sight and Sound*, Dec 2007, p. 67.

107 Kim Newman, "Scary Movie," *Sight and Sound*, Oct 2000, p. 55.

108 Leydon, "Scary Movie," p. 19. Roger Smith, "Highs, Lows, & Status Quos," *Film Comment*, 37.1 (Jan/Feb 2001), p. 66.

in chapter six, its mixed discursive reception instead often emphasized negative links with

previously maligned comic traditions. Grossout and comic taste continued to be a critical talking

point throughout the 2000s, from R-rated comedies with notably "tacked on" grossout (2000's

Road Trip) or "tepid, stale and, occasionally, more than a little desperate" attempts at grossout

comedy (2000's *Whipped*) to PG-13 entries like the "especially juvenile and pointless ...

bathroom humour and tired bits" of *Scary Movie 5* or the "Farrelly Brothers Lite" of 2004's

Dodgeball as it tried to push the limits of a PG-13 rating.[109] Whether drawing primarily or only

partially from the *Mary*/*Scary Movie* grossout framework, these films had become a clear

touchstone for a new taste(lessness) in Hollywood comedy.

Grossout, especially in parodies and comedian comedies, also continued to develop

discursive threads assuming a young male audience for such humor. *Dodgeball* was particularly

seen as targeting young males, both in *Variety*'s review of the film and in their review of 2004's

White Chicks, which they predicted will "more likely pull in urban audiences and women than

gagfest rival 'DodgeBall' [sic]," implying that *Dodgeball*'s target is specifically young *white*

males as opposed to the "urban" (read: African-American) audiences for *White Chicks*.[110]

Elsewhere, 2005 comedian comedy *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo* featured humor "so

irredeemably juvenile that it will have little appeal for those outside its frat-boy target audience"

and "visual gags are so crudely puerile they could have been torn from the pages of a 14-year-

old's exercise book," again specifically (if floridly) delimiting the film's target audience to

teenage boys.[111] *Me, Myself & Irene* received similar, if less specific, labeling as "a guy film"

109 Chris Roberts, "Road Trip," *Uncut*, Nov 2000, p. 131. Joe Leydon, "Whipped," *Variety*, 4 Sep 2000, p. 20.
   "Scary Movie 5," *Screen International*. Joe Leydon, "Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story," *Variety*, 21 Jun 2004,
   p. 36.
110 Leydon, "Dodgeball", p. 36. David Rooney, "Cheeky 'Chicks' A Broad Comedy," *Variety*, 28 Jun 2004, p. 31.
111 James Bell, "Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo," *Sight and Sound*, Dec 2005, p. 48.

due to its own use of grossout-type humor, leading *Sight and Sound* to compare it to another film

dealing with "frustrated male rage," 1999's *Fight Club*, but "with extra slapstick."[112] For at least

parts of the grossout cycle, then, we see a continuation, if not a doubling-down, on the discourse

framing gag-based comedy as largely targeting young male audiences.

At the same time, though, grossout comedy, particularly in films that followed *Mary*'s

lead by combining gag-based grossout and the romcom, could also be seen as targeting a more

mixed gender audience. The Farrellys' *Irene* followup, 2001's *Shallow Hal*, was specifically

labeled a romantic comedy by *Variety* and, though it may not "thrill the Farrellys old core

audience of gross-out seeking teens" due to its PG-13 rating, the film was ultimately judged to be

"a reasonably commercial date movie," again implying a broader appeal to male *and* female

audiences.[113] 2004's *Along Came Polly* was likewise explicitly labeled as both a romantic and a

grossout comedy, using humor that *Rolling Stone* described as "toilet gags the Farrellys have

long since flushed."[114] For *Variety*, though, "without the outrageous, talked-about scenes that

broad, post-Farrelly exercises like this depend on" they predicted that the "pic will do merely

modest date biz," pointing to the difficulties *Mary*-inspired films faced when trying to effectively

balance the appeals of grossout and romantic comedy for different audiences.[115] However, other

films could overcome this industrial challenge and find the right balance between the two, as did

2005's *Wedding Crashers*. The film was a huge hit largely due to its status as neither a "full-

throated, R-rated romp" in the vein of *Mary* nor "a fully realized romantic comedy" but an

effective, and more widely appealing, blending of the two.[116] Teen-skewing comedies also began

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112 Leslie Felperin, "Me, Myself & Irene," *Sight and Sound*, Oct 2000, p. 51.
113 Todd McCarthy, "Sweet 'Hal' Thin On Laffs," *Variety*, 5 Nov 2001, p. 23.
114 Peter Travers, "The Bleak Midwinter," *Rolling Stone*, 5 Feb 2004, p. 64.
115 Robert Koehler, "Opposites Detract," *Variety*, 5 Jan 2004, p. 45.
116 Brian Lowry, "B.O. Should See Hot 'Wedding' Reception," *Variety*, 11 Jul 2005, p. 21.

to more explicitly target young male and female audiences. This could be effective, as when

Variety called *40 Days and 40 Nights* (2002) "a good twentysomething date attraction" that

promised an attractive premise plus a "parade of hotties" for "young guys" and the appeal of

Josh Hartnett "where the femme audience is concerned."[117] But these attempts could also go

astray, as *Variety* later saw *Sex Drive* (2008) as "clumsily juggling gross-out gags, cartoonish

physical humor and synthetic date-movie sentimentality" and featuring a last second "romantic

wrap-up" that "comes off as a shameless sop to young femme auds" in trying to ensure that date

night crowd.[118] Although these latter reviews are less explicit in connecting grossout films to

romantic comedy, romcom tropes still clearly factor into their portrayal of them as date night

material for young audiences.

For a film like *Sex Drive*, this is also partly due to the influence of the other major player

associated with the intersection of grossout and romantic comedy in the 2000s: the films directed

or produced by Judd Apatow. His 2005 film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, along with popular

comedies like *Mary* and *Wedding Crashers*, were credited with helping popularize "anti-romantic

comedies" that combined R-rated comedy with romantic plots, creating sleeper hits that appealed

to a broad range of audiences.[119] Others also saw Apatow as adding a masculine twist to

romantic comedy, with *Film Comment* calling his films "male weepies" with jokes added and

crediting *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Virgin* as adhering "to the basic shape of a romantic comedy"

but "oscillat[ing] back and forth between the genre's two poles" of romance and comedy.[120] All

of this helped lead scholars to posit the existence of their own pseudo-genres, including Tamar

Jeffers McDonald's aforementioned "homme-com" or the "bromance" examined in a 2014

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117 Todd McCarthy, "40 Days and 40 Nights," *Variety*, 25 Feb 2002, p. 70.
118 Joe Leydon, "Sex Drive," *Variety*, 20 Oct 2008, p. 50.
119 Ian Mohr, "Fresh Faces for Summer Races," *Variety*, 26 Mar 2007, p. 6.
120 Mark Olsen, "3 Dimensional Man," *Film Comment*, 43.3 (May-Jun 2007), p. 32.

collection on the subject, that were often first established in the critical response to films from the Apatow stable.[121] This is evident even on films only produced by Apatow with less explicit ties to the romantic comedy, such as *Pineapple Express* (2008) or *Superbad* (2007), which were nevertheless seen as films that walked "the same path between buddy comedy and heterosexual man-love rom-com" or were expected to "guarantee strong teen and date-night turnout" due to their "plethora of outrageously out-there gags."[122] *Superbad* especially seems to gather all of these previous threads together quite neatly. It includes elements of the discursive approach to Apatow-styled romcom, grossout comedy, and presumptions of mixed "date night" audiences that highlight both the industrial shifts and ambivalent discursive adaptation to gag comedy at this time.

Conclusion

It should be noted, though, that the Apatow "homme-coms" also drew even more from the romantic comedy than other examples, including *Mary*, making them increasingly less gag-based than other grossout films. As the Apatow stable (and the overall grossout cycle itself) became less dominant by the early 2010s, more clearly gag-based comedy has struggled to maintain its dominant position within the contemporary Hollywood landscape that it once held. Genre parodies like *The Heat* (2013), *Spy* (2015), or *Keanu* (2016) are more genre hybrids that blend partially gag-based humor with stronger narrative lines borrowed from action films and often emphasize moments of improvisation (gag-based or not) more so than in past parody cycles. That being said, the confluence of the gag-based, the romantic comedy, and their varying presumed audiences has altered recent comedy in other ways. Another Apatow-produced film,

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121 For the bromance, see *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Deangelis, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014.

122 Olly Richards, "Pineapple Express," *Empire*, Oct 2008, p. 50. Todd McCarthy, "Raunchy, rueful romp has '70s soul," *Variety*, 13 Aug 2007, p. 39.

2011's *Bridesmaids*, helped launch a trend of raunchy, gag-heavy humor in specifically female-centered films. If they offered something of a female take on the homme-com given their focus on raunchy comedy and homosocial friendships, they also helped deconstruct the notion of gag-based comedy as a solely masculine realm and showcased how women could be as successful, performatively and economically, in physical gag comedy as men. In addition, although subsequent female-oriented raunchy comedy can be hit or miss when it comes to commercial success, it has also provided much greater space for Black women (the 2017 hit *Girls' Trip*) and queer women (2017's less successful *Rough Night* and the TV series *Broad City* (2014-2019), both of which share a number of key writing and directing personnel) as well, further expanding the industrial range of gag-based comedy. The relationship between gag-based comedy and genre, especially in regard to narrative, taste, and audiences, may still be complex and infused with a number of codified critical and scholarly assumptions, but an examination of romantic gag-based comedies and other major gag comedy cycles showcases both continued trends and promising new directions.

Looking ahead, then, there are still many other questions to answer in regards to the topics I have covered in this chapter. A deeper look at gag-based comedy in relation to other genres, particularly genre hybrids like the horror-comedy, would help to expand upon the observations made in my first section. Likewise, further narrative analyses of other gag-based comedies (especially gag-based romantic comedies) can help clarify *There's Something About Mary*'s relationship to narrative as well as the role of narrative in contemporary gag-based comedy more broadly. Finally, the discursive threads of taste and audiences traced in the third section point to further work that can be done in relation to actual audience responses (as

opposed to the presumed audiences posited by critics and the industry), the industrial role of gender in gag-based comic cycles (including in terms of marketing and textual features), and the ways in which other elements such as race further inform these trends. Through a combination of these approaches, we can continue to develop our understanding of the ways gag-based comedy functions generically, textually, and culturally, throughout the blockbuster era up to the present and, perhaps, into the future as well.

Chapter 4

"Methods to the Madness: Gag Production in Blockbuster Era Hollywood Comedy"

If we take the words of their creators at face value, producing gags was a simple process in early silent comedy. As they told industry press and fan magazines, early comedy stars merely started with a general idea, headed to set, and improvised or experimented with gags during production until they found ones that worked, repeating the process until they had filled out a one or two-reeler. Although more fully fleshed out scripts and official "gag men" would complicate this process a bit by the 1920s, and the coming of sound placed further limits on the degree to which comedians could improvise physical gag material during production, it nevertheless still seems quite simple in comparison with the pitfalls of contemporary gag-based comedy. Especially for studio comedies, with large investments of capital, potentially dozens of personnel who have had a hand in working on a script or proposing gags, and numerous visual effects workers from an array of companies that can constitute hundreds of people (if not more) helping to sculpt a gag, the production of gags in blockbuster era Hollywood comedy appears to be a far more fraught, complex process than in earlier decades.

But is this really the case? As my rather hyperbolic descriptions imply, positioning a simple past versus a complex present is misleading and only partially accurate at best. This is true both in terms of the popular characterizations of silent era gag construction and the ways in which modern approaches to producing gags also display adaptation and variation. To unpack how modern gags are produced, then, we first need a more accurate picture of how gags were actually developed in classical Hollywood. In what ways does gag production in the blockbuster era adapt so as to update older methods and push them in new directions? How have various

industrial and technological changes, especially in regards to the usage of special visual effects, altered the production of gags? In what ways has gag production adapted to provide room for continuity with older methods rather than complete reinvention? By comparing gag production in the classical and contemporary eras, I argue that beyond the continuities in methods and the changes wrought by effects-based comedies, a primary difference between the two periods lies in a shift in emphasis from creating gags in pre-production and production to an increasing emphasis on *post*-production in recent decades. In addition, I argue that this shift indicates a similar movement away from gags emphasizing individual actors' comic performance and more toward gags emphasizing effects and other non-embodied elements in various strains of gag-based comedy. While the production of gags is a broad topic that encompasses a variety of other factors and intangibles that make tracing the *exact* process of gag creation extremely difficult, if not impossible, I hope to give a better, more accurate sense of at least some of the major factors that go into shaping the gags we have seen in recent decades.

To do so, I will first sketch out a general picture of gag production in the classical era, using trade press interviews, descriptions of film comedians at work, and select production documents to highlight some of the actual challenges and approaches used for making gags from the silent era to the 1960s. Moving into the blockbuster era, I then consider a range of primary documents (including script drafts and production notes) and trade press materials (especially from craft journals like *American Cinematographer*) to trace out the aforementioned adaptations providing continuity and change in gag production, with particular emphasis on how changes in the division of labor, technology, and special effects have impacted gags. While this examination encompasses a variety of films and production contexts from the 1970s and on, I end by looking

in further detail at the production of two films, *Airplane!* (1980) and *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990). These films, particularly their wealth of production documents, serve to better showcase the adaptations made within contemporary gag production and how the continuities and changes, including in terms of varying emphasis on phases of production and performance, operate in practice. Together, all of this will provide a clearer, more accurate picture of how gags were actually created in the past and how they continue to function today.

Gag production in classical Hollywood comedy

Looking back at the first big heyday of gag-based comedy in the 1910s, the most common claim from both comic creators and press of the time was that comedies were unscripted and improvised, depending more on spur of the moment inspiration during production than the careful pre-production work developed for contemporaneous dramatic films. 1918 *Photoplay* stories on comedians from the Keystone studio featured claims from Fatty Arbuckle that comedy was "largely inspirational," using "physical experimentation" on-set in lieu of a written script, and from Louise Fazenda that comedy started "with only the thinnest frame-work of a plot" and developed gags from fortunate accidents or consultations between performers.[1] Even though not specifically referring to gags, *Photoplay* saw comic construction in slapstick functioning in this way as well. Their 1917 claim that "there is no such thing as a scenario or script of a slapstick comedy" helped to explain why twelve to twenty thousand feet of film were reportedly shot for the average slapstick two-reeler, by implication a much higher shooting ratio than for other film types.[2] In later years, comedians continued to perpetuate this approach to creating gag-based comedy, especially for shorts. Buster Keaton told *Photodramatist* in 1921

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1 "'Writing' Comedy with Fatty Arbuckle," *Photoplay*, Apr 1918, p. 49. Allen Corliss, "Fazenda – Comic Venus," *Photoplay*, Apr 1918, p. 67.
2 Alfred A. Cohn, "'Writing Slapstick'," *Photoplay*, Sep 1917, p. 118.

that "we 'write' more with the camera than with the typewriter. In other words, we have one idea

before starting, or perhaps two, say, a start and a finish, and the rest is ad lib," portraying the

script as a "mere skeleton" that the comedian used to guide their improvisation as they

constructed the film.[3] In 1924, Harold Lloyd also claimed that he never worked from scripts on

his films, partly because he claimed comedy as a whole was a largely unscripted form.[4] The

following year, a report on production of *The Freshman* (1925) suggested that Lloyd did not

even have an ending in mind during shooting because he was still creating the film's story.[5]

While that may clash with Keaton's insistence on having a start *and* a finish in mind, many

comics clearly worked to position themselves as intuitively creating gags during the production

of their films.

If these claims seem dubious given our knowledge of the development and spread of

script-based production in the mid-1910s, that is because it is only partially accurate at best.[6] As

scholars have noted in reviewing Keystone production files from the 1910s, there was generally

a far greater degree of scripting and other concrete forms of pre-planning at the studio than the

above quotes imply. Simon Louvish points out that, contrary to popular myth, Keystone films

were in fact extensively scripted by 1915.[7] Synopses for two-reelers may not have fully

described every action, but they provided a written guide for the story, comic situations, and

potential gags while allowing room for a degree of improvisation during production itself. Rob

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3   Harry R. Brand, "Writing Slapstick Comedies," *Photodramatist*, Nov 1921, p. 28.
4   Harold Lloyd, "The Laugh Factory," *The Film Daily*, 22 Jun 1924, p. 97.
5   Dorothy Donnell Calhoun, "Harold Tells on Himself," *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1925, p. 106.
6   For the development of pre-production during the 1910s, see Janet Staiger, "Dividing Labor for Production
    Control: Thomas Ince and the Rise of the Studio System," *Cinema Journal*, 18.2 (Spring 1979), p. 16-25 and
    Staiger "Blueprints for Feature Films: Hollywood's Continuity Scripts," *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino
    Balio, rev. 1985, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, p. 173-192.
7   See Simon Louvish, "Bath-tub Perils: Back to the Clowns," *Keystone: The Life and Clowns of Mack Sennett*,
    New York: Faber and Faber, 2004, p. 125-135.

King's study of Keystone during this time further details the studio's pre-production methods. If they were using rough outlines in 1914 that only sketched the plot (unlike contemporaneous Ince-styled "design blueprint" scripts) and provided no actual gags, by 1915 they had transitioned to outlines detailing specific shots and areas for gags to be inserted, leading to a standardization of both story outlines and a separate "gag sheet" of potential gags for upcoming films.[8] Although Keystone comedies still clearly allowed more room for improvisation and "inspiration" during production than many dramatic narratives of the time, the studio (and presumably other major comic studios as well) was not immune to the growing trend toward scripting and pre-production in the developing Hollywood studio system of the mid-1910s.

However, while there was a great degree of mythmaking during the 10s and 20s, stars and the press did at times also position gag construction as more complex than the simple "off the cuff" myth implied. King notes that comic filmmaking at Keystone was both "rigidly planned and departmentalized" *and* "spontaneous and opportunistic," a reality hinted at in other ways as well.[9] Fatty Arbuckle, in a 1916 *Photoplay* story on the stunts used in his comedies, suggested that he was never hurt performing some of the crazier stunts because they "figure[d] it out on paper" first, indicating that if not technically scripted, at least some gags were carefully planned in pre-production.[10] In later years, silent comedy stars also complicated the idea that they simply improvised their films. Buster Keaton again claimed that he and his co-creators never wrote their stories down in his 1960 memoir *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* before adding that they still had a story *in mind* (and, contra *The Freshman*-era Lloyd, an ending planned out) before they began shooting, hinting at a more realistic, though likely not *fully* accurate, balance between

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8 Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, p. 113-116.
9 King, *Fun Factory*, p. 37
10 Randolph Bartlett, "Why Aren't We Killed?," *Photoplay*, Apr 1916, p. 84.

pre-production planning and ad libs during production.[11] And if at times Lloyd claimed to use

inspiration rather than scripts, at other times he also positioned himself as being at the forefront

of planning out his films as well. In 1924 he told *Exhibitors Trade Review* that he carefully

planned out his scripts and major gags, with "every gag [being] dissected and vivisected" before

shooting, only allowing for the "occasional" ad lib on-set.[12] He later provided a more balanced

characterization of his silent work, claiming in 1969 that, although they never wrote down scripts

until the coming of sound, they still had "a script in our mind, up to a point."[13] While I will

explore some of the reasons for Lloyd's conflicted self-positioning momentarily, the tension here

between the mythologies of inventiveness and the emphasis on careful planning was far from

atypical for other gag creators of this period.

Viewed in another light, Lloyd's shifting insistence in the mid-1920s that he both always

and never worked with a script reflects the changing approach to gag production in Hollywood

in these years. As the studio system continued to move toward an increasingly divided,

hierarchic mode of production, gag-based comedies likewise fell more in line with the scripted,

carefully planned out approach prevalent elsewhere in Hollywood. Although the traditional

narrative of silent gags as anarchic and improvised continued to appear in the discourse of the

time, gag-based comedians who used greater pre-production in their work began to receive more

attention as well. In 1925, *Motion Picture Magazine* specifically pointed to Charley Chase as an

example of a comedian who carefully planned out his material before shooting, and *Picture Play*

Magazine praised Harold Lloyd in 1929 for rising above the comic work of others due, in part, to

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11 Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*, New York: Doubleday, 1960, p. 112.
12 Harold Lloyd, "Comedy as a Serious Subject," *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 16 Aug 1924, p. 23.
13 "Harold Lloyd," interviewed 23 Sep 1969, *Conversations with the Great Moviemakers of Hollywood's Golden
     Age at the American Film Institute*, ed. George Stevens, Jr., New York: Knopf, 2006, p. 11.

the fact that he has "carefully worked out clearly on paper" the details of his films.[14] It was not only the trades and popular press critics that emphasized this shift toward greater planning. Jack White, head of Educational Pictures, detailed to *Exhibitors Herald* in 1926 how comic ideas at his studio had to pass through committees and be dissected for their "comic possibilities" before production, framing the writing of such comedies as a mix of hard work *and* inspiration while also noting how the practicality of gags (in terms of complexity and costs) needed to be considered during this process.[15] All of these point to the adaptability of gag-based comedy in the 1920s as it underwent a clear, if bumpy, transition toward emphasizing pre-production in gag creation that mirrored the emphasis on pre-production within the industry as a whole.

Many factors likely influenced this change, particularly the shift from two-reel shorts to feature-length comedies for many of the era's most prominent comics. However, another key element of this adaptation is the fascinating but short reign of the "gag man." Although a complete account of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this chapter, the establishment, golden age, and decline of the gag man in industry discourse from the early 1920s to the early 1930s is worth briefly sketching out. In one sense, the increase in references to and stories about gag men (and the extremely rare gag women) in the mid-1920s fits as another way in which studios and comedy producers sought to portray their work as fitting in with the now-standardized mode of production.[16] Most frequently part of the writing staff for comedies, though occasionally called upon to add gags to other types of films as well, feature stories by

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14 Alice Tildesley, "Leaders in the Funny Business," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Jul 1925, p. 29. Nat Dyches, "Their Chaplin Complex," *Picture Play Magazine*, Jun 1929, p. 20.

15 Jack White, "Inspiration Plus Perspiration Equals One Comedy, Says White," *Exhibitors Herald*, 31 Jul 1926, p. 50.

16 A search for the terms "gag man" or "gag men" in the Media History Digital Library's Lantern database currently returns 34 results prior to 1922, 205 between 1922 and 1924, and a whopping 715 from 1925-1929, with a steady decline over the rest of the 1930s.

Screenland in 1924 and *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1925 framed gag men as major support personnel for the screen's biggest comics.[17] Unsurprisingly given their source in fan magazines, such profiles mostly concentrated on a behind-the-scenes look at how major comics worked rather than noting the importance of gag men within the studio system. Still, the only partially successful attempts by Paramount head Jesse L. Lasky to rebrand gag men as "comedy constructors" in 1926 highlights how the industry itself attempted to alter discourse and the way the public perceived film comedy production.[18] Rather than simply men who "came up" with gags, the label of "comedy constructor" tried to frame the writing of comedy as a carefully planned and controlled system, using a construction metaphor to help counter the perception of uncontrolled improvisation and spontaneity around some gag-based comics. Gags did not simply "appear" spontaneously during production, then, but were part of deliberate pre-production planning that showed how they could be effective and reliable in the long run.

The coming of sound further altered the role of the gag man within comedy as it continued to shift gags even more definitively toward pre-production rather than production. The aforementioned 1969 Lloyd quote showcases the traditional story of this change, as the technical challenges of shooting with sync sound and the need for a full script to facilitate dialogue tamed the tendency of comics to ad lib or work unscripted during production. The trade press likewise mirrored these changes, as in in a brief 1930 *Film Daily* story describing how Warner Bros. had eliminated "off the cuff" shooting in their comic shorts, with gag men and on-set ad libs replaced by scripts, writers' conferences, and rehearsals.[19] This implies that gag men

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17 H.B.K. Willis, "In the Temples of Tee-Hee," *Screenland*, Jan 1924, p. 28-29, 92, 99. Tildesley, p. 28-29, 109-110.
18 For Lasky's call for the term "comedy constructor," see "Lasky Defines Function of 'Comedy Constructor'," *Moving Picture World*, 2 Jan 1926, p. 73, and "Glorifying the Gag Man," *Motion Picture News*, 9 Jan 1926, p. 154-155.
19 "'Off the Cuff' Shooting Is Out," *The Film Daily*, 21 Sep 1930, p. 22.

were made obsolete by the coming of sound, and numerous other stories reinforced this, with

Variety declaring as early as January 1929 that "gag men cannot deliver for talking short comedy

skits," presumably due to their lack of experience with dialogue-driven comedy and situations.[20]

In 1930, *Picture Play Magazine* praised the greater sanity in sound cinema due to the diminished

status of silent comedy's "Unholy Three" (the director, gag man, and title writer) whom they saw

as suffocating late silent films with superfluous gags and broad comedy irrespective of stars or

genre, suggesting that sound opened up possibilities beyond the (implicitly visual) silent gag.[21]

Further reinforcing this sense of a shift from visual to verbal humor in sound comedy, a 1933

Variety story discussed how some gag men attempted to make a comeback as dialogue directors,

musing that gag men became extinct in part "because it was believed there was no place for him

with all dialog and business filmed exactly as written in the script."[22] Such an observation aligns

gag men with the uncontrolled, in-production improvisation rather than the controlled pre-

production put forth by the studios only a few years before. While the death of the gag man may

have been overstated, as seen in the demand for Al Boasberg throughout the 1930s, this discourse

points to both real and perceived shifts in gag production at the time.[23] Verbal humor and

carefully rehearsed gags became increasingly emphasized as comedy continued to integrate itself

into the studio system's mode of production.

A look at trade press and secondary literature on key performers such as the Marx

Brothers or Laurel and Hardy further shows how the arrival of sound altered gag-based comedy

production in the 1930s. If industry discourse early in the decade emphasized the subjugation of

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20 "Talking Shorts," *Variety*, 2 Jan 1929, p. 15.
21 H.A. Woodmansee, "Farewell to Three Bad Ones," *Picture Play Magazine*, Sep 1930, p. 84-85, 117.
22 "Gagsters Still Gagsters," *Variety*, 3 Jan 1933, p. 3.
23 For more on Boasberg, see Ben Schwartz, "The Gag Man: Being a Discourse on Al Boasberg," *The Film Comedy Reader*, ed. Gregg Rickman, New York: Limelight Editions, 2001, p. 68-104.

in-production gags (at least physical ones) to planning and the written word, a 1937 *Hollywood*

feature on the Marx Brothers framed their approach to gags as a mixture of pre-production work

and spur of the moment inspiration. The magazine emphasized how the Marxes, their director, a

gag man, and a dutiful note-taking secretary held gag conferences, but it also declared the

biggest laughs on-set to be "the unexpected ones," complicating the claim elsewhere that the

Marxes "painstakingly [worked] out, far in advance, their every gag and joke."[24] Although the

story does not explicitly say how much (if any) of this material made it to the films themselves,

Randy Skredvedt cites interviews with Hal Roach, Anita Garvin, and others to showcase how

Stan Laurel often made use of ad libs and other script deviations during the production of Laurel

and Hardy films.[25] According to Skredvedt, Laurel had almost total control over the duo's films

in pre-production and production, using this power to shape the films' stories and shoot them in-

sequence so as to account for expected deviations from the story due to improvisation. Garvin,

who appeared in over a dozen films with the pair from the 1920s to the late 30s, likewise recalls

them using the script only as a loose guide, preferring to discuss gags and other comic material

on-set, shooting them, and then moving on.[26] Although we should take at least some of these

characterizations with a grain of salt, such stories point to a more balanced approach between

production and pre-production than is otherwise implied by contemporaneous discourse.

Are the working methods of the Marxes or Laurel and Hardy representative of other gag-

based performers of the 30s, though? Rob King's 2017 book *Hokum!* implies that others did

indeed use a similarly balanced approach to gag construction for the decade's comedy shorts.[27]

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24 Harry Lang, "A Day at the Races," *Hollywood*, Jun 1937, p. 80, 39.
25 See Randy Skredvedt, "The Method of the Madness," *Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies*, Beverly Hills: Moonstone Press, 1987, p. 49-70, for an in-depth (if not always clearly sourced) discussion of these working methods.
26 Ibid., p. 56.
27 Rob King, *Hokum!: The Early Sound Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture*, Oakland: University of

While sound could make the production of gags more difficult, sound itself could also become a vehicle for gags, both via dialogue and sound effects. Harold Lloyd had already explored this latter approach when he withheld a finished, silent version of his 1929 film *Welcome Danger* to add a sync soundtrack of music and comic sound effects. The early king of slapstick, Mack Sennett, likewise touted in press releases the ability of sound effects to enhance the effectiveness of comedy in his early sound shorts, pointing to a new potential avenue for comic construction.[28] And if the coming of sound brought changes for many filmmakers, others were able to adapt and maintain a degree of continuity with their silent era approaches to gags. Jack White, who had made "fast action" a directorial trademark in earlier years, minimized dialogue and maximized physical action in his early sound shorts to maintain this feature. King also credits Jack's brother, Jules White, with creating greater space for ad-libbing and improvisation in the Three Stooges shorts he directed, recalling the "off the cuff" production style used at times in silent comedy.[29] The adaptations of the Marxes and Laurel and Hardy, balancing between old, in-production methods of gag creation and new, more pre-production focused ones, were thus common across the work of many creating gag-based comedy in the sound era.

Primary documents from the 1940s and 1950s also highlight the continued evolution of these methods over these decades. Although generally known for romantic and social comedies rather than gag-based work, the papers of famed comedy writer I.A.L. Diamond elucidate certain elements of gag creation that point toward the blockbuster era. An early draft of the 1945 Bob Hope/Bing Crosby picture *Road to Utopia* incorporates numerous verbal gags (one-liners, wisecracks) and sight gags (Hope and Crosby's frozen clothes standing up on their own, a bizarre

California Press, 2017.
28 See King, *Hokum!*, p. 101 for quotes from Sennett and his production company on this topic.
29 Ibid., p. 100, 170.

encounter with a penguin on ice skates) that show Diamond treating the picture as gag-based

from the beginning.[30] While Diamond would be replaced by Norman Panama and Melvin Frank

as the film's writer, and sadly these two particular sight gags do not make the finished film, this

approach to conceptualizing and writing down gags across script drafts is even more prevalent in

contemporary comedies. Elsewhere, notes on an early Diamond script draft that would

eventually became the 1952 Howard Hawks' film *Monkey Business* features no less a figure than

Fox head Daryl F. Zanuck proposing additional gag material as the scientist (Barnaby in the film)

watches the chimp (Mr. Hyde in this draft) attempt to recreate the youth formula central to the

film's narrative.[31] This material again does not survive to the finished film (or at least not in this

form), but it presages the ways in which, even beyond the decline of the studio system, the

suggestions and input of prominent producers would continue to carry a great deal of weight in

shaping gags.

In terms of major gag-based comedians and filmmakers near the end of the studio era, a

closer look at production material for the 1955 film *Artists and Models* shows some of the ways

in which figures like Frank Tashlin and Jerry Lewis approached gag production. Script drafts for

the film show that, much like for the Diamond scripts, a good deal of the gags (including the

film's opening and the numerous gags centered around the billboard painting job gone awry)

entered very early on in the writing process, linking back to the traditional studio approach of

carefully scripted pre-production.[32] Perhaps more interesting, however, are the times when there

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30 I.A.L. Diamond, *Road to Utopia* story treatment "Road to Nome," 23 Mar 1942, I.A.L. Diamond Papers, U.S. Mss 109AN box 1 folder 6, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI (hereafter WCFTR.)

31 Daryl F. Zanuck, notes on script for "Darling, I Am Growing Younger," 16 Oct 1951, I.A.L. Diamond Papers, U.S. Mss 109AN box 4 folder 10, WCFTR.

32 See Frank Tashlin, *Artists and Models* third draft (14 Dec 1954) and final draft (23 Feb 1955), Paramount Pictures Scripts, 45.f-A-674 and 46.f-A-679, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Special Collections, Beverly Hills, CA (hereafter MHL).

are gags that appear in early script drafts but not in the finished film. One would include the "switchboard gag," as it is labeled in the film's budget, that is written into both drafts of the script that I reviewed. It calls for Richard, the boy that Eugene meets in the comic book publisher's office, to stick the plugs from a telephone switchboard into Eugene's ears, causing smoke and sparks to pour from his head. The gag appeared to have been shot (for a mere $184), but it is absent from the final film, possibly due to pacing issues or because the gag itself fizzled during shooting.[33] Additionally, one of the film's central gag routines, a trip to a massage parlor where Eugene is bent and twisted around like a pretzel, only appears in a vague form in the script drafts because, as Tashlin notes, it "can only be worked out in actual rehearsal," although each draft does note that the masseuse should be played by a contortionist to help aid the scene's comic possibilities.[34] The tendency to only sketch out certain gag scenes, especially for ones like this that make use of specialized personnel and/or effects, is common in more contemporary comedies as well, providing a link to the more improvisational, collaborative production style of silent comedy that complements the strict emphasis elsewhere on gags more fully developed in pre-production.

One last gag is worth noting for the shifts it goes through from page to screen: a brief, parodic allusion to *Rear Window* (1954) that shows up about three-quarters of the way through the film. Although the gag appears across multiple script drafts over three months, no version of it quite lines up with what appears in the film. A 14 December 1954 draft cites Jimmy Stewart by name as showing up, but does not include the dialogue that directly cites the Hitchcock film ("of course I can't see so well from this rear window") in the final version of *Artists and*

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33 See third draft (14 Dec 1954), p. 46 for a description of this gag. For budgets, see *Artists and Models* costs 1955-1957, Paramount Pictures Production Records, 17.f-203, MHL.
34 Third draft (14 Dec 1954), p. 83.

Models.[35] By the 23 February 1955 draft, Jimmy Stewart had unsurprisingly been replaced by an instruction to get an undoubtedly much easier to obtain Stewart soundalike, but it too still does not contain the explicitly referential "rear window" line.[36] Given that, unfortunately, these production and script files do not tell when this portion of the gag was added, we can only speculate on the reasons for the addition, although it seems plausible that its genesis had to do with enhancing the gag's ease of uptake for the audience members by adding a more explicit, verbal cue. Nevertheless, it is worth noting given how we will soon see further issues around reflexivity and referentiality, and concerns about their legibility, in gag production. Together, all of these examples from across the classical Hollywood era showcase how the production of gags adapted to a variety of pre-production and production contexts as they attempted to navigate shifting industrial and technological currents to maintain their place within the studio system.

Gag Production in Blockbuster Era Hollywood Comedy

If this gives a sense of the ways in which gag production operated and adapted during the classical Hollywood era, how has gag creation continued to evolve across the blockbuster era? Changes in production due to the break up of the studio system, different production practices for varying budgets and filmmakers from a diverse array of comic backgrounds, and the rise of special effects-dependent comedies have all undoubtedly played a role in shaping recent gag creation. However, while these factors led to numerous changes in the production of gags, a closer look reveals a complex interplay between change *and* continuity as gag creation resiliently adapted. In terms of continuity, some of the methods for creating gags in contemporary Hollywood comedy bear a striking resemblance to those from earlier eras. Although we have

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35 Ibid., p. 92.

36 Final draft (23 Feb 1955), p. 86. As far as I can tell, Stewart was not filming elsewhere at this time, since production on his next film, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, would not begin until May 1955, but it remains plausible that he may have been occupied with pre-production for that film and thus unavailable for the cameo.

seen how the self mythologizing of silent film comedians as making it all up on-set as they went

along was problematic, improvisation in production did play a role in silent gags. And if recent

gag-based comedy remains heavily dependent on pre-production, we still find examples of

filmmakers continuing to use surprisingly similar approaches to creating gags during production.

This is particularly true of Joe Dante, with numerous stories framing him as a director who

makes use of a highly collaborative, improvisation-friendly approach in crafting comedy. For his

early, lower budget films, this may be somewhat less surprising. Dante relates telling Keenan

Wynn to improvise most of his dialogue and jokes for *Piranha* (1978), while *Penthouse* details

Dante's penchant for on-set improvisation while serving as an emergency director of scenes for

1979's *Rock and Roll High School*.[37] However, this approach remains for Dante's later, higher

profile and higher budget Hollywood work as well. In one example, a *Cinefex* story on *The

Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983) describes how makeup and mechanical effects lead Rob Bottin

helped to brainstorm gags for Dante's segment of the film.[38] In another, the press kit for

Gremlins 2: The New Batch has production designer James Spencer giving credit for gag ideas to

himself, Dante, DP John Hora, and more, noting that any effective piece of comic action

suggested could make it into the film because "that's how movies with Joe are made."[39] Even

though Dante's production context greatly changed between his early, Roger Corman-produced

films and his later, Steven Spielberg-produced ones, Dante adapted and remained surprisingly

constant in utilizing this traditional, collaborative approach to create in production gags.

 We can further see this approach in the gag-centric Dorry's Tavern sequence in 1984's

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37 Paul Mandell interview with Joe Dante, Jon Davison and Jon Berg, *Cinefantastique* magazine records, 67.f-1302, p. 7, MHL. Michael Goodwin, "Roger Corman's Rock 'N' Roll High School: The Last of the Red-Hot Cheapies," *Penthouse*, date unknown, p. 194.
38 Don Shay and Paul Sammon, "Shadow and Substance," *Cinefex*, Oct 1983, p. 55-56.
39 *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* press kit, p. 8, *Cinefantastique* Magazine Records, 36.f-705, MHL.

Gremlins. In discussing the scene, producer Michael Finnell told *Cinefex* that "*everybody* came up with ideas," including grips and effects personnel, tallying up over two hundred suggestions that Dante reviewed before finalizing gags for the sequence.[40] Production notes from the film reinforce this approach, as a post-production shot list for the film simply describes the sequence as "various shots of Gremlins T.B.D." with handwritten marginal notes (seemingly by Dante) stating "Go to sets Bring puppets, talk."[41] Later post-production schedules further emphasize this slowly coalescing, gag-centric approach: a 1 September schedule again contains handwritten notes calling for "GAGS!," with a handful of potential ideas below, and a 27 September shooting schedule provides a finalized gag list with a number of gags recognizable from the sequence in the finished film.[42] Taken together, these secondhand accounts and primary documents highlight Dante's use of this improvisational approach for the production of even his most gag-heavy scenes, ones frequently involving large crews and complicated mechanical effects.

If Dante connects well with this strain of classical gag creation, other gag-based filmmakers show a greater affinity with the script-based, pre-production focused approach to crafting gags. At one extreme, this is perhaps best exemplified by the David Zucker-Jim Abrahams-Jerry Zucker (hereafter ZAZ) filmmaking team, who position themselves as carefully planning and writing out *all* of their myriad visual and verbal gags ahead of time. In the wake of their success with *Airplane!*, Abrahams told *Screen International* that the group "knew exactly what we wanted to see" and asked the crew on-set to simply help them realize their vision,

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40 Paul M. Sammon, "Never Feed Them After Midnight," *Cinefex*, Nov 1984, p. 32. Emphasis in original.

41 Handwritten notes on post-production shot list, 30 Aug 1983, p.6, *Gremlins* Post-production schedules & info, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 10, MHL. Underlining in original. I believe these to be Dante's notes given that most of the files in this container seem to be from the Dante, rather than the Finnell, collection.

42 Handwritten note on post-production shooting schedule, 1 Sep 1983, p. 6. Underlining and capitalization in original. *Gremlins* post-production shooting schedule, 27 Sep 1983, p. 1. Both Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 10, MHL.

further claiming that they "spent three months in pre-production planning out each shot and all the sets."[43] All of these comment imply a clearly top-down, fully planned out approach to gags that stands in stark contrast to some of the most gag-heavy moments in Dante's work. As we will later see, early scripts for *Airplane!* generally (though not completely) confirm Abrahams' characterization of the group as carefully planning out gags prior to shooting. An early (Dec 1982) draft of the 1984 ZAZ film *Top Secret!* also reinforces this approach, as many of the film's sight gags (the switch image gag of a train seeming to leave the station revealed to instead be the train platform moving away on a flatbed trailer; flying people landing on a giant pigeon statue; a Ford Pinto exploding at the slightest tap) are already present.[44] While it makes sense to plan out some of these well in advance given the props, sets, and effects work needed for them, the presence of many (though not all) of the other smaller visual and verbal gags still highlights the carefully controlled way in which the ZAZ team approached gags in their films.

Along similar lines, Mel Brooks, arguably the early blockbuster era's most famous gag-based filmmaker, also favored scripting gags in pre-production rather than on-set. Brooks told *Film Comment* in 1975 that he shot scripts for *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *The Producers* (1967) word for word because "you can improvise with rhythms and motions during rehearsals, but not with lines," pointing to a primacy of the written word for his verbal gags and, implicitly, many of his visual gags as well.[45] The same interview also describes the writing of *Blazing Saddles* in strikingly similar terms to the 1937 Marx Brothers story, as various writers held story meetings and bounced ideas off each other while a secretary went "crazy trying to take everything down."[46] This reinforces how Brooks and his writers preferred to work out their improvisation

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43 Adrian Hodges, "A Flying Start for the 'Airplane!' Directors," *Screen International*, 23 Aug 1980, p. 13.
44 ZAZ, Martyn Burke, *Top Secret!* Dec 1982 script draft, Paramount Pictures Scripts, 1043.f-T-725, MHL.
45 Jacoba Atlas, "Mel Brooks," *Film Comment*, 11.2 (Mar-Apr 1975), p. 56.
46 Ibid., p. 55. This likely also draws from Brooks' previous experience as a writer for *Your Show of Shows* (NBC,

and ad libs as part of the pre-production writing process rather than on-set. Much like the ZAZ

team, a review of scripts for Brooks' own work, in this case the 1987 film *Spaceballs*, largely

confirms this approach to gag creation. From early drafts, scripts often describe even small

chicken fat gags (such as the bumper stickers and paraphernalia on the exterior of Lone Starr's

Space Winnebago) as well as visual gags both large (the transformation of the Spaceball ship into

a giant robot maid) and relatively small (the reflexive moment where Dark Helmet and his

minions watch themselves watching themselves on a video tape of the film) in a high degree of

detail.[47] Although I will later focus on reasons why some of these elements were so carefully

prepared, as well as other gags that did *not* survive into the film itself, these show how Brooks

largely fits with the scripted, pre-production emphasis on gag creation seen in classical comedy.

Of course, other gags have adapted to display a combination of both continuity and

change in regard to gag construction. While the fallout of the 1948 Paramount decree means that

the role of contemporary producers is often quite different from classical-era moguls like Louis

B. Mayer, Harry Cohn, or Daryl F. Zanuck, producers can still take a hands-on role in shaping

gags. In the lower budget realm, Paul Bartel colorfully describes how he and producer/New

World head Roger Corman clashed over the tone of 1975's *Death Race 2000*, as Bartel conceived

of it as blackly comic, outrageous, and cartoonish while Corman insisted that it should be a more

realistic, "serious comedy."[48] In a letter to Ted Sills of AIP, Bartel focuses on the film's potential

for a variety of gags before moving on to discuss its "dramatic core," implying that he saw it as a

gag-based comedy first and a dramatic narrative second.[49] Bartel also relates how Corman

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1950-1954), as such descriptions mirror the similarly chaotic methods of pre-production in many TV comedy writers' rooms.

47 Mel Brooks, Thomas Meehan, and Ronny Graham, *Spaceballs* 19 Mar 1986 script draft, John Candy papers, 25.f-217, MHL.

48 Paul Bartel notes on *Death Race 2000*, Paul Bartel papers, 4.f-47, p. 1-2, MHL.

49 Paul Bartel letter to Ted Sills (Vice President, Creative Affairs, AIP), 2 Jul 1975, p. 2, Paul Bartel Papers, 4.f-47,

argued against the film's fake tunnel gag, one that drew directly from Chuck Jones' Roadrunner

cartoons, because it wouldn't be "real" enough. Bartel countered that the film was already on the

level of a cartoon and that audiences, especially kids, would love to see a live-action version of

this familiar gag.[50] Although Corman objected, Bartel ultimately won the day and the gag

remains in the final film. Such producer influence appears in big-budget films as well.

Production documents do show how numerous personnel, both above and below the line, came

up with ideas for various gags in *Gremlins*, but DP John Hora also specifically notes how

producer Steven Spielberg helped add gags during post-production. Hora credits the brief

glimpse of a breakdancing gremlin in Dorry's Tavern to "one of Steven's last minute inspirations"

and notes that it was one of the very last things shot for the film.[51] As we will later see for

Gremlins 2, production documents again show Spielberg taking a small, but important, role in

shaping gags for that film. The role of producers may have changed since the classical era, then,

but they can still serve to dictate and shape elements of gag construction.

 We also see continuity and change in the use of referential gags in blockbuster era

comedy. In one respect, the use of intertextual references for gags has become increasingly

prevalent in recent decades. Simply compare the relative rarity of gags like the Rosebud sled

from 1941's *Citizen Kane* showing up in the same year's *Hellzapoppin'*, or the *On the Road* films'

direct references to previous gags in the series, to the barrage of references and allusions in the

Gremlins films, the *Scary Movie* franchise and its ilk, and innumerable other comedies.[52] At the

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MHL.

50 Ibid., p. 3-4.

51 Paul M. Sammon, "John Hora and *Gremlins*," *American Cinematographer*, Nov 1984, p. 77. I should note that, although Hora claims Spielberg had the *idea* for the gag, editor Tina Hirsch takes credit for making it work via her editing of the footage in Vincent LoBrutto, *Selected Takes: Film Editors on Editing*, New York: Praeger, 1991, p. 192-193.

52 Of course, this is a phenomenon that has been well noted outside of the realm of gags (or even comedy), especially in Noël Carroll's "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," *October*, 20

same time, though, some concerns about referential gags remain more or less stable. If the differences between early scripted versions of the *Rear Window* gag in *Artists and Models* discussed earlier and the final version in the film hint at uncertainty about the audiences' ease of uptake in getting the joke, we see similar concerns in contemporary gag-based comedies. While *Artists and Models* was not able to get the originally scripted choice of Jimmy Stewart for their *Rear Window* gag, *Spaceballs*' parody of *Alien* (1979) went the opposite route: none of the film's early drafts call for John Hurt himself (only a Hurt lookalike) to appear as part of the gag, and none of them include his line "oh no, not again!" following the alien emerging from his chest.[53] Not only does this point to a late casting coup to get Hurt to essentially reprise his *Alien* character, but it also hints at a desire to include Hurt and the "not again" line to both increase the humor for those who understand the reference *and* to ensure that audiences would more easily get the joke.

In addition, while the rising importance of effects work in both quantity (compared to the amount typically needed in a classical comedy feature) and type (the increased use of puppetry and computer animation) has greatly changed gag production, they have been adapted to align with methods from earlier eras of comedy as well. Dante's approach to creating gags during production serves as a prime example of melding the kinds of collaborative brainstorming present in silent and early sound comedy with complex effects comedies. Chris Walas, designer of the gremlins themselves and an overseer of on-set special effects, told *Cinefex* in 1984 that he and the other puppet operators would frequently start improvising and holding conversations in-character with the gremlin puppets during shooting breaks, allowing them "to get natural

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(Spring 1982), p. 51-81.

53 See 19 Mar 1986, 30 Jul 1986, 24 Oct 1986, and 19 Nov 1986 *Spaceballs* drafts, John Candy papers, 25.f-217 thru 25.f-220, MHL.

reactions" from the puppets more easily.[54] This even led to impromptu moments, such as Stripe blowing his nose on the Peltzer's drapes before escaping their home after attacking Lynn, that were shot and included in the finished film. The moment is also noteworthy for the ways in which it points to a concept I unpack more shortly, the give and take between gags based around performance and those based around effects, as Stripe, an effects-based character, has a rare gag dependent upon his "performance" rather than his placement within larger gag structures.

Various *American Cinematographer* stories on *The Muppet Movie* (1979) likewise tell of moments where the effects crew had to deal with issues akin to the kinds faced by classical Hollywood filmmakers. In discussing the film's optical effects, Joseph Westheimer reveals that the "pie shot" (a gag where the Muppet car hits a billboard of a woman holding a giant pie that is then flung back at Doc Hopper's pursuing car) needed to be reshot several times because the pie itself "must have weighed 600 pounds" and simply fell down rather than flew away when the billboard was struck.[55] Gravity thus necessitated that the filmmakers use careful edits and split screen mattes to "show" the pie being flung through the air. An interview with special effects lead Robbie Knott also highlighted how the film's effects crew used basic, classical techniques, such as manipulations via monofilament wire, to pull off numerous Muppet-related gags like Kermit's bicycle ride.[56] Knott also claimed that there was no script when the film started, recounting examples of how his effects crew needed to plan and equip a more or less mobile, "fully-equipped shop" to allow them to deal with sudden scripting decisions or changes. This shop meant that the crew could "just sort of pull these gags out of a hat" and produce the 6-foot pie and mechanical billboard to toss it less then a week after being asked to add it to the film.[57]

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54 Sammon, "Never Feed," p. 25.
55 Joseph Westheimer, "Optical Magic for 'The Muppet Movie'," *American Cinematographer*, Jul 1979, p. 724.
56 "Mechanical Special Effects for 'The Muppet Movie'," *American Cinematographer*, Jul 1979, p. 676.
57 Ibid., p. 684, 676.

As with *Gremlins*, these examples point to the continued role of improvisation during production and spur of the moment flexibility in realizing gags, even for modern, effects heavy comedies that would seem to offer little room for such an approach.

They also point to how effects personnel at times "perform" gags more than human actors do in effects-based comedy, and the increasing importance of special effects and other technologies clearly stands as one of the biggest changes for gag production in blockbuster era Hollywood comedy. Although effects themselves have changed greatly from the 1970s to the present day, especially when considering the differences between practical, analog effects and digital, computer generated imagery (CGI), the overall impact of effects work has led to a number of broad changes in gag creation. For instance, the great number of personnel and the mechanical complexities inherent in creating effects gags bring with them a variety of potential pitfalls. For practical effects like those in the Muppet or *Gremlins* films, this revolves around the sheer amount of people and equipment needed on-set. John Hora claimed that there were "upwards of thirty people" from Chris Walas' effects crew for some shots in Dorry's Tavern, while a press kit for the film by Rob Harris likewise claimed that the gremlins required up to fifteen puppeteers working up to thirty-two character facial muscles to help them come across as "real" creatures.[58] Even though the popularity of puppets in TV and film of the 1970s and 1980s meant that there were likely sufficient personnel to operate them, the sheer number of people needing to work in sync to pull off gags meant that there was a greater possibility of errors or cost overruns as well. Especially for a scene like Dorry's Tavern, the importance of such specialized personnel compared with the relatively small number of people working together for

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58 Sammon, "John Hora," p. 82. Rob Harris, *Gremlins* press kit, *Gremlins* Production Information, p. 46, Rob Harris Papers, MHL.

many of classical comedy's gags would require careful coordination and further adaptation.

We can also see the impact of the increased need for personnel and coordination in conjunction with practical effects by examining how individual gags were shot. Take the gag in *Gremlins* where Lynn disposes of an attacking gremlin in her kitchen by blending it into a gooey puree: the film's effects crew not only had to shoot the gremlin puppet coming out of the blender and reverse the footage to effectively show it climbing into the device, but they also had to rig up a complicated system involving motors, an aircraft-derived piston, and multiple valves (among other things) to successfully spin the creature around and spray its guts across the kitchen.[59] Later in the film, as the villainous Mrs. Deagle meets her fate at the hands of a sabotaged stair-lift, effects engineer Bob McDonald and his crew had to create a twenty-five foot ramp rigged up to a large air compressor to (literally) propel this gag. They also had to come up with a hooking system that would automatically disengage when the chair and the dummy substituting for Mrs. Deagle in it reached the top of the ramp, hurling them out into the street.[60] While I do not know the cost of all of this, suffice to say it would likely dwarf the few hundred dollars spent on specific gags for *Artists and Models,* all in the service of one brief (if highly memorable) gag. For *The Muppet Movie*, Joseph Westheimer was quick to say that "there was nothing new" in the composite work necessary to capture Kermit and Fozzie dancing on stage before a (human) crowd. Nevertheless, he describes not only the work needed to pull this off (shooting the puppets and their puppeteers, all dressed in black, in front of an all-black velvet background before compositing this material with the rest of the shot) but also why this option was a better choice than rotoscoping (too difficult) or using a blue screen (where puppeteers would still be in

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59 Sammon, "Never Feed," p. 24.
60 Ibid., p. 30.

the way), again showcasing the amount of work needed for a relatively brief moment.[61]

Undoubtedly, many of these effects are rooted in previous Hollywood practices. But they also

point to a change in the *way* practical effects gags needed to be approached before and during

production to effectively implement them efficiently and cost-effectively.

Later blockbuster era films that use practical effects (at least in part) for gags face similar,

if not even greater and more complex, challenges. Dante's 1998 film *Small Soldiers* may have

used a good deal of CGI, but it also included a great deal of puppet work, necessitating a degree

of effects crew personnel and technology to pull off such complex work akin to that required on

Gremlins (and, as we shall see later, *Gremlins 2*). Although CGI eased some of the burden of by

erasing wires or rods used to manipulate puppets, a *Cinefex* story on the film's effects still notes a

need for multiple puppeteers (up to four or five) to operate certain puppets. It goes on to

describe the "chaotic" nature of group scenes with multiple toy characters needing fourteen to

twenty-three puppeteers, thirty-four radio transmitters, fifty-two unique radio frequencies, and

seventy-two radio receivers to coordinate all of the puppets' actions.[62] Such a complex

arrangement would make careful pre-production planning essential, and even then, the range of

potential gags would likely be reduced from the *Gremlins* films (or at least made far more

difficult) given the sheer amount of equipment to work around. Similarly, for the 2011 franchise

reboot of *The Muppets*, the decision to follow the original's use of practical puppets brought up

its own challenges for gag implementation. Director James Bobin told *Empire* magazine that

many of his favorite gags involved "things going on in the background" (essentially chicken fat

gags) that were "hard to do with puppets unless you have a conveniently placed barrel" to hide

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61 Westheimer, p. 706.
62 Jody Duncan, "A Small Soldiers Story," *Cinefex*, 75 (Oct 1998), p. 110.

the puppeteers, especially given the film's conscious aversion to CGI.[63] If directors like Dante

and Bobin wanted to incorporate more puppets or other practical effects *and* pack more gags into

each shot, then, the difficulty of doing so only increased.

Of course, these changes not only made gags more complicated but could also greatly add

to their cost. Some of *Artists and Models*' more complicated gags, such as the eliminated

switchboard gag or the hot water bottle gag and water cooler gag (both of which made the final

film), still only cost a combined $823 (in terms of prop costs), or .00048 percent of the film's

final cost of $1.701 million.[64] By contrast, a fairly brief gag from *The Flintstones* (1994)

featuring Dino the dinosaur in a conga line cost about $95,000, or .00208 percent of the film's

reported budget of about $45.5 million, over four times the proportional cost of the three *Artists*

and Models gags for a moment that *American Cinematographer* described as memorable but

"throwaway."[65] While there are, of course, myriad factors that complicate this as an *exact*

comparison of gag costs, interviews, production documents, and script drafts likewise point to

cost concerns for effects gags. These costs seem to be a primary reasons (if not the main one) for

why some gags disappear in later script drafts, especially for a few major gag sequences that

only appear in early drafts of the 1976 disaster film parody *The Big Bus* and ZAZ's *Top Secret!* A

24 January 1975 memo proposing cuts for *The Big Bus* singles out an early attempt to stop the

runaway bus in Springfield that is drafted with numerous cars crashing and pinballing into and

off of each other, likely at great cost and difficulty. Instead, the memo asks it to be replaced by

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63 Nick de Semlyen, "The Muppets," *Empire*, Feb 2012, p. 94.

64 For *Artists and Models* prop costs and final production budget, see *Artists and Models* costs 1955-1957, Paramount Pictures Production Records, 17.f-203, MHL.

65 For conga line gag cost, see Kent Beyda, handwritten note, *The Flintstones* notes circa 1994, Kent Beyda Papers, 2.f-27, MHL. *Flintstones* budget gathered from averaging the reported budgets on Box Office Mojo ($46 million) and The Numbers ($45 million) websites. For "throwaway gag" comment, see Ron Magid, "ILM Meets *The Flintstones*," *American Cinematographer*, Jul 1994, p. 64.

an attempt that uses foam to try and slow down the vehicle, as we see in the final film.[66] For *Top Secret!*, an initial draft describes a massive battle between Germans and the French resistance where both sides have the same idea: rig up a number of their fallen comrades to look like they are still alive and have them mount a diversionary attack against the enemy, leading to an all-out, darkly comic battle between two armies of the dead.[67] The difficulties of actually filming such an encounter, and the concomitant effects, crew, and costs it would incur, all likely explain why not a trace of it survives into the final film. Other gags likely cost too much in terms of salaries or licensing rights to make them feasible. The same *Top Secret!* draft includes a gag cameo by Paul McCartney in an East German jail that was cut, while early drafts of *Spaceballs* specify that Princess Vespa listens to a Prince song on her headphones, a punning reference (as a Princess listens to a Prince) that changes to the generic music we get in the film itself by later drafts.[68] Although not directly stated, in both cases it seems logical to assume that the price for getting a former Beatle or a Prince song at the height of his popularity heavily factored into why these minor gags were axed.

　　Interviews, memos, and more also explicitly reveal how costs helped shape decisions about gags using practical or other pre-digital effects. A *USA Today* story on the making of *Small Soldiers* claimed that a single shot involving the film's puppets could cost up to $60,000, likely for the reasons of complexity cited above.[69] Such costs would further add difficulty to realizing gags involving the puppets; it is plausible that Dante and other collaborators would be far more hesitant to simply brainstorm and ad lib gags for puppet scenes when a single error

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66 Memo from Marc Trabulus to Robin French re: 'The Big Bus' Suggested Cuts, 24 Jan 1975, Paramount Pictures Scripts, 82.f-B-380, MHL.
67 ZAZ, Martyn Burke, *Top Secret!* Dec 1982 draft, MHL.
68 Ibid. For the Prince gag, see Brooks, Meehan, Graham 19 Mar 1986 draft, p. 20-21.
69 Claudia Puig, "A 'Small Soldiers' Battle Plan," *USA Today*, 10 Jul 1998, Life section.

could lose the film $50,000 or more. For *Spaceballs*, visual effects supervisor Peter Donen told *American Cinematographer* that he and Brooks attempted to differentiate between $100,000 and $10,000 jokes based on the costs and complexities of implementing effects for each of the film's "joke shots" (gags not impacting the narrative). Invoking classical studio wisdom, Brooks would tell Donen that a joke is "not a $50,000 joke, it's only a $25,000 joke" and would only be kept if it could be done at the lower price tag.[70] Even more specifically, a 20 August 1986 memo to the *Spaceballs* filmmakers called for the replacement of a "light net" tractor beam proposed in early drafts with the final film's "magnetic beam," needing only a single beam of light rather than the complex set of overlapping lights described for the original effect.[71] Although the memo does not say it in so many words, it seems clear that the second type of tractor beam would be a cheaper, easier effect, albeit one that is also less playfully parodic of the types of tractor beams seen in other science fiction media. Here we see the limits of the adaptability for effects gags as cost concerns win out over humor.

If practical effects have created their own issues and opportunities for gags, the rise of digital effects like CGI since the mid-1990s create a separate but overlapping set of concerns. While the necessities of shooting with complicated practical effects in gag-based comedies may call for the input of numerous effects personnel, digital effects can further complicate this division of labor. Scenes with puppets in *Gremlins* or *Small Soldiers* may call for up to a couple dozen puppet operators, but a film like *Scooby-Doo* (2002) with numerous gags involving its eponymous, CGI character may need over a dozen separate effects *companies* to create such gags.[72] And while the optical supervisor for *Spaceballs* may liken the proper combination of

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70 Ron Magid, "Satirical Effects for *Spaceballs*," *American Cinematographer*, Dec 1987, p. 58.

71 Memo from Dan Kolsrud to all concerned, re: The Light Net, 20 Aug 1986, John Candy Papers, 25.f-222, MHL.

72 The credits for *Scooby-Doo* list eight different effects companies as contributing to the film, while *Scooby-Doo 2* lists fifteen separate effects companies.

different matte techniques (conventional blue screen, reverse blue screen, roto-mattes, and more) to "a giant jigsaw puzzle," these pale in comparison to the array of variables necessary to create a CGI gag: a) the status of temp shots; b) different CG animation types and the feasibility of each; c) background elements; d) choreography (between CG and live-action elements or between CGI and other effects); e) timing; f) virtual lenses; *and* g) the communication needed among effects companies to ensure that all of these variables remain in sync.[73] If the use of increasingly complex practical effects is one major change for creating gag-based comedy compared to classical Hollywood, the use of digital effects and CGI only amplifies this trend even further.

This is also evident in examples of specific gags that highlight the increasingly fuzzy division of labor and complicated workflow of digital effects. For *Small Soldiers*, while the complexity of the film's puppets may be reminiscent of other, earlier Dante films, its mixture of practical and digital effects altered its approach to gags in other ways. A *Cinefex* story on the film discusses how various gags for CGI versions of the toy characters were often "first introduced in animatics, then presented to Dante and [producer Michael] Finnell for approval," providing another avenue for the kind of collaborative gag brainstorming common to Dante's films. However, the story also notes that Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), responsible for the film's digital work, often operated separately from Dante and other live-action crew, with Dante mentioning how ILM would add unsolicited jokes, gags, and other humorous touches for each of the toy characters.[74] Though Dante is positioned as being happy with ILM's additions to the film's humor, this disconnect between the live-action/practical effects filmmakers and the digital personnel certainly may have been one of the elements leading to Dante's oft-expressed

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73 Magid, "Satirical Effects", p. 62. List of CGI variables taken from a review of *Scooby-Doo* visual effects binder #1, Kent Beyda Papers, 5.f-83 and 5.f-84, MHL.
74 Duncan, p. 109, 114.

frustrations with the film's production. And while production files for *Scooby-Doo* shed little light on how director Raja Gosnell felt about the film's digital animators helping to shape its gags, effects dailies from visual effects producer Kurt Williams show how digital work could affect the film's humor. The dailies highlight areas where CGI gags could be included (as in suggesting gag covers for a magazine Scooby reads on an airplane) and critique the timing of elements for a "sandwich gag" to ensure that the digital effects team could maximize the gag's humor.[75] Although these suggestions are hit and miss in making the final film (the magazine does not feature any kind of gag cover, but the sandwich gag seems to follow most, if not all, of the suggestions made), they further showcase how various post-production personnel also have a role in shaping gags for digital effects-driven comedies, continuing to shift the role of gag creation further toward post-production than was generally the case in the classical period.

Of course, such digital work does not come cheap, further exacerbating the need to keep gag costs in mind. While part of the $95,000 cost for the previously mentioned conga line gag from *The Flintstones* may be due to the high-priced presence of co-star Elizabeth Taylor in the shot, most (if not all) of this figure is likely due to the fact that Dino is a CGI character.[76] The decision to make Dino a CG rather than a practical effects character may have provided some new opportunities for gags, but it likely also added great cost to the scenes with Dino, forcing filmmakers to limit his onscreen presence in some shots to minimize costly digital work in post.[77]

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75 Dailies notes from Kurt Williams to Anthony Zierhut, 20 Sep 2001, OL-67, p. 3, visual effects binder #1, MHL. Dailies notes to Michele Valillo at Rhythm & Hues, 10 Sep 2001, DM-15, p. 2, visual effects binder # 1, MHL. The gag has Scooby running from a ghost, passing a sandwich, and doubling back to grab the sandwich before continuing his escape.

76 While Magid's *American Cinematographer* piece on the film claims the crew could only shoot one take of the gag due to Taylor's involvement ("ILM Meets", p. 64), the Beyda note on the film's cost comes from the context of an editor/post-production specialist, making it more plausible that his figure refers to the effects work *in toto* rather than including Taylor's salary.

77 Take, for instance, the sequence where Dino jumps on Fred to welcome him home right after the opening credits: it consists of 23 shots, 6 of which feature no clear trace of Dino, 7 which appear to use practical effects (i.e. puppets) for Dino, 4 from Dino's POV (sometimes with practical effects elements visible at the periphery), and 6

Other production documents likewise imply that suggested gags were not used due to the cost of implementing them for digital characters. For instance, screenwriter James Gunn's late 2003 story notes on *Scooby-Doo 2* (2004) often center around suggestions for how to handle various jokes and gags in the film, especially in relation to Scooby himself, and a memo from the film's creative team following a 19 Jan 2004 screening suggests adding comedy in the film's third reel by incorporating additional reaction shots from Scooby.[78] However, a handwritten note from an unknown source on this latter memo simply states "can't do" by the call for additional Scooby reaction shots.[79] While I can only speculate as to why these comic elements could not be added, the impact of Scooby being a digital character on both the film's costs and its post-production timings (given that it was only two months away from release at this point) seem plausible reasons for why these suggestions by the creative team, and some of Gunn's other suggestions, were not or could not be implemented for the finished film.

Naturally, these issues of time and cost are deeply intertwined, and this became an increasingly important factor for gag-based comedies using digital effects in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While *The Flintstones* only needed a few dozen CG shots for its small number of digital characters, by 2000's *The Adventures of Rocky & Bullwinkle*, filmmakers needed help with over 400 shots involving the digitally animated lead duo.[80] And even for a film like 2001's *Monkeybone* that eschewed CG in favor of practical, stop-motion effects for the eponymous

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shots that seem to use a CGI Dino. It should also be noted that the practical effects and POV shots are reserved for moments where only part of Dino is visible, with most of the CGI shots showing Dino's full body. Thus, the sequence seems to have been shot with this in mind, emphasizing a number of shorter and POV shots using practical effects to limit the CGI to a few, longer lasting shots.

78 See James Gunn's notes from 18 Sep 2003; memo to Raja Gosnell and Richard [likely Suckle] re: notes on screening, Scooby ideas, 18 Nov 2003, especially p. 5-7, which largely center around comic material for Scooby; and memo from WB Creative to File, 20 Jan 2004, all under *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed* editing notes, Kent Beyda Papers, 5.f-95, MHL.

79 WB Creative, 20 Jan 2004, p. 3.

80 Michael Mallory, "Drawn for Stardom," *Millimeter*, Aug 2000, p. 10.

character, over 600 animation shots still involved some kind of digital work, meaning that both practical effects on-set *and* in post-production needed to be accounted for when creating gags.[81] As I will demonstrate further in the next chapter, gag comedy was by this time increasingly prevalent in films combining live-action and animation or other effects, making digital work even more central to gag creation. This increase in digital effects across Hollywood had other effects as well: a *Variety* story from the summer of 2003 blames the digital effects glut with causing delays and driving up costs at various effects studios because seemingly everything, even traditionally effects-lite films (2003's *Legally Blonde 2*) or genres (romcoms), still needed digital work done on hundreds of shots.[82] For CG gag-based comedy, this also led to an increased recognition of the importance of digital effects crews, with *Variety* going so far as to credit the return of visual effects supervisor Peter Crosman in *Scooby-Doo 2* with being "just as important, if not more so" than the return of the first film's acting leads.[83] Even with the difficulties and complexities that digital effects could have on comedy, then, many studios, producers, and filmmakers still saw it as worth the time and cost.

Why might this be the case? A brief look at some of the discourse around the use of digital gags hints at potential answers to this question. Some within the industry, such as the venerable Ron Magid of *American Cinematographer*, saw digital effects as a comic boon because the "malleability" of these special effects meant that a shot or sequence could, theoretically, "be tweaked ad infinitum to achieve the ultimate comic effect."[84] In practice, of course, cost and time pressures mean that this is far from the case, but digital effects do offer a powerful, highly adaptable tool to adjust, or even create, gags and alter their all-important timing in post-

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81 Ibid., p. 12.
82 Marc Graser, "F/X Gridlock Seizes Studios," *Variety*, 30 Jun 2003, p. 1, 49.
83 Joe Leydon, "Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed," *Variety*, 29 Mar 2004, p. 81.
84 Ron Magid, "Handy in a Crisis," *American Cinematographer*, Aug 1999, p. 68.

production. Others pointed to new opportunities and challenges CGI created for realism when

compared with the traditional animation and effects used for gags. In deciding to use CGI rather

than practical effects for Kitty in *The Flintstones*, ILM's Mark A. Z. Dippé noted how the

difficulties of rendering fur (compared to the leathery dinosaur skin of his previous film, 1993's

Jurassic Park) were a huge initial hurdle for realistically recreating the TV show's closing gag of

Fred putting Kitty out for the night.[85] For Dino, the effects team faced the issue of balancing his

"cartoony" qualities with making him a CGI version of the "real thing," keeping clear aspects of

the former while being careful not to go so far that "suddenly he wouldn't be real anymore."[86]

And while these concerns apply to many early CGI works, as the difficulties of rendering

elements like fur or hair at least partly explain Pixar's choice of toys as protagonists for their

1988 short *Tin Toy* and the 1995 feature *Toy Story*, we continue to see this struggle between

cartoon artificiality and realism years later in notes on the effects for *Scooby-Doo*. One memo to

effects studio Rhythm & Hues calls for a shot of Scooby to be "more realistic and dog-like"

rather than "cartoon-like" in its exaggerated use of the dog's tongue for a gag while another

memo wants a different shot's CGI demon to have cartoony "big saucer eyes" to "help the gag"

as it explodes after being exposed to sunlight.[87] These examples highlight the constant tension

between digital effects' ability to add realism to comedy and the danger of them becoming

distracting and too obviously *un*real in relation to the surrounding live-action elements.

To be fair, these concerns apply not only to CGI, but to practical effects as well. On *The*

Muppet Movie, effects technician Robbie Knott credited the decision to build an enormous

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85 Magid, "ILM Meets," p. 59-60.
86 Ibid., p. 64.
87 13 Sep 2001 dailies to Michele Valillo at Rhythm & Hues, shot WO-52, Kent Beyda papers, 5.f-83, MHL. 30
    Aug 2001 dailies, to Kathleen Zuelch at WB Feature Animation, shot SO-37, p. 2, Kent Beyda papers, 5.f-83,
    MHL.

puppet (a fifteen-foot head plus arms and hands) of Animal for the film's climax to realism, saying that although a miniature or a matte effect would have been easier and cheaper, building an actual enormous puppet created realism because "it was huge and you could see that on the film."[88] Given that this was a key gag for the film's climax, the apparent added realism of the giant Animal puppet served to justify the cost and difficulty of constructing such a large effect. In a similar vein, Henry Selick, director of *Monkeybone*, credits the choice to animate the film's eponymous character via stop-motion rather than CGI to the sense of tactility and realism not possible in digital animation of the time: "I wanted it to really feel like a stuffed toy … I didn't want it to be perfect, I wanted it to be kind of bumpy and imperfect, which is still pretty hard to do in a computer."[89] This aligns with the preferences of Selick's frequent collaborator, Tim Burton, who called the effects in his own 1988 film *Beetlejuice* "a step backward" but "crude and funky and also very personal," showing a tendency by some filmmakers to prefer such imperfect effects in comedies since at least the 1980s.[90] Whether by practical means or digital, then, effects-based gag choices often revolve around maintaining a certain degree of realism, even for some of their most outlandish and unreal characters.

Another key reason for this emphasis on realism may also relate to the changing role of performance in gag-based comedy from the classical to contemporary eras. Mechanical effects, stunts, and the like were certainly present in earlier gags, but it seems fair to characterize classical gags as generally performance rather than effects-based. Even for a silent comic like Buster Keaton who was famous for his use of complex machines and mechanical trickery, his abilities as a performer largely remain most central to our understanding and appreciation of his

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88 "Mechanical Special Effects," p. 677.
89 Qtd in Mallory, "Drawn for Stardom," p. 10.
90 Qtd in Marc Shapiro, "Explaining *Beetlejuice*," 1988, *Tim Burton Interviews*, ed. Kristian Fraga, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005, p. 5.

gags. However, while performance remains important for contemporary gags, especially in comedian comedies, I would argue that one of the biggest shifts in recent decades is a broader move away from the dominance of performative gags and toward effects gags in Hollywood comedy as a whole. This also further helps to explain the concomitant shift toward greater post-production gag creation, as in many of the examples above. While I will develop this argument further when exploring *Airplane!* and *Gremlins 2* momentarily, consider the starring actors in each film: prior to *Airplane!*, Leslie Nielsen was not a major comic performer, while the male and female leads for each film (Robert Hays and Julie Hagerty in the former, Zach Galligan and Phoebe Cates in the latter) are generally not discursively positioned as exemplary comic performers outside of these roles. This is not meant to belittle these performers (Nielsen's success in *Airplane!* almost single-handedly gave him a second career starring as a gag-based comedian) but merely to note the ways in which they are *not* often the focal point of many gags in these films. If audiences marveled at the effects *and* performances of a Keaton or an Arbuckle in early gag-based comedy, we are more likely to appreciate the effects and construction of the gags themselves or the deadpan *lack* of reaction from performers (like Nielsen) today. Although effects scholars like Lisa Bode may argue that actors are not *just* graphic elements and are still essential for effects films because they serve as "conductors of presence and tactility" that help us believe in an otherwise largely created sense of space and place, this may be less true at times for gag-based films.[91] If so, the emphasis on realism for effects-created characters may thus partly serve to ensure that sense of "presence and tactility" to ground us in their gags, furthering the movement away from actual human performers in many effects-based comedies.

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[91] Lisa Bode, *Making Believe: Screen Performance and Special Effects in Popular Cinema*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017, p. 157.

Finally, one other area related to realism, though separate from effects more broadly, is worth noting when considering decisions of whether or not to include certain gags: their degree of reflexivity. While reflexive gags have long been a hallmark of film comedy, from Oliver Hardy's looks to camera to the freewheeling reflexivity on display in *Hellzapoppin'*, they can nevertheless have a difficult time making it to the screen. Early drafts of gag-based comedies reveal a host of proposed reflexive moments that do not appear in the finished film. In trying to one-up the often absurd use of stock footage in conjunction with Ted's flying flashbacks in *Airplane!*, an early draft of *Airplane II* (1982) called for random, non-sequitur clips from old Paramount films for his flashbacks in the sequel, a proposal that sadly did not survive to later drafts.[92] Likewise, *The Big Bus*' initial draft includes a gag fake intermission midway through the film, further parodying the quasi-epic disaster films of the early-to-mid 1970s, but this gag does not reappear in any subsequent drafts.[93] For other films, certain reflexive gags crop up in multiple script drafts but ultimately still fail to survive. In *Clue* (1985), multiple drafts call for the song "I Ain't Got No Body" to play as the guests pretend to dance and make out with a pair of corpses to fool a police officer. Although this adds a winking, punning musical element to complement this switch image sight gag, the finished film instead opts for the song "Sh-Boom," which is far more subtle and less clear cut in its punning qualities.[94] Whether this change was made due to song rights (especially given David Lee Roth's cover of the song as a popular single and music video for Warner Bros. while *Clue* was in production) or because of it being *too* knowingly reflexive is unclear. More clear is the use of direct address by Mel Brooks' character,

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92 Kenny Solms, "Airplane 2002" (first draft of *Airplane II: The Sequel*) 31 Jul 1981, Paramount Pictures Scripts, 12.f-A-185, MHL.

93 Lawrence J. Cohen and Fred Freeman, first draft of *The Big Bus* 31 Dec 1974, p. 98, Paramount Pictures Scripts, f.-B-374, MHL.

94 See various *Clue* drafts by Jonathan Lynn, 4 Jun 1984, 8 Feb 1985, and 9 Jul 1985, Paramount Pictures Scripts, 179.f-C-584, 179.f-C-588, and 179.f-C-589, MHL.

Skroob, in *Spaceballs* drafts. Both 19 March 1986 and 30 July 1986 drafts have Skroob look directly at and address the audience across the film, albeit with variations, but by a 19 November 1986 draft, such directly reflexive moments disappear, reflecting what we see in the film itself.[95] Even though reflexivity is common in Brooks films, for whatever reasons (whether too reflexive or too distracting from the film's narrative), reflexive gags in *Spaceballs* and elsewhere remain a particular point of contention for many gag-based filmmakers and can still struggle to make survive into a finished film.

Tracing Gags in *Airplane!* and *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*

While I have thus far pointed to issues around modes of production, special effects, technology, realism, and reflexivity, a closer look at scripts and production documents for two key gag-based comedies shows in greater detail how gag creation functions and continues to adapt within blockbuster era comedy. For *Airplane!*, much of this revolves around writing detailed gags into various script drafts, as previously mentioned. However, this applies not only to many major gags within the film (the soldier boarding the airplane as if it were a train; the switch image gag of Elaine seemingly performing fellatio on the automatic co-pilot; various verbal misunderstandings such as surely/Shirley), but to minor, chicken fat gags as well. A relatively early draft from 17 Apr 1979 specifically calls for a woman to toss away her baby as a runaway plane rolls into the terminal early in the film.[96] Later drafts likewise include this minor gag, and, although there is little to guide our attention to it on screen, it remains present in the film itself. Similarly, even odd non-sequiturs such as the watermelon that drops onto

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95 Brooks, Meehan, and Graham, 19 Mar 1986 and 30 Jul 1986 script drafts, MHL. Brooks, Meehan, and Graham, 19 Nov 1986 draft, MHL.

96 Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, *Airplane!* draft (titled *Kentucky Fried Theatre's Airplane!*), 17 Apr 1979, p. 6, Joseph Biroc Papers, 1.f-1, MHL. The exact direction reads: "a woman tosses away her infant child as she runs off."

McCroskey's desk or the spear that strikes a wall behind Captain Kramer appear from the first draft of the film, albeit in somewhat different places within the script, a trajectory that applies to a number of the film's smaller gags.[97] The fact that both of these examples survive numerous drafts and into the film itself highlights their importance for ZAZ and/or their relative inconsequentiality (given that the baby toss is barely noticeable and the appearances of the watermelon/spear are simply befuddling) that allows them to reach the screen.

This is worth noting due to the number of gags that *fail* to make it to the finished film or only survive in an altered form. Although I could only work from available script drafts rather than production memos, it is easy to speculate as to why many of these were eliminated or changed. If a chicken fat gag such as the infant-toss is small enough to be included within another gag, others are likely far too obscure or hard to understand to be given significant screen time. This includes a running gag present in the 17 April 1979 draft that likens the passengers' sickness to watching films by Italian director Lina Wertmüller: a female passenger notes that she and her husband "haven't felt this awful since we saw that Lina Wertmüller film" after first experiencing food poisoning symptoms, and Dr. Rumack later tells Elaine that he had not seen anything like this sickness since a Wertmüller film festival.[98] Though Wertmüller was relatively popular (for a European art film director) in the mid-1970s, her stock had fallen by the end of the decade, making these references likely too obscure for most audiences. They remain in the 11 June 1979 shooting script, but the finished film updates them to more familiar and pointedly political references to a Ronald Reagan film and an Anita Bryant concert, respectively.[99] Several

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97 Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, *Airplane!* first draft, 1 Aug 1978, p. 51, 61, Paramount Pictures Scripts, 11.f-A-181, MHL. These two objects do carry potential racial (if not flat out racist) implications, but this does not make their inclusion any more comprehensible in either the film or its script drafts.

98 *Airplane!* 17 Apr 1979 draft, p. 42 (blue pages), 47 (blue pages).

99 *Airplane!* 11 Jun 1979 shooting script.

drafts also contain the same running gag of a stewardess asking a female passenger "would you care for a soft drink?" and, when the passenger says yes, handing her a bottle of Coke swaddled in a blanket. Two subsequent visits to the passenger feature further absurd gags around treating the bottle of Coke as if it were a baby.[100] Given that it was not until I had encountered this gag in multiple drafts that I actually understood it as an elaborate, subtle pun on the phrase "would you care for" (understood as "would you assume parental responsibilities for" rather than "would you like"), it seems plausible that many audiences would struggle to understand the gag as well, making it a sensible elimination.[101]

Other gags do survive in some form, but we can likewise still readily speculate as to why they were greatly reduced from earlier scripts. While a number of gags from the film's first draft do survive to the finished film in similar form, the series of rear projection gags as Captain Kramer and Paul drive to the airport is greatly expanded in this first draft, adding a trio of incongruous driving backgrounds to the three present in the finished film.[102] Similarly, the ending of this first draft features an extended sequence after the plane successfully lands that includes gags parodying prototypical sports celebrations and post-game interviews, none of which are present in later drafts. While both of these examples fit with the type of incongruity humor that ZAZ favor throughout the film, such gags are, unlike the baby toss or the spear and watermelon, likely too long to make their comic point, leading to them being eliminated or condensed. For other gags, they were most likely reduced in scope due to potential ratings issues. A running gag featuring a pair of young passengers, a boy and a girl, dressed and acting

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100 See, for instance, 1 Aug 1978 first draft and 17 Apr 1979 draft for similar examples of this running gag.
101 Or, alternately, leading the ZAZ group to simply save it for later: its dependence on a bizarrely literal understanding of a basic idiom is reminiscent of the "Cigarette?" "Yes, I know" gag present in both the *Police Squad!* TV series and *The Naked Gun 33 1/3* film.
102 1 Aug 1978 first draft, p. 62.

like adults (mainly the boy propositioning the girl) does briefly appear in the final film, but this is only a fraction of the material present across various drafts. The pair have a great deal more dialogue that expands their incongruity (the boy, Milton, presents himself as a *retired* eight-year-old in the first draft) that turns into a budding romance later in the drafts, complete with strong sexual overtones.[103] Given that several gags in the film already uncomfortably flirt with pedophilia (here and, of course, with Captain Oveur and Joey), this running gag may not only have taken too much screen time in various drafts, but its emphasis on child sexuality likely would have been too much to fit within the film's ultimate PG rating as well.

Since many of the final film's gags *are* written into the script from very early on, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is the gags themselves rather than their actors' comic performances that are most central to *Airplane!*'s comedy. Building upon the incongruity present throughout the film, many gags depend on the characters' seriousness and incredulity to the bizarre events unfolding around them that, while certainly not unheard of in classical Hollywood comedy, is accentuated to a far greater degree. Gags where Dr. Rumack pulls eggs out of a sick passenger's mouth or responds to Elaine's interjection of "A hospital? What is it?" with "It's a big building with patients, but that's not important right now" depend largely upon *de*emphasizing comic performance in ways that are a far cry from the broad, knowing styles of gag-based predecessors like Bob Hope or Jerry Lewis. This approach is central to the ZAZ-style writ large as well, with numerous interviews over the years reinforcing the trio's desire to downplay the role of comic performance in putting over their gags. Abrahams defended the casting of then-unknown actor Val Kilmer in *Top Secret!*'s lead role because the group thought that "having a star in the role would get in the way of the comedy," a sentiment that David Zucker echoed a few years later

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103 Ibid., p. 33. 17 Apr 1979 draft, p. 75-76.

when espousing the group's philosophy that actors should play their characters straight "and let the comedy play itself."[104] Decades later, Zucker would go so far as to call *Airplane!* "the first of its kind where you had a comedy without comedians," emphasizing that it was the quality of their script and the producers' trust in the trio to direct it that made the film a success, not the film's comic performers.[105] Irrespective of whether or not that claim is true, *Airplane!* serves as an key example of the growing shift away from comic performance and toward gags deemphasizing comic performance as a central adaptation for certain strains of blockbuster era Hollywood comedy.

However, while the ZAZ team takes pride in writing out their gags, there are also times where evidence points to them crafting gags through improvisation or on-set inspiration. This may relate to gags that are only sketchily defined in various script drafts, such as several that are part of the choreography of Ted and Elaine's dance in the *Saturday Night Fever*-inspired flashback.[106] It may also relate to gags that change to incorporate a more specific punchline, as in a brief gag where the plane knocks off the transmission antenna of radio station WZAZ ("where disco lives forever") as it descends over Chicago, referred to in drafts as, alternately, the John Hancock building or a generic tower sans any specific reference to disco or radio.[107] Additionally, though many gags appear in some form across drafts, there are also others from the finished film (a topless woman briefly stopping in front of the camera as the passengers panic; the shot of McCroskey, high on glue, that rotates to reveal he is hanging upside down from the

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104 Abrahams qtd in Adrian Hodges, "Locked Room Tactics by 'Airplane!' Trio Likely to Seal New Success," *Screen International*, 1 Oct 1983, p. 65. D. Zucker qtd in Jack Barth, "Piz-ZAZ," *Film Comment*, 22.4 (Jul 1986), p. 29.

105 Qtd in Robert J. Emery, *The Directors: Take One*, New York: Allworth Press, 2002, p. 341.

106 I hasten to add that at least some of these gags *are* clearly effects-based as well, most notably Ted's faux-Russian dance that ends with him seemingly floating above the ground. The wires holding him up are clearly visible within the frame, especially on a Blu-Ray copy of the film, adding further humor to the gag.

107 See 17 Apr 1979, p. 103 (white pages), 11 Jun 1979, p. 103 (pink pages).

ceiling) that are completely absent from the drafts at all, implying that ZAZ were inspired on-set, or at least in the very late stages before production, to include some of these brief, but often memorable, sight gags.

Gremlins 2 further showcases how gags can develop and morph throughout production in the ways they are planned, shot, and eventually reach the screen. I have previously pointed out the complexities of effects-heavy gags involving puppets like the gremlins, but production documents for Gremlins 2 further highlight these challenges. If secondhand reports on Gremlins and Small Soldiers claim the use of up to thirty and twenty-three puppeteers (respectively) for certain scenes, production reports for Gremlins 2 list up to *thirty-six* puppet operators for the heaviest day of gremlin shooting, the film's climactic gathering of the creatures in the Clamp building lobby.[108] This much personnel would likely only increase the on-set complexity, and given these potential difficulties, it is unsurprising that some of the most gremlins-heavy elements from earlier script drafts, such as gags revolving around the gremlins' takeover of Clamp Cable Network TV channels in a late 1988 draft, were dropped due to their complexity and/or cost.[109] Additionally, while in-production inspiration for gags was, as we shall see, still clearly present in Gremlins 2, production documents also highlight the degree of pre-production necessary for the film's effects work. This include storyboards from early-to-mid 1989 for about 159 different shots with information on whether the proposed shot a) would use practical or optical effects, b) would be done during principal photography or during post-production, c) what characters they would incorporate, and d) additional effects notes as necessary.[110] Though

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108 Production report, postproduction unit, 27 Nov 1989, Gremlins 2 Production Reports, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 10, MHL.

109 Charlie Haas, Gremlins 2 second draft, 22 Dec 1988, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

110 See various Gremlins 2 "Monolith" storyboards, dated up to 25 Apr 1989, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.

not all these shots are gags, and not all these storyboards would be shot or included in the final film, the amount of information needed for them points to the degree of pre-production planning and relative inflexibility present in any contemporary comedy utilizing effects-based gags.

Of course, much of the rationale for this is, as in the classical studio system, to help control costs, and *Gremlins 2* is no exception. Looking at two gag sequences that were storyboarded but later eliminated implicitly shows this process in action. Early scripts called for a series of flashbacks as Gizmo reunites with Billy and attempts to describe his time on the streets of New York through a series of charades, all of which Billy initially understands as puns (for example, Gizmo describes being attacked by caterpillars, shown as giant insects in the flashback, before Billy realizes he means Caterpillar construction machinery). These gags were not only included in earlier scripts but also appear in various storyboard drafts, from as early as 25 October 1988 to the aforementioned 25 April 1989 ones.[111] Storyboards reveal that many of these visual puns required optical effects, and given the relatively small number of optical effects called for in general, their cost, their concentration here, their retardation of narrative, and the potential of certain puns to confuse audiences, it helps explain their elimination. Unsurprisingly, a 18 January 1989 memo explicitly questioned the flashbacks' usefulness given their costs and called for them to be trimmed.[112] While still present in later storyboards, by this time the process of deciding to jettison these expensive gags had already started. Similarly, there were several proposed and storyboarded versions of initially getting Gizmo wet to produce other Mogwai, with a 29 November 1988 storyboard targeting him with a complicated automatic watering

111 *Gremlins 2* "Monolith" Story Boards (obsolete), 25 Oct 1988, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.

112 Memo from Lucy Fisher and Lisa Henson, 18 Jan 1989, *Gremlins 2* Script Notes, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

device for the Clamp Center's flora, including a note to "add vacume [sic] gag" to this sequence.[113] While ambitious and, at least potentially, more humorous, the added costs and difficulties of enacting this complex mechanical sequence likely encouraged the filmmakers to choose a simpler, easier approach for the final film, as Gizmo is only hit by a wayward stream from a water fountain (albeit in a playful, complex way).

Costs also implicitly shaped the evolution of the film's opening. Famed *Looney Tunes* animator Chuck Jones, who had a brief cameo in the original *Gremlins*, was hired to create an animated opening sequence centered around *Looney Tunes* stalwarts Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. Lengthy early sketches for the opening sequence are stuffed with gags, as Daffy responds to Bugs' torments by threatening to send him to arbitration or to report him to the Screen Actors Guild's Anti-Defamation League (complete with an Elmer Fudd cameo as the representative of the ADL).[114] After this exchange, Bugs tells Daffy that he has become "executive of the month," and seats him in front of a large computer where Daffy proceeds to consistently mangle the film's opening titles: Steven Spielberg becomes Steven Gerbils; "A Michael Finnell Production" becomes a "Mike Flannel Induction;" and *Gremlins 2* becomes *Gremlin Stew* before Daffy retitles it *The Return of Batman Meets Gremlins II, Part 6: The Movie* (for "class"). Rife with Warner Bros in-jokes (such as the Batman reference) and an extreme degree of reflexivity that recalls the classic 1953 *Looney Tunes* short *Duck Amuck*, these sketches seem more like a wish list for possible gags this opening sequence could contain rather than a realistic blueprint for what the finished product *would* include.

Production memos further trace how this massive initial version was trimmed down to the

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113 *Gremlins 2* "Monolith" Story Boards (obsolete), 29 Nov 1988, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.
114 *Gremlins 2* – Chuck Jones – Main Title Sequence, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.

relatively brief (less than 90 seconds) one found in the final film. The initial version of the

opening likely would have run several minutes, and a 14 December 1989 memo from Kathleen

Helppie, WB VP of cartoon production, to producer Michael Finnell specified that a budget for a

300 foot version, or roughly eight minutes worth of film, had been approved.[115] An estimated

budget for this version and a memo from four months later claimed that the animation was

mostly on schedule and on budget at a cost of about $155,000 ($20,000 of which went to Jones

as a director's fee).[116] However, a separate budget from animation company CJ Enterprises only

lists 100 feet worth of film, about two and a half minutes and closer to the ultimate length of the

finished version.[117] Revised drawings for the opening sequence from mid February and mid

March of 1990 show that many gags survived, albeit in truncated or otherwise altered form (for

instance, it is now the "Feathered Friends Anti-Defamation League," and a number of the gag

credits have been dropped), and marginal notes as late as 20 March on these drawings indicate

that revised gags (Daffy's alternate title for the film, with "Super-Daffy" replacing "Batman")

were still being approved.[118] Nevertheless, many of these gags, including all of the gag titles,

were axed for the final version. Although there is a dearth of clear documentation as to exactly

why these gags were dropped, it is plausible that issues of cost and time as the film approached

its May 1990 release date (CJ Enterprises claimed it would take five animators five weeks just to

finish the 100 foot version) seem to be likely factors.[119] Additionally, concerns about the film's

reflexivity, which I will discuss more momentarily, may also have necessitated a compromise

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115 Memo from Kathleen Helppie to Michael Finnell re: revised *Gremlins 2* main title budget, 14 Dec 1989, Joe
      Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.
116 Initial budget from ibid. Second memo, 13 Mar 1990, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.
117 CJ Enterprises budget, undated, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.
118 See drawings dated 13 Feb 1990, Pacific Title mock ups of main titles dated 22 Mar 1990, Joe Dante and
      Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.
119 See CJ Enterprises budget for five animators/five weeks claim.

over the number of reflexive gags in this opening sequence. Potential objections to the opening's length or to the gag names obfuscating the actual credits for major above-the-line personnel could also have been factors in decisions by the studio, filmmakers, or both to trim the opening.

Documents reveal how similar issues were raised elsewhere in the film as well. A letter from scriptwriter Charlie Haas brainstormed alternatives to Gizmo's torture by gremlins for post-production reshoots, declaring gags involving catapults or rubber cement to be too elaborate and instead suggesting the velcro torture seen in the final film. While these suggestions simplified gags for the post-production effects crew, Haas also suggested additional verbal gags, such as the voice in the men's bathroom at the Clamp Center that intones to an exiting patron "hey pal, I sure hope you washed those hands," that could easily be added to the film in post.[120] This change seems to be in direct response to a set of notes from WB in late February that explicitly called on the team to "use the male building's voice whenever possible" so as to cheaply add last minute gags, leading Haas to insert the additional verbal gags featuring the building's voice.[121] In both examples, we see exactly how practical concerns of complexity and cost, issues that have remained central throughout this chapter, served to alter the possibilities for gags in the last weeks before *Gremlins 2*'s release. They also point to the continued emphasis on post-production as an increasingly viable source for gags, especially those that do not depend on embodied human actors and their comic performance during production. If *Airplane!* tended to add such gags in pre-production, Dante, Haas, and the *Gremlins* crew could as easily incorporate additional effects or mechanical-based gags in pre-production *or* in post to achieve a similarly dense concentration of gags.

120 Charlie Haas letter brainstorming Gizmo torture, 7 Mar 1990, *Gremlins 2* Post-production Re-shoots, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 11, MHL.
121 28 February 1990 notes, *Gremlins 2* Screening Notes, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

Production documents also highlight the influence of studio personnel for certain gags. While producer Steven Spielberg's role in *Gremlins 2* was foregrounded less than in the first film, he was still actively involved in the sequel and suggested various gags that wound up reaching the screen. Notes from a 17 November 1988 meeting with Spielberg credit him with suggesting the Brain Gremlin interview (by Grandpa Fred in the final film), including many details that survive (the talk of wanting "civilization"; the shooting of a random gremlin during the interview) and some that do not (a witheringly satirical swipe at family values and President George H.W. Bush as the Brain Gremlin says "we believe in marriage...the family...kinder, gentler Gremlins" while trotting out a complete gremlin family) in the film itself.[122] Beyond Spielberg, other Warner Bros. personnel also tried to influence gags in the film. A 27 September 1988 memo from WB production vice presidents Lucy Fisher and Lisa Henson specifically praised the ways in which current script drafts made the brain and vegetable gremlins into running gags, and they suggested that the filmmakers should focus on fewer gremlin types with more gags for each one.[123] The two execs followed this up with suggested changes to the types of gremlins in a 31 January 1989 memo. Many of these suggestions were followed (reducing the variety of gremlins and Mogwai from the thirty listed in early drafts/storyboards to the smaller number in the final film), but some were not (their call to eliminate the electric gremlin).[124] Through all of this, there remains a constant give and take between studio and "in the field" filmmaking personnel, as both groups attempted to guide or retard the development of numerous

122 From 17 Nov 1988 meeting with Spielberg, *Gremlins 2* WB Notes 9/16/88 [includes notes from 11/88 as well], Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

123 Memo from Lucy Fisher and Lisa Henson, 27 Sep 1988, *Gremlins 2* Script Notes, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

124 Memo from Lucy Fisher and Lisa Henson to Joe Dante, Michael Finnell, and Charlie Haas, 31 Jan 1989, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL. For number of gremlin/Mogwai types, see *Gremlins 2* Creature Effects Breakdown, 26 Sep 1988, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 8, MHL.

gags as they each saw fit.

This is perhaps most interesting in discussions surrounding some of the film's most reflexive, and most controversial, gags, especially explicit studio concerns around the notorious "film breaking" sequence. Dante had conceived of this gag, or at least something like it, from very early on in the process of *Gremlins 2*'s creation: notes from an April 1985 story meeting for a proposed *Gremlins* sequel credit Dante with calling for the film to be "breaking the frame … take risks and have fun with the medium," including a rough idea of the movie theater sequence that became *Gremlins 2*'s most reflexive moment.[125] Although other writers took a crack at a *Gremlins 2* screenplay between 1985 and 1987, only Charlie Haas' drafts continued to develop this particular frame-breaking gag. The details of the gag changed frequently across his drafts: it appeared in different spots (following the film critic gag, with Rex Reed in early drafts and Leonard Maltin in the final film, in the second draft); was placed in the finished spot, but lacked a clear ending, in a revised second draft; and called for Clint Eastwood and Steven Spielberg cameos in a third draft before eventual cameo star Hulk Hogan entered the script as part of a revised third draft.[126] Although Dante was enthusiastic about this particular gag from well before the official start of *Gremlins 2* production, the gag's instability reveals how difficult it was to actually realize within the film itself.

This instability was also due to the shifting, at times contradictory, view of this gag by studio personnel. Some memos position the studio as encouraging the development of this sequence, both explicitly and implicitly. Correspondence from September 1988 expresses approval for the gag itself, with Fisher and Henson praising the "weird humor" of the film

125 Ed Solomon notes on *Gremlins 2* story meeting, 10 Apr 1985, *Gremlins 2* Story Notes, Outlines, Etc. - Early Versions, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

126 See Charlie Haas, *Gremlins 2* second draft, 22 Dec 1988, revised second draft, 30 Jan 1989, third draft, 16 Feb 1989, and revised third draft, 11 Aug 1989, all in Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

breaking sequence and only objecting to its location in the script, which would be addressed and approved in a November followup.[127] By early the next year, Fisher and Hanson continued to comment on the gag, noting its lack of an ending and asking if "Joe will draft new conclusion to gag?," but they provided no clear signs of discomfort with the sequence, though they also no longer showed clear enthusiasm for it.[128] As the film moved closer and closer to its May 1989 production start, however, their position on the gag shifted radically. An April 1989 memo tells Dante, Finnell, and Haas that the VPs "really want you to reconsider the film breaking," calling it "just a distraction and an interruption" to the film.[129] Given that Dante's interest in this particular gag was present from the earliest *Gremlins 2* discussions, it is unsurprising that he would continue to push for it throughout the film's pre-production and production phases. Warner Bros.' increasing hesitancy to keep this extremely reflexive gag, especially when combined with the elimination of many of the opening animation's reflexive elements, implies that although they were more or less open to considering such gags in written form, they were extremely leery of committing to them being shot and included in the final film. As with much of comedy in general, *Gremlins 2* showcases a tension between the greater freedom to be reflexive than other film types and the limits of willingness to use that freedom as well.

Conclusion

Of course, even looking in greater detail at the ebb and flow of various gags for *Airplane!* and *Gremlins 2* cannot provide us with a solid grasp on *every* factor going into the decisions to include, alter, or drop gags. Still, this process further highlight the ways in which gag comedies

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127 Memo from Lucy Fisher and Lisa Henson, 27 Sep 1988, p. 2. Memo from Marianne to Joe Dante and Michael Finnell, 15 Nov 1988, p. 3, *Gremlins 2* Script Notes, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.
128 Memo from Lucy Fisher and Lisa Hanson, 31 Jan 1989, p. 9.
129 Memo from Lucy Fisher and Lisa Hanson to Joe Dante, Michael Finnell, and Charlie Haas, 11 Apr 1989, p. 3, *Gremlins 2* Script Notes, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, container 16, MHL.

in the blockbuster era approach gag construction in ways that adapt by both borrowing and varying from the classical era. Although a slippery proposition in both periods, there are still a number of ways by which we can better determine how the gags we see in comedies have traveled paths both simple and complex to reach the screen. From shifts in emphasis on creating gags in production to pre-production to post, to changes in technology and concomitant increasingly complex workflows, to shifts in emphasis from comic performance to effects-based and other non-performative gags, and to continuing concerns about cost and difficulty, the web of factors controlling gags is incredibly tricky to unravel. Still, attempting to isolate the thread of gag creation offers an important window into the methods of the madness for how gag-based comedy is developed.

That being said, I want to reiterate how gag creation only accounts for one factor among many when examining contemporary gag-based comedy writ large. Tracing the progress of gags throughout their creation, especially given the potential for additional work via further digging through archival records and trade press materials that can nuance the observations made here, is invaluable to help us understand the logic, constraints, and possibilities of the object at the heart of gag-based comedy. However, this can also provide relatively little to help us understand the history, use, or discursive responses to the gags themselves, essentially what happens with them *after* they reach the screen. Thus while I consider this tracing of gags to be more or less at the heart of my dissertation work, it is only in conjunction with other factors, covered in the other chapters of this project, that we can truly begin to trace a clearer, more fully formed overall picture of gag-based comedy in the shadow of the blockbuster.

Chapter 5

"A Tooniverse of Gags: Live-Action/Animation Hybrids and Gag-Based Comedy"

As noted in chapter two, gag-based film comedy has largely ceased being a prominent or industrially sustainable comic approach over the last ten to fifteen years. Instead, gag comedy today, and commercially successful Hollywood comedy in general, adapts more effectively by trending toward hybridization, offering moments of prominent gag-based comedy *in addition to* the tropes of genres like adventure (2006's *Night at the Museum*, 2017's *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*), superhero (2018's *Deadpool 2*), science fiction and horror (2016's *Ghostbusters*), and more. As Steve Neale points out, genre-blending has long been central to Hollywood film, and as this dissertation has shown, this particular move toward genre hybridization in mainstream comedy has been ongoing since at least the 1980s.[1] Given this, while previous chapters have largely centered around clear examples of gag-based comedies, an examination of gags in the blockbuster era cannot and should not focus *only* on 'purely' gag-based films. Instead, it will by necessity also look at more blended examples of gag-based comedy, especially since the 2000s, to further explore how and what gags are blending with as they continue to adapt today.

However, another salient feature connects each of the films mentioned above: not only do they feature clear moments of gag-based comedy, but they frequently combine live-action and animation as well. Indeed, looking at other prominent gag-based comedies from the late 1980s and on reveals that live-action/animation hybrids have become an increasingly common and effective avenue for gag-based comedy today.[2] Some films blend live-action with traditional 2D

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1   See Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 234-238 for his discussion of the (over) emphasis on hybridity in scholarship on blockbuster-era Hollywood cinema.

2   Some, like Jason Mittell, dislike the term "hybrid" for generic classification, but I use it here to describe live-action/animation because a) it is a familiar (if somewhat problematic) term, and b) because live-action and animation are less *genres* than cinematic *modes*. See Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 147-148 for his discussion of genre hybridization.

animation styles (1988's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, 2001's *Osmosis Jones*) or with 3D digital animation (2000's *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, 2015's *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge Out of Water*), while still others will use a mixture of various animation styles (2001's *Monkeybone*). And there are, of course, a vast array of films (like the *Jumanji* or *Night at the Museum* series) that combine live-action with digital visual effects, although these are often positioned as effects films rather than as animation specifically. Via these avenues, live-action/animation hybrids have established themselves as one of the key venues for creating contemporary gag-based comedy, especially in the twenty-first century. Hybrids may differ greatly in the degree to which they integrate live-action and animation, the degree to which they utilize gag-based comedy, and their degree of commercial success or failure, but together they serve as a major forum for showcasing gags.

Furthermore, live-action/animation hybrids directly highlight the importance of animation history, most notably the legacy of classical Hollywood cartoon shorts, in shaping gags across the blockbuster era. In fact, one could easily argue that much of today's gag-based comedy draws as much, if not more, inspiration from the legacy and forms of these cartoons than it does from classical gag-based comedians. Although many examples *are* clearly indebted to comedians from classical Hollywood, the combination of constant wordplay, bad puns (both verbal and visual), and knowing reflexivity in the films of Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker or Mel Brooks also seem to owe a great deal to the use of such gag-based forms in the *Looney Tunes* or Tex Avery cartoons of the 1940s and 1950s. Other contemporary gag-based films and filmmakers more explicitly connect themselves to classical Hollywood cartoons: Joe Dante cites and/or uses *Looney Tunes* and Chuck Jones in numerous films; 1994's *The Mask* is filled with

explicit references to Tex Avery; and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* pays homage to an entire range of classical cartoons. Given these tendencies, then, we can see at least some of the ways in which blockbuster era gag comedy can be considered, at least in part, as a continuation of the gag-based heyday of *Looney Tunes* and other cartoons from that period.

If this is the case, one may ask why I focus on live-action/animation *hybrids* rather than on animation itself in contemporary cinema. Simply put, much modern animation displays a tendency to draw *less* from classical cartoons than do many live-action and hybrid comedies. This may seem counterintuitive, but as I will develop more in this chapter, the legacy of musicals and Disney's long-standing insistence on story and character over gags in their animation continues to loom large for many (though certainly not all) contemporary animated comedies. As a consequence, animated films like Pixar's *Soul* (2021) will explicitly eschew "quick gags" in favor of constructing a realistic, believable world, making gag comedy clearly a *secondary* concern.[3] To be fair, most animated films still use many gags, and some films and studios (like Dreamworks) even attempt to differentiate themselves via an emphasis on more gag-focused comedy. This is reinforced in critical discourse by descriptions of *Shrek* (2001) as "gag-filled," *Horton Hears a Who* (2008) as at its best when featuring gags with "Tex Avery-grade nuttiness," or more negatively, *Hotel Transylvania* (2012) as using a steady stream of gags in lieu of character development.[4] However, if *Variety* seems to frame 2015's *Hotel Transylvania 2* in gag-based terms when noting that its plot is "just a rickety skeleton" to prop up the gags, they ultimately position the film, including its gags, as an animated *family* film rather than a gag-based comedy.[5] In fact, most animated comedies are heterogeneous and contain elements of

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3 Carole Horst, "Setting the Toon Scene," *Variety*, 27 Jan 2021, p. 95.
4 Kim Newman, "Shrek," *Sight and Sound*, Jul 2001, p. 54. John Anderson, "Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!," *Variety*, 17 Mar 2008, p. 29. "Hotel Transylvania," *Screen International*, 7 Sep 2012.
5 Nick Schager, "Hotel Transylvania 2," *Variety*, 29 Sep 2015, p. 98.

comedy and genres like musicals, action, and sci-fi under the nebulous discursive construct of the "family" film, itself a highly heterogeneous form.[6] Combined with the tendency of animated films to be less frequently or consistently gag-based than live-action/animated films, this chapter focuses specifically on these hybrids. Although a more in-depth look at contemporary animated comedies would be useful, it is simply be too nebulous and not gag-focused enough to fit feasibly within this project.

Instead, the links between live-action/animation hybrids and gag-based comedy, as well as the influence of classical cartoons on gags today, make a further study of hybrids an important part of understanding blockbuster era gag comedy and its adaptations. Doing so raises a variety of questions that relate to the history, practice, and reception of gag-based live-action/animation hybrids. In what ways have animation, live-action/animation hybrids, and gag-based comedy all been related to each other historically, both discursively and in practice? In fact, why combine animation and live-action/animation to create gags at all? What new flexibility, possibilities, and limitations, do they provide for gags? Especially given the widely acknowledged cost of combining live-action and animation, as well as the challenges it creates for producing gags (as discussed in chapter four), how can this approach be rationalized? Why has gag comedy adapted to live-action/animation hybrids as such a frequent and popular form? And what does this combination look like in practice when we more closely examine live-action/animation hybrids and how they adapt each medium to create gags? Answering these questions will give us a better sense of both how and why hybrids have become so central to gag-based comedy as gag comedy itself has become a more and more hybrid form.

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6 See Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, for an in-depth discussion of the family film as a construct.

To address these questions, I first examine the history of animation's relationship to gags, including a brief overview of the historical development of live-action/animation hybrids and how they relate to gags and gag comedy. I then unpack further the theoretical and practical rationales for why live-action/animation hybrids and gags have become so connected in recent decades. By examining scholarly and trade discourse, I show how these films work to carefully balance various elements (production methods, genre and audience expectations, industrial concerns, issues of realism) in their combinations of live-action, animation, and gags so as to create a more resilient, sustainable form. Finally, I trace how hybrids approach this flexibility in practice by looking at gags relating to animation's freedom, realism, and the conjunction of the two in a quartet of live-action/animation hybrids: *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, *Osmosis Jones*, *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* (2003), and *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge Out of Water*. Together, these approaches not only shed greater light on an understudied area of film comedy (the live-action/animation hybrid film), but they also give us a sense of how the balancing of appeals in hybrids have come to dominate the larger gag-based comedy landscape.

A *Looney* History of Gags, Animation, and Live-Action/Animation Hybrids

Stretching back to early cinema and the rise of animated cartoons within the industry by the mid-to-late 1910s, scholars note a connection between animation and comedy that is so strong that comedy is still an assumed default for most Hollywood animation today. In large part, this is due to the functions commonly assigned to animation and live-action cinema. Kristin Thompson claims that because "animation could do things live-action could not, and hence it came to be assumed that it *should* do only those things," the classical Hollywood system worked to contain animation, leading to the linkage of animation and comedy from the silent era to the

present.[7] To integrate animation with the developing studio system, then, Hollywood was

"forced" to adapt animation to comedy, containing animation's ability to transcend the rules of

the natural world by tying it to comedy's tendency toward the fantastic. Thompson's premise has

been cited and accepted as a foundational truism for much subsequent animation scholarship, but

it was shared by early practitioners as well. In his 1920 primer on the making of cartoons, E.G.

Lutz strongly implies that animation was especially suited for comedy in part because "there is

no need to consider physiological impossibilities of the human organism" in cartoons, thus

allowing for a greater ability to move beyond the bounds of reality when depicting comic

actions.[8] Both theory and practice thus seem to support the idea that that animation's *separation*

from the dictates of live-action cinema made it an ideal form for comedy from the beginning.

Given this, most animation scholars and historians see a tension in silent cartoons

between a continued emphasis on the possibilities of animation as a form, usually expressed

through gags, and the studio system's own insistence on foregrounding narrative. Norman Klein

explicitly connects early comic animation, like the 1920s Felix the Cat films, to the legacy of

graphic arts, aligning them with newspaper comics and their emphasis on easily readable images

and flat (that is, lacking in graphic depth) gags rather than realistic narrative spaces.[9] Paul Wells

likewise frames Otto Mesmer as using Felix the Cat to destabilize space while exploring gags

and visual puns, pointing to the same character as Klein to similarly emphasize a drive toward

investigating the possibilities of *gags* over realistic animation in silent cartoons.[10] Even Disney's

emergence in the 1930s as the preeminent animation studio became aligned with the idea of

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7   Kristin Thompson, "Implications of the Cel Animation Technique," *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980, p. 110.
8   E.G. Lutz, *Animated Cartoons*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920, p. 230.
9   Norman Klein, *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, London: Verso, 1993, p. 5-8.
10 Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 132.

silent cartoons as a predominantly gag-based form. Klein notes how Disney "decided emphatically to move away from gag storytelling" by 1934, including a shift toward melodrama that "suggested *deep staging instead of flat surface*" and provided an alternative to the earlier styles of gag-driven graphic narrative.[11] Animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston reinforce this 1930s shift in their discussion of the studio's "greatest sight gags." They portray the history of gags at Disney as teleological, moving from individual animators coming up with their own gags in the 1920s, since "almost any gag for animation was acceptable as long as it got a laugh," toward an emphasis on collaboration, story, and personality-based animation over gags by the 1930s and 40s.[12] All of these approaches thus serve to frame silent cartoons as particularly well suited to gag-based comedy due to animation's ability to move beyond reality, both spatially and in terms of "realistic" narratives.

Silent animation also gives us the first major examples of live-action/animation hybrids, films combining elements of both forms while remaining clearly gag-based. A central example comes from one of the major silent cartoon series: the Fleischers' *Out of the Inkwell* films. Starting in 1919, each film was largely structured around cartoonist Max Fleischer's interactions and struggles with a drawn clown (later christened Koko) who would come to life on and off the page to cause mischief around the cartoonist's office and beyond.[13] Directed by Dave Fleischer and featuring both traditional animation and (especially in earlier years) extensive rotoscoping for Koko, the *Inkwell* series produced dozens of films throughout the 1920s. David McGowan even credits it with creating "a craze for 'combination cartoons,' films that blended live-action

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11 Klein, *Seven Minutes*, p. 30, 122. Emphasis in original.

12 Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *Too Funny for Words: Disney's Greatest Sight Gags*, New York: Abbeville Publishers, 1987, p. 17.

13 The clown remained nameless until 1923. Film titles and intertitles often alternate between 'Ko-Ko' and 'Koko', but I follow the lead of certain scholars (e.g. Leonard Maltin and David McGowan) in using the latter spelling.

footage with animation in a much more sophisticated manner than in earlier production" from the

early-to-mid 1920s. As one byproduct of this "craze," he cites live-action/animation films that

brought the late-1910s animated character Colonel Heeza Liar out of "retirement," but other

films and film series further highlight the brief flourishing of such hybrids.[14] Of particular note

are the *Alice* comedies running from 1923 to 1927, featuring the eponymous, live-action

character interacting with an animated world. The series was produced and directed by Walt

Disney and constituted some of his earliest major film work. Although the *Alice* comedies never

approached the popularity of the *Inkwell* films, with some describing them as "live-action

comedies with animated inserts" rather than full-fledged hybrids, they likely emerged in large

part because of the environment for live-action/animation hybrids during this time.[15]

Furthermore, their role in helping to launch Disney as a producer points to how they, and live-

action/animation hybrids as a whole, played a key role in the history of Hollywood animation.

In many respects, the *Inkwell* films combined an emphasis on gags with a fascination

around technological innovation that linked up to animation's earliest approaches. Like Winsor

McCay's hugely influential *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), part of *Out of the Inkwell*'s appeal lay in

the new and clever ways in which Koko would interact with the cartoonist and the live-action

world at large, whether it be animating different real world objects (such as clay in 1921's

Modeling), multiple versions of Koko "attacking" Max (1922's *Jumping Beans*), or seeing a giant

Koko wander through New York City (1923's *Bed Time*). According to Michael Frierson, the

Inkwell films followed a standard format: bring Koko out of the inkwell, escalate gags and

situations around the clash of live-action and animated worlds, and end with Koko's inevitable

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14 David McGowan, *Animated Personalities: Cartoon Characters and Stardom in American Theatrical Shorts*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019, p. 44.
15 Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*, 2003, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 39.

return to the inkwell. He frames the films' appeal for audiences, then, as deriving from the mixture of this structural familiarity with technical novelty, as "within the *Inkwell* format, the Fleischers could redirect their energies from narrative construction towards the development of new techniques." As this statement implies, such an approach favored gag-based rather than narrative or personality-based comedy since "the 'construction of gags' revolved around film techniques for visualising the interaction of the live action world and the cartoon world," the series' central *raison d'etre*.[16] The *Inkwell* films served to show how not only silent Hollywood animation as a whole but the combination of live-action and animation in particular were fundamentally tied to gag-based comedy, a foundation upon which later hybrids would build.

Of course, the technological trickery required for silent live-action/animation hybrids meant they were subject not only to the pressures facing other contemporary gag-based comedies detailed in chapter one, but that they struggled even more to adapt to the shift to sound as well. Leonard Maltin connects this shift, and Paramount's concomitant need for a new talking cartoon series, with the Fleischers' decision to at least temporarily retire Koko and the *Inkwell* films.[17] This makes intuitive sense given the techniques needed to create the illusion of interaction between animation and live-action: animation over still photographs; rotographing (frame-by-frame composites of cel animation and live-action background footage); pixillation of inanimate objects; or even simple cross-cutting between live-action and animated spaces.[18] The early years of sound would make many of these techniques (though certainly not all) more difficult to easily or cost-effectively achieve, especially for films with any kind of synchronized sound. Maltin

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16 Michael Frierson, "Clay Animation Comes Out of the Inkwell: The Fleischer Brothers and Clay Animation," *A Reader in Animation Studies*, ed. Jayne Pilling, London: J. Libbey, 1997, p. 86.

17 Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*, rev.d 1987, New York: Plume, 1980, p. 96.

18 See Michael Frierson, *Clay Animation: American Highlights 1908 to the Present*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994, p. 89-90, 94, for a list of techniques used.

notes that the Fleischers' *Talkartoon* films used little dialogue and post-synced all of their sound, and Disney's early Mickey Mouse shorts likewise mostly eschewed talking, although they were carefully animated to premade soundtracks.[19] It thus seems logical that the difficulties of combining live-action and animation would preclude most any kind of sustained use of hybrids in early sync sound cartoons. This is further reinforced by the fate of Charley Bowers, whom Rob King identifies as a direct link between live-action and animation via his live-action/stop-motion hybrid shorts of the 1920s.[20] While Bowers made numerous, often hybrid, films in the mid-1920s, he made none from 1928 until 1935, at which time he switched to working exclusively in stop-motion.

Granted, animation historians also note that the trend of live-action/animation hybrids was on the way out before the coming of sound, with McGowan seeing the "craze" for such films as dissipating by the mid-1920s.[21] But whether due to industrial changes, audience preferences, the coming of sound, or other factors, live-action/animation hybrids struggled to adapt and remain a viable option in subsequent decades. I will discuss some of the reasons why this might have been the case in my next section, but it is worth briefly noting some examples in the 1930s and 1940s where we *do* still find live-action/animation hybrids. Given the difficulties, both technical and narrative, of integrating animation into otherwise live-action feature films, it is unsurprising that the majority of such hybrids appeared in shorts, especially cartoons. Although not in a sustained series of films like *Out of the Inkwell*, animated cartoons did occasionally make use of live-action, whether for brief moments or entire films. This ranged

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19 Maltin, p. 96.
20 See Rob King, "The Art of Diddling: Slapstick, Science, and Antimodernism in the Films of Charley Bowers," *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 191-210.
21 McGowan, p. 46.

from further Fleischer experiments in the late 1930s with a "3-D" animation process that filmed

animated characters against live-action miniature backgrounds to tongue-in-cheek *Looney Tunes*

cartoons mixing animated characters with live-action people, as when Porky Pig meets his

"boss" Leon Schlesinger in 1940's *You Ought to Be in Pictures*.[22] And if these are more sustained

examples of combining live-action and animation, many more shorts use brief live-action inserts

for quick gags. This is particularly true for rapid-fire, gag-heavy director Tex Avery, who used

live-action as simply one of many avenues for zany gags. In 1949's *The House of Tomorrow*, TV

sets for each member of the family include a live-action cheesecake shot of a blonde woman for

the "tired businessman," while 1953's *The T.V. Of Tomorrow* features numerous gags involving

the interaction of animated characters with live-action footage on TV sets, as when an animated

man tries to fish a live-action marlin out of his TV. Although often brief, live-action thus served

as another potentially fruitful avenue by which technical trickery or irreverent and knowing gags

could further adapt within classical sound cartoons.

For live-action features, though, appearances of animation were infrequent and often

limited to sequences that were implicitly or explicitly bracketed off within each film. Disney's

ascendance during the 30s and movement toward feature-length animation kept the studio from

experimenting much with live-action/animation hybrids during the decade, but star Mickey

Mouse did make a cameo in the heterogeneous 1934 comedy *Hollywood Party*, making for at

least one marquee combination of the two forms in a 1930s feature. Leonard Maltin also claims

that animator Walter Lantz wanted to make a feature-length live-action/animated film with stars

(and fellow Universal personnel) Abbott and Costello in the 1940s, but the project appears to

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22 For the Fleischer "3-D" animation system, see Maltin, p. 113-114.

have never gotten off the ground.[23] However, MGM was able to utilize their own biggest

animated stars, Tom and Jerry, for special live-action/animation sequences in the 1945 musical

comedy *Anchors Aweigh* and the 1953 Esther Williams comedy *Dangerous When Wet*. MGM

animators William Hanna and Joseph Barbera were also responsible for the hybrid "Sinbad the

Sailor" sequence from the 1956 Gene Kelly musical *Invitation to the Dance*, another extended

example of live-action/animation in a classical feature.

However, these latter instances point to a shifting use of live-action and animation during

this time, one best exemplified by the spate of hybrid features made by Disney in the 1940s.

Starting with 1942's *Saludos Amigos*, the studio released a series of "package" films that

gathered together multiple shorts, often loosely tied together by a narrative frame, into features.

Many of these films featured live-action in their frame stories, within individual shorts, or both,

and films like *The Three Caballeros* (1944), *Song of the South* (1946), *Fun and Fancy Free*

(1947), and *Melody Time* (1948) feature numerous moments of live-action/animation interaction

that often incorporate gags. Unlike the *Inkwell* series or in contemporaneous cartoon shorts,

though, these hybrids were not only, and sometimes not even primarily, gag-based. Instead,

many of these Disney films took a page from the studio's ambitious 1940 film *Fantasia* and

blended live-action and animation within an explicitly music-oriented format. If *Fantasia*

largely contained its use of live-action to an appearance by conductor Leopold Stokowski in the

film's framing sequence, other Disney hybrids integrated the two forms and musical numbers to a

much greater degree. Live-action/animation interactions still could revolve primarily around

gags (in *Fun and Fancy Free*'s frame story) or gags as part of musical numbers (the "Baía"

segment of *Three Caballeros*), but combinations of the two forms underwent a clear shift in

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23 Maltin, p. 167.

emphasis during this time that would have a lasting effect. As the aforementioned MGM examples further reinforce, musical numbers would become the primary venue for animation within live-action features over the rest of the classical era.

Why might this be the case? On the one hand, musicals of the 1940s and on still provided a space for the kind of modular structure and heterogeneous appeals that had, by and large, disappeared from more explicitly comedy-oriented films of the 1930s. While Mickey Mouse fit naturally alongside the variety of stars on display in the vaudeville-styled comedy revue of *Hollywood Party*, by the 1940s revue films usually centered around a more clearly musical format. From huge wartime hits like *This Is the Army* (1943) and *Stage Door Canteen* (1943) to postwar films like *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945) and *It's a Great Feeling* (1949), musicals became the primary venue for loosely structured, star-studded, revue-style films. However, the characteristics shared by gag-based comedy and musicals make this shift one of emphasis rather than a complete sea change. Both are often highly modular, have far greater liberty to break the diegesis and feature sequences that retard narrative development, and draw liberally from stage-based predecessors and contemporaries. Indeed, heterogeneous 1930s films like *Hollywood Party* or *Stand Up and Cheer!* (1934) may have been more comic and gag-oriented, but they too still featured numerous musical numbers.[24] Likewise, while later films were primarily centered around music, they still featured self-contained, gag-heavy segments as well, notably the physical and verbal humor of Red Skelton's parodic commercial for Guzzler's Gin in *Ziegfeld Follies*. The Disney and MGM examples of live-action/animation in the 1940s and 50s, then, simply apply this shift to animation, serving to link animation and live-action musical numbers

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24 See Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 1-3, for a discussion of the heterogeneity of *Stand Up and Cheer!*

over the ensuing decades. However, for reasons I will explore more in a moment, Disney's

hybrid films received mixed commercial, critical, and cultural responses that ultimately pushed

Disney to separate animation and live-action again in their features of the early 1950s. Much

like the "combination craze" films of the 1920s, Disney's live-action/animation hybrid features

of the 1940s were relatively short lived, but they remained influential by providing models and

technical expertise that would go on to fuel future hybrids.

The relationship between animation and gags in theatrical cartoon shorts more broadly

was changing during the 1930s and 40s as well. Disney shifted their attention to feature films

and personality-based, rather than gag-based, animation, while other silent or early sound era

studios like the Fleischers declined in prominence. In their stead, new major players in

animation rose to reinvigorate gag-based cartoon comedy. This is especially true of Warner

Bros. and their *Looney Tunes* series, which combined gag-based comedy and personality

animation to great success in the 1940s and 50s, leading to a later shift in critical appraisal away

from Disney and toward Warner Bros.[25] As Disney's films became more concerned with realism,

a process of adaptation that moved them away from the freedom identified with animation's

medium specificity, *Looney Tunes* served to pick up that slack. They instead focused on creating

freewheeling worlds that obeyed their own internal logic in a manner closer to silent and early

sound cartoons than much of Disney's post-1930s animated output. This approach is perhaps

best exemplified by Chuck Jones' set of "rules" for his popular, long-running series of

Roadrunner and Coyote *Looney Tunes* films, which allowed them to eschew an "anything goes"

format for a set of nearly infinite variations on gags within a more clearly defined structure.[26]

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25 See Timothy R. White, "From Disney to Warner Bros.: The Critical Shift," *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, p. 38-48.

26 See, for example, Jones' description of these in *Chuck Jones: Conversations*, ed. Maureen Furniss, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005, p. 34-35.

While Warner Bros. was far from alone in their gag-based approach, they became most identified with it, making them a huge influence on later gag-based comedy.

Arguably even more important is the work of director Tex Avery, who contributed to *Looney Tunes* in the late 1930s before becoming one of the most celebrated members of MGM's animation department in the 1940s. Describing Avery's addition to the *Looney Tunes* staff in the mid-1930s, Barry Putterman credits him with "building gags based on contrasts in speed both of motion and speech, puns derived from visual and verbal juxtapositions, and the kind of abstract analysis of the production's own self-admitted theatrical artifice," all of which created cartoons that "began structuring layers of references and suggesting a world of infinite behavioral possibilities."[27] At MGM, Avery continued to refine this approach and push it even further. In films starring characters like Droopy, Wolf and Red, and Screwy Squirrel, Avery dispensed gags in every manner imaginable: visual and verbal, self-contained and self-referential, innocent and brazenly knowing, blindingly obvious and bizarrely subtle, in animation and (on occasion) via live action. This fast and furious approach to gag-based comedy led later scholars to identify Avery as a foundational figure of what J. Hoberman termed "vulgar modernism." Henry Jenkins credited vulgar modernism with blurring the lines between live-action and animation in cinema, and he compared Avery's use of extraneous "chicken fat" gags to those found in *Mad* magazine, a prime vulgar modernist forum.[28] Serving as a primary example of the types of adaptation gag comedy underwent within classical cartoons, Avery would also go on to become an explicit reference point for many live-action/animation hybrids in blockbuster era Hollywood comedy.

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27 Barry Putterman, "A Short Critical History of Warner Bros. Cartoons," *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, p. 31.

28 Henry Jenkins, "'I Like to Sock Myself in the Face': Reconsidering 'Vulgar Modernism'," *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 165, 154.

This is certainly true for 1988's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, the massively successful (and massively expensive) blockbuster that helped pave the way for a sustained resurgence of hybrids in the 1990s and beyond. Although Disney continued to explore hybrids in a few films of the 1960s and 70s (1964's *Mary Poppins*; 1971's *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*; 1977's *Pete's Dragon*), these struggled to maintain a prominent industrial role for the combination of live-action and animation. They remained centered around musical numbers as much if not more than gag-based sequences, and none of them were sustained enough (*Mary Poppins*' animated sequence runs only about 17 of its 139 minutes), successful enough (given the mixed commercial response to *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* and *Pete's Dragon*), or both to make a lasting impact. On the other hand, *Roger Rabbit* became a pop culture phenomenon that spawned imitators (like the 1992 Ralph Bakshi debacle *Cool World*) and helped create an industrial space for later films like *The Mask* and *Space Jam* (1996) that blended live-action with increasingly elaborate, and increasingly digital, animation. *Roger Rabbit* originally started as a project at Disney in the early 1980s before becoming embroiled in the studio's management and financial difficulties, leading Disney to strike a deal with Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment by the mid-80s to help get the film into production.[29] Stories of the film's making highlight how director Robert Zemeckis was particularly insistent on modeling it after Avery's work, especially in comparison to Disney's previous shepherds of the project.[30] The final film thus reflects not only a huge technological achievement in the degree to which it combines live-action and animation, but it works to highlight myriad sources and styles from across the history of Hollywood cartoons as well.

But all this does not mean that it is a clearly always a *gag-based* comedy. *Roger Rabbit*

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29 For an in-depth discussion of the history of *Roger Rabbit* and its creation, see Ross Anderson, *Pulling a Rabbit Out of a Hat: The Making of Roger Rabbit*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019.
30 Anderson, p. 43-44.

does certainly borrow from the gag-filled milieu of Avery and *Looney Tunes*, but it is also a film

noir pastiche, a tongue-in-cheek backstage showbiz satire, and an action-filled blockbuster

spectacle, making the film's comic approach as hybrid as its use of live-action and animation. It

does provide a clear shift away from musical hybrids and back to more comic forms, but it is the

Jim Carrey vehicle *The Mask* that fits better as a more thoroughly gag-based Avery homage,

making explicit the vulgar modernist blend of live-action and animation that Jenkins saw as

implicit in Avery's work. The film's connections to Avery are clear throughout: Stanley's home

features Avery-themed décor; he watches an excerpt from *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943) on TV;

when possessed by the eponymous mask, he directly impersonates Avery's Wolf character

(bulging his eyes, rolling his tongue, dropping his jaw, etc.) Such citations are even present in

promotional material for the film, as one press release claimed that approximately "a hundred"

gags were lifted from Avery and various other cartoons.[31] However, clear homages to classical

gag-based cartoons are far from limited to hybrid gag-based comedies. Nods to *Looney Tunes*

crop up in *Blazing Saddles* (1974), numerous Joe Dante films (both with and without animation),

and *Death Race 2000* (1975), not to mention specific gags in the hybrid *Looney Tunes* films

Looney Tunes: Back in Action and *Space Jam*. In this way, then, we see one key way in which

Hollywood comedy of the blockbuster era owes a clear debt to classical gag-based animation.

In the wake of *Roger Rabbit*, a wide variety of live-action/animation hybrids appeared,

each of which used and adapted gag-based comedy to varying degrees. In terms of animation

styles, several followed *Roger Rabbit* by combining live-action with traditional (albeit often

digital rather than hand-drawn) 2-D cel animation styles, including *Space Jam*, *Osmosis Jones*,

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31 Qtd in Norman M. Klein, "Hybrid Cinema: *The Mask*, Masques, and Tex Avery," *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, p. 209.

Looney Tunes: Back in Action, and *The Spongebob Squarepants Movie* (2004), although this

approach became less prominent as digital 3-D became the animation default in the 21st century.

Other films incorporated live-action with three-dimensional, digitally animated characters: *The*

Mask, *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, *Scooby-Doo* and *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters*

Unleashed (2002/2004), the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* series, *Ted* and *Ted 2* (2012/2015), and *The*

Spongebob Movie: Sponge Out of Water, to name but a few. Still others took a mixed media

animation approach, using both 2-D and 3-D animation with live-action (*The Adventures of*

Rocky and Bullwinkle, the *Spongebob* films) or using a variety of other animation types

(*Monkeybone* features 2-D animation, stop-motion animation, *and* digital 3-D animation at

various points). And these categories do not include the massive number of films, most often

discursively aligned with visual effects rather than animation, that incorporate live-action and

digitally-animated elements, ranging from adventure comedies (1995's *Jumanji*, *Jumanji:*

Welcome to the Jungle) to effects-driven family comedies (1997's *Flubber*, 1999's *Inspector*

Gadget) and strongly comic superhero action films (2014's *Guardians of the Galaxy*, 2018's *Ant-*

Man and the Wasp, *Deadpool 2*). What aligns these films is not necessarily their animation

styles but their tendency toward combining live-action and animation for gag-based comedy,

whether in isolated moments or as a consistent approach.

Beyond animation styles, live-action/animation hybrids also vary greatly in the ways

these elements interact. In some cases, this means keeping animation largely separate from live-

action throughout much of the film, with the two only directly interacting at key points, often

near the climax. For instance, *Osmosis Jones* oscillates between a live-action world and the

animated world within Frank's body, only bringing the two together for isolated moments (as

Jones watches Frank's dreams) or in the climax (as Jones and Thrax move between Frank and Shane's body in the hospital). The first two *Spongebob* films each follow a similar trajectory. The 2004 film withholds live-action until the climax, when Spongebob and Patrick are captured and brought into a live-action, marine-themed curio shop. For the 2015 film, it intercuts between a (mostly) live-action story centering around Antonio Banderas' Burger Beard and an animated story set in Bikini Bottom. It is not until the film's final act, when Spongebob and friends are sent to the surface and turned into digitally animated 3-D characters to defeat Burger Beard, that live-action and animation consistently interact. And for other films, interactions between the two may be more consistent across the film but are generally limited to one or two major animated characters, as in *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, the *Ted* or *Scooby-Doo* films, or *Yogi Bear* (2010). If saving the direct interaction of live-action and animation for "special" moments or the climax of narratives closely resembles the approach to hybrid moments in classical Hollywood features, this second option is more akin to the sustained integration on display in *Out of the Inkwell* or certain *Looney Tunes* films, albeit at feature length.

The Best of Both Worlds?: Understanding the Why of Live-Action/Animation Comedies

Given some of the connections between animation and gags outlined here and the fact that many of these titles serve as examples of gag-based comedy across this dissertation, hybrid films have clearly been central to Hollywood gag-based comedy in recent decades. Beyond this, the deluge of visual effects films featuring gags dependent upon the interaction of live-action and digitally animated elements likewise makes hybrids even more central to contemporary gag comedy than is implied by the simple combination of explicit, traditionally-understood animation and live-action. All of this makes understanding live-action/animation hybrids vital for

understanding contemporary gag-based comedy. The question we should ask ourselves, then, is why? What benefits does the combination of live-action and animation provide for gags that neither form can achieve on their own? Given that a major reason why such hybrids were relegated to occasional shorts and isolated moments in features during the classical era was due to the costs and technical challenges inherent in combining live-action and animation, answers to this question are not immediately obvious. However, by examining theoretical considerations of animation and gags, we can start to get a better understanding of why this is the case. Doing so points out the adaptive possibilities of bringing animation-style gags into live-action, the technological and economic constraints that both drive and limit hybrid films, and the tension between animation's freedom and the realism of live-action cinema that constantly frames their interactions. These may not fully offer rationales for why the two are combined in every film, but they provide a strong sense of many of the main reasons that animate this hybrid comic form.

If Kristin Thompson best established the potential of animation's freedom in scholarly discourse, this potential is reinforced by both classical cartoonists and contemporary filmmakers as well. For *Looney Tunes* director Chuck Jones, "animation is an extension of motion pictures not an imitation. It should go where live action can't go," setting up a dichotomy between animation and live-action cinema that is dependent upon the possibilities inherent in each.[32] Tex Avery likewise claimed to favor impossible comedy precisely because he "found out early that if you did something with a character … that couldn't possibly be rigged up in live action, why then you've got a guaranteed laugh," but that "if a human can do it, a lot of times it isn't funny in animation. Or even if it is funny, a human could do it funnier."[33] For Avery as well, then, there is

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32 Qtd in *Chuck Jones: Conversations*, p. 40.
33 Qtd in Joe Adamson, *Tex Avery, King of Cartoons*, 1975, New York: Da Capo Press, 1985, p. 190.

an understanding that animation can and therefore *should* be fundamentally focused on exploring comic possibilities ill-suited to live-action. Contemporary filmmakers who work on live-action/animation hybrids concur. Visual effects supervisor Ed Jones saw greater freedom in using virtual audiences for *Space Jam*'s basketball games, allowing for more extreme camera angles than were possible in live-action so as to better replicate the aesthetic of original *Looney Tunes* cartoons.[34] *Sponge Out of Water* co-director Paul Tibbitt also praises animation's freedom to control the environment, noting that in animation "if you want to put the camera in a place that seems impossible, you just draw everything from that angle," unlike in live-action where "you realize once you get there that we can't really put the camera a quarter of an inch above the ground" to achieve the same effect.[35] For decades, then, creators have highlighted the flexibility of animation and reiterated the underlying assumption that animation offers a fundamental freedom live-action cinema does not.

Scholars further reinforce understanding animation in this way. One strain of animation scholarship argues that, due to the long-term neglect of animation within film studies more broadly, cinema *as a whole* is best understood as a subset of animation rather than animation being a relatively minor, neglected variant of live-action cinema. Alan Cholodenko proposed this radical inversion of the relationship between live-action and animation in the 1990s, asserting that "it is only through animation that film can define itself as film," and Lev Manovich developed it further by noting how, in the digital age, "cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation" and that digital cinema is "a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements."[36] While intriguing, others critiqued this

34 Bob Fisher, "*Space Jam*: A Special Effects Slam Dunk," *American Cinematographer*, Dec 1996, p. 88.
35 Tom McLean, "SpongeBob Gets Real," *Animation Magazine*, Mar 2015, p. 11-12.
36 Alan Cholodenko, "*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, or The Framing of Animation," *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation*, ed. Alan Cholodenko, Sydney: Power Publications, 1991, p. 213. Lev Manovich, *The Language of*

inversion as simplistic, and both Cholodenko and Manovich have since softened, reframed, and nuanced their position. More commonly, scholars see the relationship between live-action and animation as a complex, dialectical give-and-take. For Paul Wells, animation is a "more sophisticated and flexible medium than live-action film" that works to extend "the vocabulary of humour within the live-action film." Far from being separate from live-action cinema, though, it also self-consciously adopts live-action's norms due to the fact that animators must go through "a highly detailed process of *creating* a world rather than merely *inhabiting* one."[37] In relation to humor, others see an even more two-way relationship between live-action and animation. Charlie Keil and Daniel Goldmark claim that "the interchange between animated humor and live-action comedy is fluid and ongoing" due to the movement of gags between them, while Ethan de Seife considers the two forms to be "perhaps best considered as two distinct but overlapping modes or realms of filmic expression" rather than seeing one as a subset of the other.[38] Theories about the relationship between live-action film and animation may vary, then, but they still remain mutually dependent and mutually inflecting, especially in terms of comedy.

How exactly does this interdependence work? To start, consider some of the ways in which comic animation moves into the realm of live-action comedy. Creators and scholars acknowledge that cartoons and live-action comedy exchanged comic material in the silent and early sound era, but subsequent changes in each form served to alter this relationship

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New Media, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001, p. 295, 302.

37 Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, p. 6. Paul Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship*, London: Wallflower, 2002, p. 26.

38 Charlie Keil and Daniel Goldmark, "Introduction: What Makes These Pictures So Funny?," *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 5. Ethan de Seife, "Tish-Tash in Cartoonland," *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*, eds. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 233, 249.

somewhat.[39] Whether due to a change in the types of live-action gags borrowing from animation

or merely a change in the discourse around them, by mid-century the "impossible" gags of Frank

Tashlin (e.g. *Son of Paleface*, 1952) or Jerry Lewis (e.g. *The Nutty Professor*, 1963) became more

clearly understood as borrowing from the forms of humor on display in cartoons. Consequently,

discourse framed a tension between the appealing novelty of turning cartoon-like gags into live-

action and the limits of such borrowings, particularly the ways that it can highlight the

restrictions of live-action comedy itself. As McGowan puts it, when "comedians do engage in

'impossible' humor, it is usually necessary to interrupt their performance," potentially breaking

the diegesis as the body of a comedian will "subject itself to cinematic manipulation and at times

even literally become *animated*" to create such gags.[40] This is merely one of the tensions (and

challenges) inherent in applying animation techniques to live-action comedy, both in strictly live-

action films and in live-action/animation hybrids.

    For others, this tensions connects more explicitly with the combination of live-action and

animation seen in hybrid films. Dan North sees the conjunction of live-action and animation

within a single image as creating "a *comparison* between the real (synecdochically represented

by human actors) and the fabricated, placing the two forms in competition for the spectatorial

gaze," drawing us both to the technical apparatus of the combination *and* the efficacy of their

diegetic overlap.[41] Hybrids are thus split between the spectacle of intermingling live-

action/animation and their ability to convey narrative or, for our purposes, comedy. This is one

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39 See Chuck Jones' comments on the debt he owed to silent live-action comedians, including a feeling of
    "retroactive plagiarism" when rewatching Buster Keaton's films, in *Chuck Jones: Conversations*, p. 45. See also
    McGowan's discussion of the relationship between early cartoon "stars" and comedians in *Animated
    Personalities*, p. 115-117.
40 McGowan, p. 145, 147. Emphasis in original.
41 Dan North, *Performing Illusions: Cinema, Special Effects and the Virtual Actor*, London: Wallflower Press,
    2008, p. 67. Emphasis in original.

element that may potentially limit the flexibility of live-action/animation hybrids, but another

relates to the potential for excess and overload when adding animation to live-action. Norman

Klein muses that, for *The Mask*, visual effects artists were "usually asked to add objects or

gimmicks, rather than clean up or thin out," creating "much more visual throwaway than in the

usual live-action films," positioning animation (via visual effects) as adding *quantity*, but not

necessarily *quality*, to live-action comedy.[42] As seen in my discussion of the production of gags

in chapter four, Klein's hypothesis may only be partially accurate in practice, but it nevertheless

points to a discursive trend that sees live-action/animation hybrid comedies as being "lesser"

than either form individually.

This also points to the complicated discursive positioning of animation itself, which

further affects the framing of live-action/animation hybrids. Numerous creators of classical

Hollywood cartoons insisted that they made their films for a wide range of audiences, but

animation as a whole, and cartoons in particular, developed a fundamental connection with

juvenile audiences that still shapes popular and critical understandings of the form.[43] As Jason

Mittell outlines, the rise of cartoons on television and their successful, marketing-driven co-

option of Saturday morning TV time slots helped shift animation from discursively having a

broad appeal in the late 1950s to being almost exclusively for kids by the late 1960s.[44] The

complex legacy of this shift is still in evidence during the early development of *Who Framed*

Roger Rabbit. Due in part to an emphasis on live-action rather than animation at Disney during

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42 Klein, "Hybrid Cinema," p. 210.
43 See, for example, Chuck Jones' insistence that "we never wrote for anybody but ourselves" in *Chuck Jones: Conversations*, p. 134, or Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston's claim that Walt Disney "never made films solely for children, believing that we should only use material that was funny to everybody," *Too Funny for Words*, p. 67.
44 See Mittell, "From Saturday Morning to Around the Clock—The Industrial Practices of Television Cartoons," *Genre and Television*, p. 54-89. See p. 59 for shift in appeal from 1957 to 1967.

this time, Darrell Van Citters, an ex-animator and *Roger Rabbit*'s original unit director, expressed concern in 1981 that the film would feature live-action zaniness rather than following Disney's long tradition of character animation. He rejected the tendency toward "Tex Avery-style gags" in early script drafts, fearing that "a live-action director might only see wild gags, fast timing, impossible situations, and enormous pliability" and make the "animated equivalent of an *Animal House*" rather than the serious animation style Van Citters preferred.[45] His concerns may have been justified, as director Robert Zemeckis *did* continually push for more zany, Avery-style gags in the final film. More important, though, is the tension around the limiting alignment of animation and taste in Van Citters' criticism. For him, classical Disney character and personality-based animation appeals to a "better," wider audience than the Tex Avery, *Looney Tunes* gag-centered approach, which is "just" for youth audiences. This taps into a larger discursive struggle to see animation and gags beyond the confines of a continued narrowing of audience appeals framed in gag-based comedy more broadly, as discussed across this dissertation.

Another potential limit to the flexibility of live-action/animation hybrids relates to the challenges they pose in terms of technology and cost. Technological limitations likely prevented animation studios, especially Disney, from integrating live-action and animation on a more widespread scale in the classical era. According to various sources, the two would be combined in the 1940s by either creating animation first, then using rear projection to film live actors reacting to the animation timing, or by filming the live-action first and using an optical printer to add animation that would match the live-action environments.[46] Both options were fraught with difficulty, as combining multiple effects shots resulted in a lower image quality that could

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45 Anderson, p. 16.
46 See *Popular Science Monthly*'s descriptions qtd in Maltin, p. 67-68, and Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston's descriptions of the approaches used by Disney in *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1981, p. 525.

"break" the illusion of live-action/animation interaction, while each approach also limited the ability for actors to move in front of the animated characters and vice versa. These technological limitations could be overcome, especially when one compares the handling of the hybrid "Baía" musical number in *The Three Caballeros* to the "Blame It on the Samba" one from *Melody Time*. Still, they serve to provide plausible reasons for the infrequent, relatively short appearances of live-action/animation hybrids in classical Hollywood films. If hybrid segments fit well with the musical as a genre, such technical issues served to threaten the efficacy of the very spectacle they were meant to create.

These challenges are also intimately tied to cost, creating further difficulty for classical hybrids. Thomas and Johnston were diplomatically enthusiastic about hybrids, calling them "a third medium" that "must be planned more carefully, conceived with even more imagination, and budgeted realistically" to work, but they neglect to define what a "realistic" budget entails.[47] However, Michael Barrier credits the cost of *Three Caballeros* with making it a failure for Disney in the mid-40s, as box office receipts failed to match a negative cost of about $2 million and led the studio to scrap a proposed third entry in its Latin American-themed series of hybrid films. He also notes that "well-animated cartoon characters typically move both a little faster and in more clearly defined phrases than live-action actors," again contributing to the technical difficulties of hybrid films and, he implies, further ballooning the film's budget.[48] J.P. Telotte pushes back against the idea that cost was an impediment, though, suggesting instead that hybrid films may have been a way of *cutting* costs given Disney's recent financial failures, difficulties caused by World War II, and the studio's clashes with labor in the early 1940s, helping to explain

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47 Thomas and Johnston, *Disney Animation*, p. 524.
48 Barrier, p. 374. Barrier cites a 1947 studio balance sheet for these numbers, but other sources claim a higher international gross that may problematize his claims.

why hybrids became Disney's go-to for much of the decade.[49] Both Barrier and Telotte may be

right: films like *Saludos Amigos* were cheaper to make (with a negative cost of $350 thousand)

and more profitable, fitting Telotte's assertion, but they integrated live-action and animation less

systematically or to a far less intensive degree than did *Three Caballeros* or *Song of the South*,

films that cost nearly six times as much and were less immediately profitable, backing Barrier's

claim.[50] Irrespective of who is 'right' here, there is a clear correlation between an increase in the

complexity of hybrid films and an increase in cost.

It is thus unsurprising that hybrids would become less frequent as the studio system

fragmented in the 1960s. Some wildly successful films did incorporate live-action/animation

(*Mary Poppins*), but others took on those added technical costs without any concomitant box

office rewards (*Bedknobs and Broomsticks* or *Pete's Dragon*). This is further exacerbated by the

decline of the musical as a big budget form across this time, creating fewer opportunities and an

expectation of lower profits from musical hybrids in *Poppins*' wake. By the late-80s, though, a

more clearly comedy-oriented film like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* highlighted the continued

difficulty and expense of a full-fledged hybrid film *and* its potential for international commercial

rewards. Reports of the film's ultimate cost vary, ranging from $45 to 70 million, but there is

greater agreement that its worldwide take was nearly $330 million, slightly over half of which

came internationally.[51] Furthermore, this total also does not include the merchandising revenue

the film earned as part of its promotional blitz. Costs on the film were high: $5,000 per character

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49 J.P. Telotte, "The Changing Space of Animation: Disney's Hybrid Films of the 1940s," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2.3 (Nov 2007), p. 248-249.

50 Barrier, p. 369, 392.

51 Anderson lists the film's cost as $45 million with $10 million more spent on promotion (p. 157) and *George Lucas's Blockbusting* lists a cost of $58.166 million, but popular websites such as IMDB and The Numbers place the cost at about $70 million. *George Lucas's Blockbusting: A Decade-by-Decade Survey of Timeless Movies Including Untold Secrets of Their Financial and Cultural Success*, eds. Alex Ben Block and Lucy Autrey Wilson, New York: It Books, 2010, p. 615.

for rights to cameos from other studios' most recognizable characters (like Bugs Bunny); needing to film in 70mm VistaVision (with specially modified cameras) for a high enough quality image to stand up to the film's volume of optical compositing; four optical printers running nearly full time to process all of the film's effects.[52] Even given these formidable fees, such investments ultimately paid off when the film became a runaway commercial and cultural success.

As this list indicates, many of the film's costs were again associated with its technical complexities, ones that went above and beyond those in Disney's hybrid films of the 1940s. Industrial Light & Magic team head Ken Ralston discusses how the effects crew and animators wanted to let director Zemeckis shoot live-action footage as freely as possible, and since he "moves his camera, we had to devise ways for the animators to plot objects in the set for the perspective shifts" when they matched characters into the footage.[53] Anderson claims that most of the animation crew was unaware of this beforehand, making their work to match this moving perspective far more difficult, time-consuming, and expensive than initially projected.[54] The live-action crew also had to figure out how to simulate animated characters interacting with their environment, such as using water spouts to make Roger spit water, an armature to make him throw a (real) shot glass, and using a hidden driver sitting low in a stripped auto chassis as the base for the animated character of Benny the Cab.[55] Animators were then charged with covering over these live-action elements to create the impression of animated characters manipulating real-world objects. This had its benefits, as the animation team was able to cover up a timing issue in the live-action footage by stretching an animated weasel as he is punched to gloss over

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52 Anderson, p. 35, 50, 132.
53 Qtd in George Turner, "Cartoons Come to Life in *Roger*," *American Cinematographer*, Jul 1988, p. 54.
54 Anderson, p. 93.
55 Mark J.P. Wolf, "In the Frame of *Roger Rabbit*: Visual Compositing in Film," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 36 (Fall 1995), p. 48.

the incorrect timings, but it also provided technical limitations not unlike those faced in earlier examples of hybrid films.[56] For instance, live-action elements could limit the movements of animated characters, requiring Roger to move his arm in an "unnaturally stiff" manner to hurl the shot glass so as to cover up the armature, cutting against animation's promised freedom.[57]

We also see this freedom limited by costs, difficulties, and time constraints elsewhere in the film. For instance, although scenes where Eddie leaves Maroon Studios or visits Toontown added spectacle and received a great deal of praise, they were fantastically complex to achieve. According to ILM director of post-production Ed Jones, the Maroon Studies scene used 162 original elements and some 400 to 500 pieces of film requiring around 300 passes through the optical printer, "all for an illusion which lasted a couple of seconds."[58] The film as a whole used 1031 composite shots, with composites needing up to ten hours of optical printing time each.[59] Anderson also highlights how the Toontown sequence "was drastically reduced due to time and cost constraints."[60] This was partly due to the perfectionism of animation head Richard Williams, who wanted the film's animation done on the ones (that is, animating movement in every frame of film) rather than the industry standard, and far more economical, on the twos (animating every *other* frame). However, it was also due to the sheer amount of animation the sequence required, keeping the film's original animation unit behind its projected pace and necessitating the creation of a second animation unit to focus solely on Toontown.[61] Even so, this second unit had to lean heavily on a "Disney morgue" of cels and characters that allowed them to reuse original animation from classical Disney shorts and features to save time and

56 Anderson, p. 60.
57 Wolf, p. 49.
58 Qtd in Wolf, p. 45.
59 Turner, p. 6.
60 Anderson, p. 83.
61 Ibid., p. 97, 113.

money in filling Toontown.[62] If the promise of animation's freedom added a great deal of

flexibility to *Roger Rabbit*, then, practical constraints of cost and time on this incredibly labor-

intensive hybrid undercuts Ralston's assertion that "there are no limitations" for such a film.[63]

Many of *Roger Rabbit*'s specific issues relate to its use of traditional cel animation and

optical printing, but subsequent hybrids faced similar challenges when moving to digital

animation, either in part or in whole. Beyond the examples of *The Flintstones* (1994) and the

Scooby-Doo films covered in chapter four, digital gags create specific challenges for other hybrid

films, as in a film like *Monkeybone* that combines digital, traditional, *and* stop-motion animation

to create production shenanigans akin to those in *Roger Rabbit*. This includes on-set puppets

standing in for the eponymous stop-motion character's interactions with star Brendan Fraser, live

video images showing rough CGI pre-visualizations during filming, and standard motion-control

cameras that, when combined with a "robotic replica" of Fraser's head and torso, could be used

to later animate Monkeybone.[64] This technique likely produced the gag where Monkeybone

kisses Stu, followed by Stu's subsequent scream, early in the film, an incredibly complex shot for

a gag taking up a mere eight seconds of screen time. The technological complexity of such brief

gags also reinforces the disconnect between live-action and animation or effects personnel seen

in chapter four. Falling under the umbrella of what Norman Klein calls "*applied* animation," he

argues that effects work in contemporary live-action/animation hybrids like *The Mask* leads to a

dehumanized, disconnected production process and, potentially, similarly dehumanized

narratives.[65] Underlying Klein's argument is the idea that, if we compare the live-action and

animated elements in a single image a la North, the non-human, animated elements are clearly

62 Ibid., p. 116, 123.
63 Turner, p. 55.
64 "Stop the Motion," *Millimeter*, Apr 2001, p. V1-V2.
65 Klein, "Hybrid Cinema," p. 211.

winning. This may partly account for the mixed to hostile critical and commercial receptions of some of the major live-action/animated films of the past twenty years, from *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, *Monkeybone*, and *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* to, more recently, the (not *intentionally* comic) 2019 film *Cats*. As cinematographer Michael Ballhaus puts it, effects based comedy is "like an enormous puzzle, and because of the mixture of motion control, CGI work and so forth, no one person is in total control," potentially making such hybrid films more susceptible to failure in terms of a coherent narrative, comic approach, or appeal.[66] Ironically, this was exactly the case for *Wild Wild West*, the 1999 flop Ballhaus was working on when making these comments.

Given all of this, we may thus return to our initial question and ask: why bother? What benefits are there to combining live-action and animation at all? A pithy answer would be that they offer the possibility of a large box-office take, a la *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *The Mask*, or *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (2007), but this fails to truly get at *why*, especially given the high risk of failure evident in other hybrid films. Instead, both scholars and practitioners provide more theoretical rationales that better explain why live-action and animation are a good match, especially for gag-based comedy. As previously indicated, the discursively-defined freedom of animation is one major benefit and is particularly well suited to comic adaptations. Referring to Stanley in *The Mask*, Dan North credits the power and freedom of the film's digital animation with making him "a walking intertext, embodying a cartoon aesthetic that has been infused with a digital nature" and a more fully-realized embodiment of a Tex Avery aesthetic than would otherwise be possible in live-action.[67] Wolf sees similar potential in digital animation, noting

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66 Qtd in David E. Williams, "Sci-Fi Cowboys," *American Cinematographer*, Jul 1999, p. 47.
67 North, p. 138.

that digital compositing can allow for a "cel layer" approach whereby animation principles can be applied to live-action more feasibly and cost-effectively than ever before.[68] Even more elaborately, Donald Crafton's concept of the "Tooniverse" is also applicable, especially his description of how animators often engage in a human-toon "commutation" because "on film the live-animated relationship is transposable." In practice, this means that *both* live-action and animation simply come across as actors to the audience, creating "a pantheistic belief in the continuity and interchangeability of living and inanimate beings."[69] If audiences tend to believe both live-action and animation are equally "valid" forms of cinema, then, it follows that they would also accept a combination of the two. Blending the greater freedom of animation with this tendency of audiences to accept live-action and animated characters as relatively equivalent thus provides a strong rationale for why such hybrid films can and do work.

Practitioners provide an even more finely-grained sense of the range of possibilities live-action/animation brings to individual films. If integrating animation with live-action can at times be limiting, it can also create new avenues for incorporating gags. For 1985's *Back to the Future*, the visual effects crew was able to add a last minute, chicken fat gag from director Robert Zemeckis (a blinking turn signal as the flying Delorean turns while hovering at the film's end) by animating it after effects shots for the scene had already been completed.[70] For *Inspector Gadget*, the effects team could literally combine live-action with digital animation to get the best of both worlds. They filmed star Matthew Broderick walking on stilts while on a treadmill against a green screen to get a sharper sense of his physical, comic movements before replacing his legs with animated Gadget-stilts. Rough green screen composites like these could even be

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68 Wolf, p. 50.
69 Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 22, 80-81.
70 George Turner, "*Back to the Future* on Wheels of Fire," *American Cinematographer*, Dec 1985, p. 80.

reviewed on set for quicker, easier retakes to adjust comic timing before committing to a costly, time-consuming final digital composite, an option not available to earlier hybrid films.[71] Animation as digital visual effects also allows filmmakers to further pack frames with gags. John Schwartzman, cinematographer for *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian* (2009), called the film "a comedy first and an effects extravaganza second," describing how the filmmakers augmented the film's comedy by adding animated elements to everything from simple two-shots to sprawling set pieces.[72] This approach may run the risk of fulfilling Klein's prediction and overloading the film, but it also seems to offer a clearer and, at least in the context of a high budgeted studio tentpole, more feasible way of achieving the promise of animation's freedom within a hybrid film.

However, all of these factors only explain in *part* why live-action/animation hybrids can be a popular vehicle for gag-based comedy. In addition to the freedom of animation, scholars and especially practitioners routinely hone in on *realism* as central to animation as a whole and live-action/animation hybrids in particular. Of course, comedy is no stranger to discursive struggles around the balance between realism and fantasy, as it thrives on the implausible and fantastical to a degree not afforded other genres while still requiring a realistic base to engage audiences and/or ground its comic moments. This tension is even integral to the performative and narrative expectations of comedy, from comic duos featuring a straight (realistic) performer and a comic (fantastical) one to models of comic narrative that seek to "tame" a social outcast by pushing them into a more realistic engagement with the world.[73] When applied to animation and hybrids, though, realism acquires different connotations. In animation, realism has historically

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71 Ron Magid, "Handy in a Crisis," *American Cinematographer*, Aug 1999, p. 66, 68.
72 Patricia Thomson, "Making History Fun," *American Cinematographer*, Jun 2009, p. 55.
73 For an overview of comic narrative models, see Neale, p. 59-65.

been associated with Disney, both positively and negatively. Walt Disney once defined his

approach as using animation not in an attempt to copy reality, but so as to feature "plausible

impossibility," a loaded term that seems to favor the realistic (the 'plausible') rather than the

'impossible' favored by some other animators.[74] It makes sense, then, that as a studio Disney

often designed animation and hybrid films with realism in mind. Thomas and Johnston

explicitly use realism to defend Disney's use of personality animation, claiming that gags and

effects "will hold [the audiences] attention for barely ten minutes," far less time than the reality

of a well-defined character would.[75] However, J.P. Telotte sees Disney's hybrid films of the

1940s as working, in part, to push back against this tendency, especially in the wake of an

extremely realistic film like 1942's *Bambi*. For him, hybrids are "evidence of Disney repeatedly

trying to regain some balance between those realistic and subversive possibilities that, ultimately,

are both intrinsic to animation," a balance contemporaneous discourse often framed Disney as

neglecting.[76] This certainly seems to be the case in sequences that depend upon subversive,

abstract, even proto-psychedelic mixtures of animation and live-action in the later musical

numbers of *Three Caballeros* or the "Blame It on the Samba" number in *Melody Time*. However,

Disney's general approach to animation soon returned to reality afterwards, with live-action

footage relegated to serving as the basis for rotoscoping human characters.

Of course, the push and pull between the realistic and the fantastic affected other studios

as well, further defining realism's place in animation and in hybrid films. Scholars often portray

animation as dependent upon a complex balance of reality and fantasy, with Paul Wells seeing

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74 Qtd in Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*, London: John Libby, 1994, p. 65.
75 Thomas and Johnston, *Illusion of Life*, p. 19, 21.
76 Telotte, p. 247.

"the tension *between* belief and disbelief" as an integral part of animation's effects.[77] For David McGowan, animation shares a rhetoric of authenticity with live-action, and he sees the tendency of early animated stars to be human or strongly anthropomorphized as helping perform this authenticity for viewers.[78] This fits with similar approaches to digital effects such as Stephen Prince's influential formulation that digital imaging, though no longer indexical like the analog image, still functions as a "perceptually realistic image" and fulfills similar functions for viewers as did analog photography.[79] Following Prince, then, if an image *seems* real, even if it is clearly animated, we accept it as real within the context of the film. For forms of animation like clay or stop-motion that use real world objects, the appearance of authenticity and perceptual realism can come across even more strongly. Jane Shadbolt frames contemporary stop-motion animation as a unique special effect in its own right, using non-digital materials to operate with "its own visual language and its own emotional resonance" that help to suspend disbelief. For her, this form of animation "is never photoreal and has never tried to be. The approximation is enough."[80] These theorists all see animation as offering *both* realism and the potential for fantastical freedom, akin to the balancing act on display in Disney's hybrid films of the 1940s.

This sense of realism is also clearly on the mind of many animators, effects personnel, and others creating hybrid films. It is perhaps best summed up by production designer Peter Jamison who, in discussing his work on the infamous 1986 flop *Howard the Duck*, posited that with an effective suspension of disbelief "you can show [the audience] just about anything." One simply has to establish a sense of reality and craft a design that people will believe in "no

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77 Wells, *Understanding Animation*, p. 20. Emphasis in original.
78 McGowan, p. 7-9.
79 Stephen Prince, "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly*, 49.3 (Spring 1996), p. 32.
80 Jane Shadbolt, "Parallel Synchronized Randomness: Stop-Motion Animation in Live Action Feature Films," *Animation Studies*, 8 (9 Jun 2013).

matter what kind of world you're talking about, because, certainly, we're not creating reality."[81]

Indeed, while much of *Roger Rabbit* involved fantastical overlaps between live-action and animated characters, the film's animation also strove to create a rhetoric of authenticity as well. In describing the multitude of effects necessary to create Toontown, Ken Ralston muses that they were all "pieces of the puzzle we had to solve to blend the cartoons into the live action *to the point where an audience would accept them as real characters*," an approach that belies the fact that they are very *un*real characters.[82] Even *Cats & Dogs* (2001), a film that centers around clearly fantastical talking animals, used animated effects work that appealed to realism and believability. Bill Westenhofer, visual effects supervisor at the effects studio Rhythm & Hues, describes how the use of anatomical simulations meant that the CGI animals "could do crazy actions ... and their bodies completely held together and did exactly what they're supposed to do in real life," adding that because the film cut between real and CGI animals, "our animation required a very high degree of fidelity" to remain believable.[83] Although the CGI animals, much like the animated characters in *Roger Rabbit*, engage in comic actions that are absurd and fantastic, they nevertheless must fit realistically into the film's world to be judged a success.

The realism of animation and effects also helps shape specific gags. In *Bruce Almighty* (2003), a gag where Bruce uses his new godlike powers to part a bowl of tomato soup required the use of complicated mechanical effects by visual effects studio Illusion Arts to simulate the miraculous parting. Digital effects were out because simulating a liquid with "really turbulent dynamics" was too difficult and expensive. Instead, they needed to use a larger than normal, foot and a half wide soup bowl on a pivoting table to "get large enough ripples in the soup to sell the

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81 Qtd in George Turner, "A Duck Who Needs No Introduction," *American Cinematographer*, Sep 1986, p. 57.
82 Turner, "Cartoons Come to Life," p. 57. Emphasis mine.
83 Ron Magid, "Peeved Pets," *American Cinematographer*, Aug 2001, p. 78.

gag," a method that ultimately worked because it "got a look that was the closest to reality."[84]

Likewise, for *Night at the Museum*, the Rhythm & Hues effects team again engaged in

anatomical research to help them animate a woolly mammoth that comes to life and comically

rampages through the museum. While they acknowledged that the film was a comedy, they

explicitly "wanted to avoid creating a woolly mammoth that veered too closely to Sesame

Street's Snuffleupagus," instead trying "to draw a line between comedy and what we think real

mammoths looked like."[85] Again, these creators emphasize *realism* as the key to animation

within a live-action context. The effects artists may acknowledge that they are working on (quite

fantastical) comedies, but their emphasis is still on realism rather than on the gags themselves.

The methods may change, but such an approach fits within a long tradition of tensions and

discursive struggles to balance the realistic and the fantastic in animation, hybrids, and comedy.

Balancing Animated Freedom and Realism in Four Hybrid Films

If the history of live-action/animation hybrids and their relationship to gags help highlight

why gag comedy has adapted so well to such hybrids, a further examination of specific films and

gags will allow us to better gauge how hybrid films utilize gag-based comedy in practice. To this

end, I look at how the tensions between animation's freedom and the dictates of realism affect

gags in four hybrid gag-based comedies of the 2000s and 2010s: *The Adventures of Rocky and

Bullwinkle*, *Osmosis Jones*, *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*, and *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge

Out of Water*. Not only do various gags in these films highlight the promise of animation's

freedom, the dictates of realism, and ways in which animation and live-action are mutually

dependent, but they also better showcase how theoretical approaches to hybrids, animation, and

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84 Ellen Wolff, "*Bruce Almighty*: Engineering a Miracle," *Millimeter*, May 2003, p. 34-35.
85 Ellen Wolff, "*Night at the Museum*: A Mammoth Assignment," *Millimeter*, Jan 2007, p. 34.

gags hold up in actual films. Examining these films shows that the approaches of scholars and

practitioners often do hold up, but that they still struggle to fully explicate the range of

possibilities, flexibility, and the limitations for gag-based comedy present in the combination of

live-action and animation as well.

As it has been traditionally understood, one of animation's advantages is its ability to

create worlds that are free to follow as few or as many of the rules of reality as they choose. In

describing animation, Donald Crafton see its broad appeal as being in "the alternate world that it

conjures, a world in which the rules are suspended and viewers allow themselves to be

mesmerized."[86] For hybrid films, Telotte highlights the potential they provide "to demonstrate

that there is another, more promising, world alongside our own, if only we could shift

perspective to see it."[87] These "alternate worlds" of animation are on clear display in each of

these four films, both at the level of narrative and in their gags. For *Spongebob* and *Rocky and

Bullwinkle*, this manifests as a literally separate world of 2-D animation, where the prologue for

Rocky and Bullwinkle and much of the first two-thirds of *Spongebob* each take place. In both

cases, these separate, 2-D animated worlds also help tie the films to their TV incarnations, with

the transition to live-action and 3-D digital animation serving in part to help differentiate the

films from an episode of their respective TV shows. The other films, *Osmosis Jones* and *Looney

Tunes*, offer variations on this approach. *Osmosis* features a separate, animated world taking

place within the body of Frank, the film's main live-action character, while *Looney Tunes* takes a

world similar to our own (given that Warner Bros., Brendan Fraser, and the 1999 and 2001

Mummy films exist in both the real world and the *Looney Tunes* one) and simply adds animated

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86 Crafton, p. 145.
87 Telotte, p. 255.

characters to it. In each, animation works to create a separate world that exists alongside, and eventually intersects with, our own.

These films also use their animated worlds for gags that, in their makeup, timing, or level of detail, would be difficult or impossible to replicate in live-action. For *Osmosis Jones*, this is primarily evident in the sheer number of chicken fat gags littering the background of Downtown Frank, especially early on in the film. Punning billboards cover the city (calling for "peace in the middle ear" or advertising the "Glands" hotel & casino with name and sign clearly modeled on Las Vegas venues) that hurtle past so quickly as to be barely noticeable without the benefit of pausing and rewinding. These gags are emphasized to different degrees as well. A police car crashing into the center of a billboard with a giant picture of a human butt exhorting us to "visit the land down under" creates a brief, but clearly visible, punchline. However, only seconds earlier we can barely glimpse a similarly themed billboard advertising the "Hemorrhoid Valley" campsite in the anus.[88] Chicken fat gags like these are of course possible in a live-action context, but it would be far more difficult (or, more likely, too expensive) to create a *world* that is so densely populated with these specific gags. Similarly, in *Spongebob*, after Mr. Krabs predicts that the town of Bikini Bottom will descend into anarchy without their beloved Krabby Patties, the town instantly shifts to a stereotypical smoke and rubble-filled, leather-clad post-apocalyptic milieu. A gag like this would again be theoretically possible in live-action, but effecting such an instantaneous change would likely be prohibitively difficult, expensive, and unrealistic for it to be feasible. All of these films also feature numerous examples where animated (and occasionally live-action) characters are subject to what Scott Bukatman calls "cartoon physics" as they fly,

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88 By my count, the billboard is only visible for 13 frames, most of which are obscured by a car passing in front of it.

zip, and hurtle around without damage or consideration for any kind of physical laws.[89] Instances like these highlight some of the ways in which hybrid films adapt to take full advantage of the comic possibilities offered by animation's freedom.

For all their cartoonish freedom, though, realism is also a clear influence on each film's approach to live-action and animation. This is likely a major reason why *Spongebob* and *Rocky and Bullwinkle* both use 3-D digital animation for their hybrid moments rather than the 2-D cel-styled animation of their TV forerunners. This is strongly hinted at by ILM animation supervisor David Andrews when he notes that *Rocky and Bullwinkle* director Des McAnuff originally wanted the characters "to be cel-drawn in the real world" in 2-D, but was pressured by the studio and Rocky and Bullwinkle rights holder Tiffany Ward to make them 3-D, digitally animated characters.[90] McAnuff *did* insist on keeping the characters flatter and more cartoon-like in their 3-D form, an approach visual effects supervisor Roger Guyett called "two-and-a-half D." Still, this animation type used "real 3D characters" moving through a digital environment "based on real, dimensional space," again implying that realism was a motivating factor for choosing this approach.[91] Tracing the trajectory of the three *Spongebob* feature films further reinforces this. The first, *The Spongebob Squarepants Movie*, is animated entirely in 2-D, even when an animated Spongebob and Patrick interact with live-action reality at the film's climax. For *Sponge Out of Water*, the sequences set underwater in Bikini Bottom use traditional 2-D animation, but when the main characters are shot to the surface by a magical time-traveling dolphin, they transform into 3-D, digitally animated characters for their live-action interactions.

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89 Scott Bukatman, "Some Observations Pertaining to Cartoon Physics; or, The Cartoon Cat in the Machine," *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, p. 301-316.
90 Qtd in Jenny Peters, "*The Adventures of Rocky & Bullwinkle*: Moose and Squirrel Live Again," *Animation Magazine*, Jul/Aug 2000, p. 14.
91 Ibid.

The latest entry, *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge On the Run* (2020), eschews 2-D animation entirely, using a digital, 3-D style both in Bikini Bottom *and* in live-action sequences. This trajectory fits Bukatman's observation that the norm of contemporary, digital animation is to follow Paul Wells' concept of "realist animation" so much "that it frequently goes unremarked," preferring a more realistic cartoon physical existence.[92] The use of digital 3-D animation thus functions as an unstated synecdoche for realism in these films.

Realism also appears in these four hybrid films via the reality of living human bodies occupying the frame with animated characters so as to provide their own comic possibilities. Part of the appeal for *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* lies in seeing star Brendan Fraser engage in physical comedy, from his various pratfalls while he chases Daffy around the Warner Bros. lot to when he dresses up and performs as a poorly disguised Yosemite Sam dancer to make contact with Dusty Tails. This extends to the film's references to the real world, perhaps best exemplified in the running gag of Fraser's character, DJ, wanting to be a stuntman for Brendan Fraser, culminating when DJ meets and punches out a parodically narcissistic version of Fraser. The gag depends upon both effects work *and* a knowing, tongue-in-cheek sense of realism to work. Similarly, part of *Osmosis Jones*' appeals depend on the comic performances of star Bill Murray as Frank to anchor its live-action sections. Both Murray's trademark deadpan, sarcastic line deliveries and moments of physical humor, as in his exaggerated fall when Osmosis accidentally hits a nerve receptor inside Frank, rely on the realism of Murray's embodied performance for their comic effects. *Spongebob* also depends on Antonio Banderas to anchor its live-action parts, and his delightfully campy, over-the-top performance functions throughout to provide a strain of comedy across the film's live-action sequences that is grounded in both

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92 Bukatman, p. 312.

embodied realism *and* cartoons. If, as I argued in chapter four, we see a tendency in contemporary comedy toward effects-driven gags and away from those centered around embodied comic performance, these actors highlight how both are still a necessary, and vibrant, source for gags.

Hybrid films also depend on the *interaction* between live-action and animation to create many gags. At times, this means a gag will be set up by either the live-action or animation and then followed through in the other medium. The switch from Osmosis shooting the nerve receptor to Frank's comical reaction serves as one example. Others include Boris in *Rocky and Bullwinkle* stepping off a water tower before he "remembers" gravity and falls in digitally-enhanced cartoon fashion, or the celebrated Louvre sequence from *Looney Tunes* that uses a live-action location and famous paintings to motivate Bugs, Daffy, and Elmer jumping from canvas to canvas as the animation switches to match each painting's art style. In other cases, interactions between live-action and animation follow a "fish out of water" type scenario. This can be literal, as in *Spongebob*, where numerous gags revolve around the sea critters coming to the surface and mistakenly interpreting the appearances and actions of the beachgoers they meet (taking a rotund, sleeping sunbather to be a beached whale that they try to roll back into the water), or interacting with the real world in humorously atypical ways (gaining questionably useful superpowers like the ability to gather nearby ice cream or blow unlimited bubbles). The two even combine when Sandy Squirrel's superhero form is revealed to be that of a realistically animated, human-sized squirrel, albeit one that talks and is armed with Sandy's knowledge of martial arts. Instances like these show how live-action and animation often work hand-in-hand to create gags, using animation's freedom *and* the grounding of live-action's realism in roughly

equal parts to create its comedy.

At other times, though, there is a greater tension between the two forms that highlights the limits of their flexibility. Live-action characters *can* shine, but they also often get short shrift in films that integrate animation throughout, both in terms of performance and narrative. For example, *Film Review* called Steve Martin's performance in *Looney Tunes* "so off that it jars against the quality found elsewhere," while reviews generally sidestepped commenting at *all* on co-star Jenna Elfman's performance.[93] And while not necessarily critiquing actor Piper Perabo, reviews of *Rocky and Bullwinkle* saw the subplot involving her FBI Agent Karen Sympathy as "embarrassing" and "played excruciatingly straight."[94] In each case, the implication is that the performers' comic input is less vital than that of their animated compatriots. At the same time, the presence of animated characters clearly following the rules of cartoon physics can feel jarringly dissonant when compared to the more realistic physical presence of live-action actors. Brendan Fraser's pratfalls may be effective gags in their own right, but they also run the risk of seeming tame when compared to the constant, outlandish physical humor of his animated co-stars. Animation's association with children and family audiences also creates potential tonal issues when live-action, animation, or both create gags clearly aimed at adults. This can be due either to their referentiality (*Looney Tunes*' parody of *Psycho* (1960) and host of classical sci-fi film references on display in Area 52, or, as Fearless Leader in *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, Robert De Niro's direct citation of his famous "you talkin' to me?" speech from 1976's *Taxi Driver*) or innuendo (a sunbathing woman moaning in pleasure as Squidward accidentally massages her oiled back in *Spongebob*, or a line about how Osmosis "divides with himself" serving as a clear

93 Anwar Brett, "Looney Tunes: Back in Action," *Film Review*, Mar 2004, p. 92.
94 Leslie Felperin, "The Adventures of Rocky & Bullwinkle," *Sight and Sound*, Feb 2001, p. 34.

masturbation joke in *Osmosis Jones*). Dual audience address may be common in animation, but critics still often see moments like these as jarring or in poor taste, likely due to the lingering discursive connection of animation (and thus hybrids) to juvenile audiences.

These tensions between live-action and animation point to the limits of gag-based comedy in adapting to hybrids more broadly. One key limitation relates to the boundaries of believability when the two forms interact. Live-action/animation hybrids may have been rarer and more geared to shorts in classical Hollywood, but this also helped them from pushing too far beyond many viewers' suspension of disbelief. As Leonard Maltin describes the *Looney Tunes* short *You Ought To Be in Pictures*, it is "so charming that we *want* to suspend logic and believe" in the reality of the animated characters in a live-action setting.[95] The increasing prevalence of hybrids since the 1990s, then, has the potential to lose this charm and the suspension of disbelief needed for audiences to feel fully engaged with a film's narrative or comedy. Although it would be extremely difficult to reinforce this with empirical audience data, I propose that this is at least a plausible limitation that can help explain the critical and/or commercial struggle of various live-action/animation gag-based comedies, including three (*Rocky and Bullwinkle*, *Osmosis Jones*, *Looney Tunes*) of the ones I am examining here. With an increase in such films more broadly, audiences would become more inured to the "novelty" of combining live-action and animation and more critical when the two do not align perfectly.

For these four particular hybrids, the seams between live-action and animation are clearly visible in a number of instances. While not a gag, Osmosis and Thrax's fight on Shane's fake eyelash at the climax of *Osmosis Jones* can struggle to maintain a suspension of disbelief due to its introduction of a new type of visual effect (a digitally rendered version of Shane's eye) that

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95 Maltin, p. 242. Emphasis in original.

fails to be "perceptually realistic" even by contemporaneous digital standards. It instead falls

into the 'uncanny valley' of digital effects that are more likely to take audiences *out* of the

diegesis than to reinforce their suspension of disbelief. While the 2.5-D approach to digital

animation in *Rocky and Bullwinkle* may help it avoid that uncanny valley, certain interactions

between the live-action actors and animated characters threaten to derail the illusion, as when

Cappy forcibly (and awkwardly) stuffs Rocky into the White House's digital scanner late in the

film. Similarly, *Looney Tunes* struggles to effectively integrate live-action humans and animated

characters when DJ unrealistically "holds" a captured Daffy Duck early in the film. Many of

these interactions utilize the same types of visual effects approaches seen in *Roger Rabbit* fifteen

years earlier (including animating over mechanical, live-action effects to simulate animated

characters interacting with the world), but they are unable to match them either due to technical

limitations or due to increased audience credulity from a growing familiarity with hybrid films.

Interactions between live-action and animation may provide more opportunities for gags, but

their increase in *quantity* can (negatively) highlight issues in *quality* more as well.

This may also be due to another major potential industrial limitation of hybrid films: their

cost. While they may be more common now, hybrid gag-based comedies often remain

expensive, risky ventures. This is particularly true of the flurry of hybrid films in the late 90s

and early 2000s, as *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, *Osmosis Jones*, and *Looney Tunes* all grossed a

fraction of their reported production budgets worldwide, with *Osmosis* returning only about one-

fifth of its budget.[96] The similarity of each film's production costs, all of which are less than the

biggest tentpole releases of the time but still similar to or more than contemporaneous comedy

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96 According to The Numbers, *Rocky and Bullwinkle* cost $70 million and grossed $35 million; *Osmosis* cost $70
million and grossed $13.6 million; and *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* cost $80 million and grossed $54.5
million, over half of which came internationally.

hits like *Shrek* or *Bruce Almighty*, highlight hybrids' costs and the risk they pose even when opportunities for merchandising (as in *Looney Tunes*) may help to defray those costs.[97] Of course, the potential for a breakout hit a la *Roger Rabbit* helped keep hybrid films on the market, and with entries like *Alvin and the Chipmunks* or *Sponge Out of Water* grossing 4-6 times more than their budgets, further films tried to copy that success.[98] It is plausible, though, that studios and production teams may be more limited in the type or degree of gags they can incorporate in recent hybrid films due to cost concerns. *Spongebob* may be the lone commercial success out of the four films examined in this section, but it also features arguably the greatest *separation* of live-action and animation for much of the film (compared to *Rocky and Bullwinkle* or *Looney Tunes*) or a more limited range of live-action locales (compared to *Osmosis Jones*) that helped keep its costs lower. Even made nearly fifteen years later, *Spongebob*'s budget remains very close to that of *Rocky and Bullwinkle* and *Osmosis Jones*.

The cost of hybrids can shape specific gags in the films themselves and further highlight reasons for some of their negative discursive responses. After villains Boris, Natasha, and Fearless Leader follow Rocky and Bullwinkle into a live-action world, the narrator describes their transformation "through the miracle of computer-generated digital technology" from "expensive animated characters ... into even more expensive motion picture stars": Jason Alexander, Rene Russo, and Robert De Niro, respectively. Reflexively, this gag highlights the technical means by which animation and live-action interact in the film, the costs spent by the film to provide spectacle *and* star appeal (even if such attempts ultimately wound up for naught), and the type of knowing humor on display in the original TV series. *Looney Tunes* likewise

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97 The Numbers gives budgets for *Shrek* and *Bruce Almighty* as $50 million and $81 million, respectively.

98 *Alvin and the Chipmunks* grossed $362 million globally on a $55 million budget, while *Spongebob* grossed about $311 million on a $74 million budget. All data from The Numbers.

foregrounds its economics through a series of reflexive gags that draw attention to its use of product placement. In Las Vegas, DJ, Daffy, and Bugs run into NASCAR star Jeff Gordon and end up stealing his race car for a chase through the city streets. Gordon's cameo appearance serves as a gag partly due to its unexpectedness, and there are a number of gags on display in the car chase itself, but it also works as an advertisement for Gordon (a multimedia star in his own right), NASCAR (increasing in popularity at the time, and having added races at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway only a few years before), and DuPont (the sponsor of Gordon's #24 car). In a similar vein, DJ, Daffy, Bugs, and Kate later wander lost in the desert when they come across the unexpected oasis of a Wal-Mart store. This gag again depends upon surprise, incongruity, and the sardonic, knowing responses of Bugs and Daffy to such blatant product placement, but it still also serves as a form of advertising for Wal-Mart itself. These, as well as the numerous Warner Bros. references scattered throughout, seem designed to try and defray some of the film's expense by selling product placements and enhancing the film's synergy through the use of various Warner Bros.-related characters. Several of these references may fit well with director Joe Dante's cinephilia, especially in the Area 52 sequence, but the opportunities they offer for gags also highlight the film's status as a blatantly commercial product. Many critics would have welcomed a purely animated or purely live-action film rather than one that depended upon this level of commercialism to get made.

Conclusion

That being said, the tensions between the flexibility of gags and limits on their ability to effectively adapt may simply be part and parcel of the relationship between live-action/animation hybrids and gag-based comedy. It stretches from their historical development and the related

discourse on animation and gags to their interactions between gags, the freedoms of animation,

the dictates of realism, and the tensions across them all. Gag-based hybrids have thus been and

remain at the center of a variety of industrial issues that help explain not only their popularity,

but the challenges that gag-based comedy as a whole has faced over the past two decades.

Furthermore, *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, *Osmosis Jones*, *Looney Tunes: Back in*

Action, and *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* all show the ways in which these

tensions inflect the possibilities and limitations for contemporary gag-based hybrids. Although

the costs and technical challenges inherent in combining live-action and animation still affect

such films and complicate their ability to effectively adapt to dictates of the blockbuster era

industry at times, in other instances the possibilities for comic adaptation and the commercial

advantages of hybrid comedies still make them a key avenue for gag-based Hollywood comedy.

As the recent release, and arguably moderate success, of *Tom & Jerry* (2021) serves to show,

hybrids can still adapt to be a key part of the contemporary Hollywood industry, even as gag-

based comedy itself evolves to become less and less of an isolated form.[99]

Given the array of topics and factors that I examine in this chapter, many could use

further research and analysis to better unpack how live-action/animation hybrids relate to gag-

based comedy. By further tracing their history, their shifting status within the industry, the

factors helping or preventing them from being made, and other examples of gags from an even

wider variety of hybrid films, we can better understand an undertheorized area of animation and

comedy studies and its role within the larger space of gag-based comedy. Furthermore, the

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[99] I say 'arguably moderate' as the film was reasonably budgeted (at a reported $50 million), but only tallied $123 million worldwide. While marketing costs would make this likely only a very modest profit at best, its status as one of the biggest wide releases during the COVID pandemic up to that point (Feb 2021) means that its overall profitability is clouded by the economics of its day-and-date HBO Max streaming release, which may have further helped or hurt its overall bottom line.

continuing hybridization of live-action/animation films in terms of genre, comic approaches, and types of animation raises a whole host of additional questions that I can only partly address. In particular, I have only scratched the surface when it comes to connecting hybrid gag-based comedy and the literature on special effects in film more broadly. Given that this is both one of the biggest avenues by which gags have been able to adapt and maintain their place *and* one of the major sources for turning gag comedy into a supporting player within blockbuster cinema, future work would do well to address the role of "invisible" effects on gags and the relation of digital to live-action performances in hybrid films, among other things, to better grasp how these factors are changing in the current industrial landscape. While their form may have changed greatly over the nearly 100 years between *Out of the Inkwell* and *Sponge Out of Water*, and it will likely change even more in the coming years, interrogating these live-action/animation hybrids remains vital for a better understanding of gag-based comedy today.

Chapter 6

"Message?: Industrial, Discursive, and Cultural Adaptability in Black Gag-Based Comedy"

Across the blockbuster era, we have seen gag-based Hollywood comedy blend freely with different genres, media forms, narrative types, and performance styles so as to adapt and maintain its place within the industry. However, this seemingly wide variety of gag-based comedy is often created from a very limited, narrow perspective. To put it bluntly, gag-based comedy is overwhelmingly white, male, and straight, in terms of both its creators and its presumed target audiences. While contemporary gag-based comedy may retain a strong element of ethnic humor via the Jewishness of many key practitioners (from Mel Brooks to Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker to David Wain) and predecessors (from the Marx Brothers to Jerry Lewis), any "ethnic" qualities have become so widely integrated into contemporary Hollywood comedy as to be virtually indistinguishable from the hegemonic norm. In a sense that is worth further unpacking (although I do not feel equipped to do so here), one could go so far as to say that a good deal of gag-based comedy *is* Jewish humor, absorbed to the point that it becomes stripped of its ethnic roots to serve as yet another vehicle for a straight, white, male, perspective.

Of course, such a characterization comes with major caveats. Although the Jewishness of gags certainly looms large, it is by no means entirely synonymous with gag-based comedy. Many important figures in blockbuster era gag comedy (Joe Dante, the Farrelly Brothers, Jim Carrey) are not Jewish, though they are heavily influenced by Jewish gagsters. And for gag-based Jewish comedians, they are by no means exclusively tied to a straight, white, male perspective, as figures like Wain, Andy Samberg, and Sacha Baron Cohen can and do challenge at least some of these categories in their gags.[1] Similarly, as I hope that numerous examples

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1 See *Wet Hot American Summer* (2001), *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping* (2016), and the *Borat* films

from this dissertation have shown, women and queer filmmakers are major creators of contemporary gag-based comedy as well. This is true of directors like Amy Heckerling (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, 1982; *Johnny Dangerously*, 1984; *Vamps*, 2012) and performers like Kristin Wiig (*Bridesmaids*, 2011; *Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar*, 2021) or Melissa McCarthy (*The Heat*, 2013; *Spy*, 2015) whose work often features gag-based elements. It also applies to transmedia filmmakers and performers that inject strains of non-masculine and queer gag comedy into their work. Examples include: Maggie Carey, who worked in both internet and television comedy before and after her lone feature comedy (2013's *The To Do List*); Kate McKinnon, the first openly queer female cast member on *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) and a major supporting performer in films like 2016's *Ghostbusters*; or Lucia Aniello, Ilana Glazer, and Abbi Jacobson, all of whom worked together on the Comedy Central series *Broad City* (2014-2019) and utilize gag-heavy comedy in both film (Aniello and Glazer, with McKinnon, in 2017's *Rough Night*) and streaming (Jacobson in *Disenchantment*, 2018-). While still unfortunately a minority, these examples serve as a clear challenge and needed counterbalance to the straight, white, male norm dominating much of gag-based comedy.

It is the *whiteness* of gag-based comedy, though, that has undergone perhaps the most sustained and striking challenge from a variety of notable Black gag-based comedies since the late 1980s.[2] Building on the work of predecessors like Richard Pryor, various films from members of the Wayans family and Black comic stars like Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Chris Rock have all served as a significant part of blockbuster era gag-based Hollywood comedy

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(2006/2020) for examples, albeit mostly of gags that potentially challenge the straightness of comedy.

2   In this chapter I use the term Black rather than African-American, reflecting both a general preference for the former in contemporary discourse and because, since my work focuses on the American, Hollywood film industry, the "American" part of African-American is already assumed. The standardized capitalization of Black following the murder of George Floyd also helps to distinguish between Black (that is, Black-created) comedy and black (that is, dark in tone) comedy.

in their own right. Many of them may be written and/or directed by whites or may have Black directors but largely white casts, but there remains a number of Black-created *and* Black-starring films that help to create a distinctly Black space within gag comedy. From an industrial standpoint, Black gag-based comedy has also proven to be a highly flexible comic form that can be a part of big and small films covering a range of genres, stars, and comic approaches. It can also be a highly successful one, with its commercial effectiveness visible in both the Black origins of the *Scary Movie* franchise and the streak of gag-based humor running through hit Black comedies like 2017's *Girls' Trip*. The reception of Black gag-based comedy, however, aligns with other gag comedy in struggling to match this apparent industrial flexibility. Like Black Hollywood cinema as a whole, critical discourse often marginalizes or dismisses Black gag comedies: scholarly works on Black Hollywood cinema often ignore or only briefly discuss gag-heavy films, and even when they are mentioned, they are often viewed through the same lenses as dramatic films rather than being studied as *comedies*. While such dismissals may be justified at times, in other instances they may also be rooted in a historical distrust of comedy's potential for negative stereotypes that can belie the ways in which Black gag-based comedy can serve as a space for dealing with issues of race and identity in Hollywood cinema.

To examine the adaptability of Black gag-based comedy, then, limited or otherwise, I start by briefly outlining ways that Black identity has been theorized in film and comedy and how I will be understanding and using these terms throughout the chapter. I then trace the history of Black gag comedy across the blockbuster era, addressing its historical precursors and trajectory from the late 1980s through the 2010s to highlight the historical limitations for Black gag-based comedy, the ways it adapted industrially during this time, and some of the ways in which it

continues to remain limited industrially as well. Then, I sketch out an overview of the discourse around Black gag comedy, arguing that while the literature on race and film comedy helps to highlight the limits of industrial adaptability for Black gag-based comedy, it also often struggles itself to discursively adapt to Black gag comedy. This may be nothing new for blockbuster era gag-based comedy, but it is further complicated by a longstanding historical distrust of comedy by many scholars of Black culture and cinema. As a consequence, the reception of Black gag comedies has difficulty balancing between the ways such films provide space for Black identity and racial critique *and* how they can reinforce negative stereotypes and associations between Blackness and "low" comedy. I end by exploring gags in a trio of Black gag-based comedies, *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996), *Undercover Brother* (2002), and *Soul Plane* (2004), arguing that these films show how gags and the films themselves can also struggle in terms of a *cultural* adaptability. While they may take advantage of new industrial opportunities to express Black humor and identity, the inability of some Black gag comedies to culturally adapt cuts across both industrial and discursive lines to further limit the reach of an otherwise potentially counterhegemonic form.

Framing Black Identity in Cinema and Comedy

Part of my argument in this chapter is that Black gag-based comedy *does* provide at least the potential to celebrate Black identity and comment on race and racial identities. Given this, what do I mean when I invoke terms like "Black identity" in film and comedy? Or, to put it another way by paraphrasing Stuart Hall, what is this 'Black' in Black gag-based comedy? Although I will summarize the larger body of literature on Black cinema and comedy later in my discussion of discourse, several works are worth noting here for the ways in which they highlight

the difficulties inherent in defining "Black cinema" as a concept. Across them, Black film is framed as a fraught and highly contested category that may have wide-reaching implications for Blackness, cinema, and various combinations of the two. I do not wish to proffer any kind of novel vision of what Black cinema is, nor am I equipped to do so for a variety of reasons, especially given my positionality as a white scholar. Since "Black cinema" or "Black film comedy" are by no means self-evident terms, though, it is best to further unpack how I understand them to help better clarify what I mean by using the term "Black gag-based comedy" throughout this chapter.

The history of Black film scholarship is filled with attempts to grapple with issues of Black identity in cinema. Early overviews of Black American cinema like Thomas Cripps' *Black Film as Genre* defined Black films as those that were made by Black creative personnel, that spoke to Black (or Black-sympathetic) audiences, and that intentionally served to illuminate the Black experience.[3] Several later works nuanced this approach while still largely following its model. This includes both Mark Reid's characterization of Black commercial films as those that focused on the Black community, featured at least one Black writer, director, or producer, and found major American distribution, and Gladstone Yearwood's assertion that a focus on the Black experience is a fundamental requirement for Black film, whether in the context of independent or commercial Hollywood film.[4] However, these ways of identifying and defining Black film also faced increasing scrutiny by other scholars who highlighted some of their flaws and limitations. David J. Leonard explicitly rejected the approaches of Cripps and Reid, noting how they struggled to account for films by Black writers and directors that did *not* necessarily address the

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3   Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 3.
4   Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 4. Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000, p. 8.

Black experience or films from white directors (like 1972's *Sounder*) that *do* meaningfully engage with Black culture. Instead, he dismissed authorship or ideology as necessary conditions for defining Black film. While acknowledging that Black films should be oppositional in some way, he advocated for a utilitarian approach that was less interested in whether a film was a Black cultural production but rather "how particular cultural formations and projects serve[d] the interest of a heterogeneous black community."[5] In a similar vein, Michael Gillespie eschewed universal claims for Black film by instead choosing to treat "each enactment of black film as discrete, if not ambivalent," concluding that his work was focused around "the belief that the idea of black film is always a question, never an answer."[6] Across these scholars, then, we get a sense of the various ways in which they have approached the idea of Black cinema, from stricter sets of conditions dependent upon production and content to looser, more theoretical ones that instead focus on the function, reception, and malleability of Black film as a concept.

In a sense, these varying options mirrors the range of ways in which scholars have attempted to define what constitutes Black identity in film and other arts. One trend focused on Black representation in film, building on Donald Bogle's work in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* where he argues that the eponymous stereotypes ultimately "embodied all the aspects and facets of the black experience" for audiences, creating a warped and unrealistic depiction of Black identity in Hollywood cinema.[7] For Ed Guerrero, "the cinematic representation of *blackness* is the site of perpetual contestation, struggle, and consequently change," pointing to a tension between Black self-definition and Hollywood definitions of

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5   David J. Leonard, *Screens Fade to Black: Contemporary African American Cinema*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006, p. 4-6.
6   Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 7, 16.
7   Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 1973, 4th ed., New York: Continuum, 2001, p. 17.

Blackness. He thus sees Black representation in film as a "grand, multifaceted illusion" given how "blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society" throughout Hollywood cinema.[8] If both of these approaches tend to focus on Black identity in film as a matter of representation, others see filmic Black identity as a matter of discourse and reception instead. This includes Gillespie, who frames Blackness in film as "a visual negotiation, if not tension, between film as art and race as a constitutive, cultural fiction" that requires particular critical reading strategies around "black visuality" to effectively formulate questions to ask about Black film and identity.[9] Herman Gray likewise pushes beyond representation when looking at Blackness in film and media, understanding Black identity as in part "referring to the discursive work—cultural practices, social meanings, and cultural identifications— that black people use to negotiate and construct meaningful lives" or as "a cultural trope and social category over which competing claims are made and registered."[10] Although only some of the ways to approach Black identity in film, these options show that it too is a fraught and contested endeavor that cannot be easily encompassed within a single approach.

Across this chapter, then, I draw some from a variety of these approaches. I understand Black gag-based comedy as applying best to films that feature major Black creative personnel (as writers, directors, and/or performers) and engage with recognizably Black cultural milieus, but also those that are engaged both textually and discursively with issues of Black identity. In addition to this, though, I also draw from two other key approaches to Black identity and film.

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8   Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993, p. 2-3. Emphasis in original.
9   Gillespie, p. 2, 6.
10   Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African American s and the Politics of Representation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p. 19.

The first is J. Martin Favor's work on Black authenticity, which, although predominantly a literary study, provides a useful model for approaching identity in Black gag comedy. Favor attempts to unpack how various discursive strands have historically tended to privilege certain Black identities as more "real" than others, thus providing a more limited understanding of racial identity in Black artworks and movements. In particular, he problematizes notions of folk identity as a more authentic presentation of Blackness by highlighting how in practice such an approach tends to undermine other major constitutive elements of racial identity such as class.[11] For him, this tendency to essentialize links between authenticity, culture, and class limits the ability to deconstruct Black identity and race, which runs the risk of "laying the framework for a new type of essentialism that potentially reproduces many facets of the old one."[12] As an alternative, he favors approaching authenticity and Black identity from multiple perspectives, finding this to be "immensely instructive in its own right" and far more useful than arguing over "a 'grand unified theory' of black identity" that will inevitably be lacking in some way.[13] Favor's approach is useful given that a major thread in this chapter relates to the historical dismissal of Black gag comedy. Instead, I argue that such comedy is worthy of further study due in part to the ways it *can* (though certainly not always does) provide a greater range of perspectives than mainstream, middle-class notions of Black film and Black identity may allow at other times.

I also find Keith Harris' concept of racial performativity to be a useful framework for engaging with the forms of identity on display in Black gag comedies. Inspired by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and applied to filmic depictions of Black masculinity, Harris conceives of racial performativity as "a performance of the self and presentation of the

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11 J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 3-6.

12 Ibid., p. 9.

13 Ibid., p. 152.

self, as a process of socialization in which the performance of the self negotiates societal

expectations and standards" that specifically relates to racial constructions rather than just

gendered ones.[14] Compared to Butler's approach, however, Harris sees racial performativity as

being even more consciously deployed, making it particularly effective when applied to film and

other media, as they provide specific instantiations of Blackness being performed in multiple

sense of the word. And as is on display in my case studies, this is especially useful for looking at

many of the gags on display in Black gag comedies. Such examples often engage with racial

identity via conscious performances of Blackness that humorously foreground elements of

various Black identities so as to critique them, celebrate them, or simply to highlight their

ambivalence (consciously or not).

Harris also describes racial performativity as, at least at times, "a racial parody in which

the difference of race, the static meaning of color, is given privileged, critical agency," using this

parody to illuminate the cracks in seemingly 'fixed' notions of race and gender.[15] This alignment

of performance with parody thus stands as one way in which scholars frame Black identity not

only in cinema more broadly, but in film comedy as well. Central to this are various

understandings of "Black humor" and "Black folk humor" that animate considerations of Black

comedy, in film and beyond. For many Black comedy scholars, Black humor is intimately

connected with the dual-focused nature of Black life in America, most famously exemplified by

W.E.B. DuBois' notion of the "double consciousness" that Black Americans struggle with as they

attempt to successfully engage with both Black and white society.[16] For Mel Watkins, this meant

that Black humor likewise displayed a double approach, as one vector was repressed or sanitized

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14 Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 25-26.
15 Ibid., p. 32.
16 See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 1903.

for display around whites while a second "more acerbic" one was reserved for Black settings and "more explicitly revealed that evasive, hidden life … kept under tight wraps."[17] This included a range of folklore-derived and, in later periods, "street" or other popular Black comic forms "that reflected a rough-hewn, blues-saturated African-American culture that disregarded the decorum, restraints, and self-conscious cleverness of mainstream humor," using their bluntness and vulgarity (in both senses) to place them in opposition to popular white humor.[18] Daryl Cumber Dance notes this as well, pointing to Black folk humor as at times featuring a vein of self-degradation that would be recognized as satirical by Black audiences and, via the legacy of the Bad Nigger tales of Black folklore, describing the vulgarity found in some strains of Black humor as "representative of further rebellion against white society."[19] Dexter B. Gordon also describes Black humor as "a rich and diverse product of Black cultural history" that "includes the quaint and delightful but is most often obscene, crudely bitter, and sardonic," owing to the often hellish history of Black experience in America.[20] While by no means the *only* way to approach Black humor and perhaps only representative of a small portion of it, the history of vulgar folk humor in Black comedy is central to a number of Black gag-based comedies and how they engage with Black identity and humor. It allows "low" gag comedy to adapt and fit within a distinct tradition of Black humor while simultaneously providing space for middle-class critics and scholars to tap into an historical discursive inflexibility that disdains or dismisses such 'vulgar' comedy.

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17 Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*, rev.d 1999, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994, p. 35.
18 Ibid., p. 398.
19 Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 77, 225.
20 Dexter B. Gordon, "Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression," *Journal of Black Studies*, 29.2 (Nov 1998), p. 257.

An Overview of the History and Reception of Blockbuster Era Black Gag-Based Comedy

In a sense, all gag-based film comedy predates cinema due to the origins of the term "gag" in 19th century theater. However, Black gag comedy has an even more complex link to pre-cinematic comic forms due to the legacy of minstrelsy. As Mel Watkins notes in his history of Black humor, minstrel shows first appropriated Black comedy as a form of American public entertainment in the early-to-mid 1800s. Primarily created by northern whites as a hyperbolic and racist spectacle of "typical" Black life, minstrelsy's use of blackface comedy and, on occasion, Black performers created early links between comedy, gags, and Black humor, albeit in a form that punishingly degraded and damaged Black lives.[21] In describing the endman and interlocutor exchanges common to blackface routines, Watkins implicitly frames them as precursors of gag-based comedy in the way endmen used outrageous dress, exaggerated accents, and "non-stop activity," including constant mugging and body contortions, in their comedy.[22] These exchanges also served as a key influence on the banter of comic duos in vaudeville routines, which in turn influenced later gag comedy and the exaggerated comic style of more contemporary performers like Jim Carrey or various Wayans. In addition, minstrel humor often revolved around puns and similar wordplay, with comic scholar Evan Esar crediting endmen with being "chiefly responsible for turning riddle wit into gags" and popularizing such routines in American comedy.[23] We can thus trace a clear lineage from minstrel humor to early 20th century vaudeville and to later gag-based film comedy, especially the Mel Brooks/Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker school that borrows from this tradition, as well as similar traditions of Jewish humor, in foregrounding its own gag-filled barrage of puns and wordplay.

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21 For the origins of minstrelsy, see Watkins, p. 81-103.
22 Ibid., p. 90.
23 Qtd. in ibid., p. 92.

Industrially, though, the legacy of minstrelsy is most visible in the *dearth* of gag-based

Black film comedy throughout the classical Hollywood era. Through its use of blackface and

overtly racist depictions of supposed Black inferiority, minstrelsy helped create a system that

denied most Black comics a viable platform for creating comedy (gag-based or otherwise) from

the very beginnings of cinema.[24] And when they did appear in classical era films, Black actors

were often less performers *of* gag-based comedy than simply vehicles for the gags themselves.

Silent comedies are rife with gags relying on a 'surprise' Black face (Buster Keaton wandering

off, aghast, when he discovers that he is actually pursuing a Black woman in 1925's *Seven*

Chances; a Black child following a string of white children out of Mother Hubbard's shoe in the

1924 *Out of the Inkwell* cartoon *Mother Gooseland*) or caricatured Black reactions to seemingly

supernatural events (posing as a mannequin, Harold Lloyd coming to life and startling a Black

worker in 1923's *Safety Last!*; Blacks turning white or mugging after seeing a "ghost" in

innumerable films.) Such gags invite viewers to see Black performers not as individuated actors

but as interchangeable punchlines, a darker and more dehumanizing precursor to the strain of

blockbuster era gag comedy that deemphasizes individual performance as discussed in chapter

four. And while sound cinema did feature performers like Stepin Fetchit (Lincoln Perry),

Mantan Moreland, and Charles R. Moore as frequent comic presences, they still often served as

comic vehicles for, rather than performers of, gags.[25] Watkins and Donald Bogle both note

Fetchit/Perry's complex relationship to his roles, as he played up *and* undercut their inherent

racism while also showcasing his clear talent as a comic performer.[26] Nevertheless, Black actors

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24 For example, *Check and Double Check*, the 1930 film adaptation of radio smash *Amos 'n Andy*, used almost
    entirely white actors in blackface, including the (white) stars who had portrayed the titular duo on radio.
25 See, for example, Moore's role as a porter trying to mollify the drunken, wildly shooting members of the Ale &
    Quail Club in Preston Sturges' *The Palm Beach Story* (1942).
26 See Bogle, p. 38-44, and Watkins, p. 247-262, for more on Fetchit/Perry's career.

far too often remained merely supporting players who were largely relegated to being the punchlines of gags within classical Hollywood comedy.

Later industrial norms in the classical Hollywood period continued to limit roles for Black comics. Part of the post-World War II struggle for rights and better treatment of Black Americans involved a push for social realism that would "uplift" Black images, replacing "the popular mode of blackface minstrel imagery with an alternative, more respectable image of blacks."[27] This included speaking out against the common stereotypes of the tom, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, the buck, and most central for comedy, the coon (or exaggerated "black buffoon") that Bogle later identified in his work.[28] As a result, the NAACP successfully pressured CBS to cancel their prime-time, Black-starring TV version of the popular blackface radio program *Amos 'n Andy* in 1953. However, as Watkins notes, this proved to be "both a victory for those stressing the necessity of positive middle-class media images for blacks and a setback in terms of the presentation of genuine black humor," ultimately leading the TV and film industries to simply ignore Black humor throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s rather than face the potential of similar (costly) campaigns.[29] In film, stereotypical supporting roles for Black comics were largely phased out in favor of more 'respectable', serious, and safe images of Blackness and Black masculinity in the work of stars like Sidney Poitier.[30] This shift in emphasis meant that opportunities for Black comics to enter the film industry and engage in a low form like gag comedy were even further reduced throughout the middle of the twentieth century.

However, the explosion of Black comics into the mainstream in the 1960s and 1970s (Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, and, after years of success on Black theatrical circuits,

27 Yearwood, p. 28.
28 Bogle, p. 7. See p. 4-18 for his overview of these Black stereotypes in classical Hollywood film.
29 Watkins, p. 322. See also p. 299-324 for Watkins' overview of Black comedy on early television.
30 See Bogle, p. 175-183 for an overview of Poitier's rise to stardom and his embodiment of these values.

Moms Mabley and Redd Foxx) and slow change within the industry provided at least a limited

space for Black comedy by the mid-1970s. In particular, while he may be most identified with

the character-based comedy and racial satire central to his stand-up, the era's most popular and

influential Black comic, Richard Pryor, was key to helping shape Black gag-based comedy.

Pryor's experience as a screenwriter on *Blazing Saddles* (1974) especially highlights both the

potentials and the continued industrial limitations for Black gag comedy at this time. One of five

credited writers, Pryor contributed to both the film's general humor and, in particular, the

centrality of race in its parody of the western.[31] When it came to casting the lead role of sheriff

Bart, though, Brooks claims to have asked Warner Bros. "on bended knee" to let Pryor play the

part but was flatly refused.[32] Instead, Warner opted for the "safer" choice of actor Cleavon Little,

a known commodity as a co-star (appearing in every episode) of the TV sitcom *Temperatures

Rising* (1972-1974). Pryor took the refusal as a blow, with close friend and fellow comic Paul

Mooney claiming that being rejected for the role almost killed Pryor.[33] If his participation in

arguably *the* most important gag-based comedy of the early blockbuster era indicated new

industrial opportunities for Black comics, the refusal to put the "dangerous" Pryor onscreen

highlighted how those industrial adaptations remained notably limited.

Exactly why was Pryor too much of a 'risk' for Warner Bros. to cast, though? As Bambi

Haggins suggests, likely a large part of the studio's decision was due to the perception of Pryor as

too volatile a performer for an already controversial film.[34] Additionally, many scholars frame

his stand-up persona as embracing the often vulgar strain of Black folk humor that further

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31 For example, see Bogle, p. 257.
32 Qtd in Jacoba Atlas, "Mel Brooks," *Film Comment*, 11.2 (Mar-Apr 1975), p. 55.
33 Paul Mooney, *Black Is the New White: A Memoir*, New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2010, p. 152.
34 Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007, p. 64.

reinforced the white industry's perception of him as a "dangerous" Black comic. Watkins credits the 1979 stand-up film *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* with presenting "nearly undiluted African-American street humor—much of it expressed in vernacular language and little of it cloaked by middle-class propriety" that "could appeal to all audiences, regardless of race," closely aligning with Watkins' framing of traditional Black humor noted earlier.[35] Haggins likewise describes Pryor's comic persona as existing at the "intersection of contemporary black comic sensibility and folk humor," but she further notes the ways in which "the unyielding nature of Pryor's stand-up did not easily transfer onto the big screen" and thus "had to be contained and sanitized" and stripped of most of its Black identity.[36] These responses highlight not only why Pryor (before the success of his stand-up films) was seen as such a risk for Warner Bros., but the ways in which the 'authentic' Black folk humor of major comics was severely limited by the film industry as well. The industry struggled to provide space for such rough-hewn and identifiably Black humor, even (or perhaps especially) in a 'low' form like gag comedy.

Nevertheless, Pryor did become a box office draw by the end of the 1970s, both in his stand-up films and in buddy comedies with Gene Wilder (1976's *Silver Streak* and 1981's *Stir Crazy*). However, these latter films highlight the mixed industrial opportunities for Black comics in early 1980s Hollywood. Ed Guerrero frames such buddy comedies as "the predominant narrative and marketing strategy for constructing and containing the cinematic image of Blacks" during the decade, bemoaning how they led to Black talent and energy "being confined to expression in mostly comic roles and vehicles" without the opportunity for dramatic roles as well.[37] Both the Pryor/Wilder comedies and Pryor's supporting role in 1983's *Superman III*

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35 Watkins, p. 557-558.
36 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p. 53, 63, 67.
37 Ed Guerrero, "The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood's Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties," *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 238, 237.

would indeed prove indicative, for better or worse, of later industrial approaches for Black comic stars and gag-based comedy. They showed that Black comics could be successful leads or co-leads while displaying their comic skills, but in films that were often less gag-heavy than other gag-based comedies and were increasingly combined with action, fantasy, sci-fi, or other genres. *Superman III* also showcases additional pitfalls for a prominent Black comic in a mainstream, heavily gag-based Hollywood film role. The film did give Pryor a major platform to display his talents: he was second-billed, prominent in marketing, and reviews predicted that his involvement would boost the film's commercial success.[38] While the first two *Superman* films may have been campy in their take on the superhero's mythos, they were still essentially "serious" action/fantasy films. *Superman III*, on the other hand, was a clearly *comic* film, foregrounding numerous gags in its even more over-the-top, comic set pieces. Foregrounding Pryor in a more comic *Superman* thus makes a good deal of industrial sense. It points to a larger shift in Hollywood gag comedies as the industry attempted to adapt not only via genre hybridity, but by providing larger roles for major Black comedians in the early 80s as well.

At the same time, the reception of Pryor's performance did not see it as markedly different from the roles available to Fetchit/Perry or Moreland in the classical era, indicating a lack of true change for Black comics. The *Film Journal*'s review of *Superman III* characterized Pryor's "tepid Bill Cosby-ish performance" as removing "all traces of his anarchic outrageousness, with only popping eyeballs and slapstick gymnastics remaining," in one fell swoop connecting the role with both lowbrow gag-based comedy ("slapstick gymnastics") *and* the coon-type roles available to earlier Black comics ("popping eyeballs").[39] Later scholars

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38 See the openings of reviews in Jimmy Summers, "Superman III," *Boxoffice*, Aug 1983, p. 50, and "Superman III," *Variety*, 8 Jun 1983, p. 18.
39 Steven L. Kaplan, "Superman III," *The Film Journal*, 30 Jun 1983, p. 25.

make these connections even more explicit. Haggins calls the part "perilously close to 'cooning'" and hypothesized that Pryor only took the role for the money, while Donald Bogle likened Pryor's character to Willie Best trailing terrified behind Bob Hope in 1940's *The Ghost Breakers* before bluntly describing Pryor's role as "old-style coon."[40] On the one hand, such responses struggle to adapt to Pryor's use in gag comedy, seeing such a performance as only fitting within a coon type likely due in part to an implicit expectation that Pryor's film performances must either replicate the racial and social critique of his stand-up or merely be empty, and potentially 'cooning', comic roles. At the same time, though, such responses do effectively highlight the ways in which earlier blockbuster era roles themselves often struggled to serve as a clear example of industrial adaptation, potentially providing more space for Black performers only if they largely replicated the same problematic types of the past. This reception of Pryor's performances as reinforcing racist stereotypes would serve to foreshadow the reception of later Black gag-based comedies as well.

The 1980s also saw the first major examples of clearly gag-based work that were both made by and starred Black creators. Notable here, although mostly for the negative responses to it, is the 1987 film *Disorderlies*. Its slapstick hi-jinks, stars (hip-hop group The Fat Boys), and director (comedy veteran Michael Schultz) all served to help make it one of the clearest early examples of Black-starring, Black-directed gag-based comedy. However, its white (perhaps painfully so) writers, tepid box office, and scathing reviews also make it a mostly forgotten entry in the history of Black comedy. Popular discourse largely eschewed treating *Disorderlies* specifically as a Black film, with *Boxoffice* sticking to familiar, traditional reference points when positing that the film "was made for no other reason than to make reviewers say nice things

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40 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p. 65. Bogle, p. 280.

about The Three Stooges," a particularly lowbrow, low prestige, gag-based antecedent.[41] Later

appraisals of the film's legacy for Black cinema largely concurred: Bogle labeled the film "an out

and out embarrassment" and Melvin Donaldson called the Fat Boys "merely the Three Stooges

in blackface" who never 'rose above' their low-class gag-based humor.[42] The mere existence of a

Black-directed, Black-starring gag-based comedy like *Disorderlies* may seem to indicate a form

of industrial adaptability in its willingness to acknowledge Black performers and audiences, if in

a flawed and limited way. Its reception, however, points to a continuing discursive struggle that

approached Black gag comedies via traditional, if perhaps justified, lenses.

By contrast, both the reception and legacy of 1988 Blaxploitation spoof *I'm Gonna Git*

You Sucka fare far better. Critical responses were still mixed, if clearly more positive than for

Disorderlies, as complaints about the film's "linear and rather familiar story" were leavened with

praise for the redemptive qualities of its gags, which made the film worthy of repeat viewings,

either theatrically or on home video.[43] Although still ambivalent, Donaldson is also far gentler

about *Sucka*, paying it a backhanded compliment by noting "some places where the humor

comes close to being clever and satirical" and thus implying that the film succeeds as much as a

'mere' gag-based comedy possibly can.[44] More importantly, *Sucka* also served as a springboard

for the multimedia careers of the Wayans family. Starring and directed by Keenen Ivory Wayans,

second-oldest in a family of ten children, *Sucka* established a tendency in the Wayans' work to

both feature numerous members of the family (*Sucka* includes five siblings in cameos or minor

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41 Kris Turnquist, "Disorderlies," *Boxoffice*, Nov 1987, p. R-104-105.
42 Bogle, p. 259. Melvin Donaldson, *Black Directors in Hollywood*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, p. 91-92.
43 For story complaints and predicted success on video, see Maitland McDonagh, "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka," *The Film Journal*, Feb 1989, p. 65-66. For repeat viewings, see Brin., "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka," *Variety*, 21 Dec 1988, p. 14.
44 Donaldson, p. 229.

roles) and to foreground heavily gag-based humor. These gags often function as part of the film's genre parody, and *Sucka* serves as a notably Black-oriented entry in the post-*Airplane!* (1980) cycle of ZAZ-style gag-based comedy discussed in chapter three. Various Wayans would continue to pursue a similar gag-heavy parodic path over the ensuing decades.

At the dawn of the 1990s, the primary vehicle for the Wayans' gag-based humor was their successful sketch comedy show *In Living Color* (1990-1994), which helped establish Damon Wayans as a comic star. But while Damon would star or co-star in only lightly or partially gag-based films (*The Last Boy Scout*, 1991; *Major Payne*, 1995; *Bulletproof*, 1996), brothers Shawn and Marlon Wayans continued the gag-based parody of *Sucka* by writing and starring in the 1996 film *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*. Much as *Sucka* parodied 1970s Blaxploitation, *Don't Be a Menace* focused on another Black-themed cycle, that of early 90s "hood" dramas. A modest (at best) financial success, the film's critical responses were mixed-to-poor, akin to the fate of many other mid-90s parodies as detailed in chapter three. *Boxoffice* praised its ability to "breathe new life into typical scenes from the ghetto, making a mockery of the violence and hatred that is the target of their unlicensed humor," but *Variety* saw the film as "funnier in conception than in execution" and a "simple parody, with little in the way of ironic commentary or real invention."[45] Popular discourse may have framed the film's adaptation as limited, but *Don't Be a Menace* did serve to keep alive a tradition of genre parody that would drive later Wayans' successes, and it provided a template for other low-budget spoofs (like 2000's *Shriek If You Know What I Did Last Friday the 13th* or 2010's *The 41-Year-Old Virgin Who Knocked Up Sarah Marshall and Felt Superbad About It*) that likewise

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45 Pat Kramer, "Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood," *Boxoffice*, Mar 1996, p. R-28. Godfrey Cheshire, "Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood," *Variety*, 15 Jan 1996, p. 126.

referenced as many parodic targets as possible in their lengthy titles.

And although his popularity did not peak until later in the decade, another major Black comic star utilizing gag-based comedy in the early 1990s was Chris Rock in his first starring feature, 1993's *CB4*. Largely co-written by Rock and Nelson George, the latter described how the two of them approached various creators with gag-based ties: Ben Stiller (originally attached to direct); Pat Proft (gag-based writer of films in the *Police Academy*, *Naked Gun*, and *Hot Shots!* series who was unable to participate); and Robert LoCash (who became the film's third credited writer following his work on 1991's *The Naked Gun 2 ½*, thanks to his "Zuckervision" approach and emphasis on gags over emotional identification that George saw as a good fit for *CB4*).[46] The team marketed the film to Universal by emphasizing its ability to adapt gag comedy for new audiences, pitching it as "a broad comedy in the style of the Zucker brothers and 'In Living Color'" that blended this approach with recent successful Black films like 1989's *Do the Right Thing* and 1991's *New Jack City*.[47] The film itself is less clearly gag-based than these descriptions imply, instead offering a mixture of gags with ample character/situation-based comedy similar to *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), a clear influence on *CB4*. Still, critics often did see the film as gag-based, if only in terms that implicitly understood 'gag-driven' to mean any comedy without a strong narrative.[48] Irrespective of the critical response, though, George's history of *CB4* still serves as a good example of explicit industrial adaptation in action, blending popular Black cinema with at least a strain of overtly gag-based comedy.

While *CB4* does foreground a sense of Black identity in its comedy, partially gag-based

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46 Nelson George, *Blackface: Reflections on African-Americans and the Movies*, New York: HarperCollins, 1994, p. 148-149.
47 Ibid., p. 179.
48 See the characterization of the film's plot as far less important than its gags and vignettes in Henry Sheehan, "CB4," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 8 Mar 1993, p. 32.

films from other major Black comics are indicative of other challenges and limitations for Black gag comedy in blockbuster era Hollywood. For instance, take Eddie Murphy's 1996 remake of *The Nutty Professor* and Will Smith's 1997 film *Men in Black*. Both were huge commercial successes, received mostly positive critical notices, and blended a strong vein of gag-based humor with science fiction and fantasy genre tropes. Each also came from a gag-heavy background: Murphy's film remade a 1963 Jerry Lewis vehicle while Smith's was directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, an established comic director of often gag-based work, especially in his *Addams Family* films of the early 1990s. However, both films were written and directed by white men, raising the question of how we can and should assess the Blackness of Black gag-based comedy in such films. In general, *The Nutty Professor* and *Men in Black* serve as good examples of, broadly speaking, two major approaches to Black gag comedy within the industry at this time. Although white-written and directed, the Murphy film is a better fit as a *Black* gag-based comedy given its greater emphasis on Black characters, Black humor, and at least certain strains of Black identity, particularly in Murphy's performance as Grandma Klump, which Bogle sees as at least partly an homage to legendary Black comic Moms Mabley.[49] *Men in Black*, however, fits more as a gag comedy that simply stars a Black comic rather than a Black gag comedy itself, depending much less upon clear strains of Black humor or identity. Although far from perfect, this dichotomy outlines two relevant ways of assessing the Blackness of later blockbuster era Black-starring gag comedies.

It also applies to the explosion of at least partially gag-based films starring Murphy, Rock, and Martin Lawrence in the early 2000s. For Murphy's 2000 sequel *Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*, numerous reviews zeroed in on *Klumps*' tendency to play up the broad, slapstick

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49 Bogle, p. 403.

humor of the original by devoting more screen time to Murphy as various members of the extended Klump family. *Sight and Sound* described this shift in positive terms as "a turn that's heir to a tradition in African-American comedy of loving, observant humour about family life that never turns homiletic."[50] However, *Film Journal International* saw it as problematically building on the "the crude, peripheral vaudeville bits" featuring the Klumps that were the "real" appeal of the first film, a characterization that strongly hints at minstrelsy and cooning in its invocation of vaudeville.[51] In a similar vein, *Variety* stopped just short of calling Lawrence's performance in 2001's *Black Knight* cooning when describing it as "a surfeit of his trademark shtick – shucking and jiving, prancing and pratfalling, mugging and bugging out."[52] For Chris Rock's 2001 film *Down to Earth*, Haggins criticizes the film for "mainstreaming" Rock's stand-up persona, turning the racial critique of his comedy into "the setup for a string of running gags" that dulled their effectiveness.[53] All were again directed and mostly written by white men (though *Down to Earth* does feature several Black writers), and for each film, critical discourse displayed a tendency to embrace a traditional hostility toward vulgar, low gag comedy while again highlighting the continued lack of change for Black comics in such roles. The industrial context may have evolved further since Pryor's heyday, but the limits on Black comic personas and a pressure to appeal through cooning may still have remained the same.

The most striking examples of Black gag-based comedy during the decade, however, came in the wake of the Wayans' 2000 smash success *Scary Movie*. Directed by Keenen, co-written by Shawn and Marlon (among others), and co-starring Marlon, the film was a surprise summer hit that spawned a quick sequel in 2001, three more films over the next dozen years, and

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50 Charles Taylor, "Nutty Professor II: The Klumps," *Sight and Sound*, Nov 2000, p. 60.
51 Eric Monder, "Nutty Professor II: The Klumps," *Film Journal International*, Sep 2000, p. 59.
52 Joe Leydon, "Black Knight," *Variety*, 26 Nov 2001, p. 25.
53 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p. 122.

a cycle of numerous _____ *Movie* genre parodies across the decade. In this way, it served as a major industrial template for all of gag comedy across the 2000s, and along with *Scary Movie 2* (also directed by Keenen and co-written by three Wayans siblings), it showed the industrial potentials of Black gag comedy. However, their reception continued to mix an awareness of the industrial limitations on display in these films with a reliance on longstanding dismissals of low comedy. Highlighting the limits of industrial adaptability, *Sight and Sound* described how the Wayans wrote a white *and* a Black version of their contribution to the first film before being pressured into focusing on the former at the expense of the latter.[54] For *Scary Movie 2*, *Sight and Sound* chided the film's lack of genre knowledge and its misogynistic attitude, before suggesting that Marlon Wayans' mugging in the film might be "far more offensive than anything perpetrated by Mantan Moreland ... or Stepin Fetchit," placing it even more within a tradition of minstrelsy and cooning.[55] On the other hand, *Variety*'s claim that *Scary Movie* "is the work of filmmakers who have studied 'Airplane!' and the 'Naked Gun' pics with all the attentiveness that used to be reserved for the likes of 'Citizen Kane' and 'The 400 Blows'" taps into a larger condescension toward gag comedy that is both limiting and, when applied to Black filmmakers, takes on troubling racial undertones.[56] The success of the first two *Scary Movie* films may have pointed to new industrial spaces for Black comedy, then, but they also further highlighted the difficulties of escaping industrial limitations and a longstanding critical distrust of gag-based humor.

    Scary Movie did reinvigorate the film careers for several Wayans, who subsequently created a number of additional Black gag-based comedies across the 2000s. Keenen directed brothers Shawn and Marlon in two more films after *Scary Movie 2*: 2004's *White Chicks* and

54 Kim Newman, "Scary Movie," *Sight and Sound*, Oct 2000, p. 55.
55 Kim Newman, "Scary Movie 2," *Sight and Sound*, Nov 2001, p. 56.
56 Joe Leydon, "Scary Movie," *Variety*, 10 Jul 2000, p. 19.

2006's *Little Man*. While not parodies, they were largely gag-based, high concept comedies that found mixed commercial success and a largely hostile reception that often highlighted their uses of racial humor, especially (and unsurprisingly) for *White Chicks*. In generally positive terms, *Variety* framed the film as most effective in its fish-out-of-water gags centering around the leads (Marlon and Shawn) attempting to adapt to an upper-class, white milieu while disguised as white women.[57] Other outlets were less salubrious: *Village Voice* critiqued the film's treatment of class, its downplaying of race, and its dependence on jokes based upon "a blithely assumed gender inequality," while *Sight and Sound* saw the film as "largely eschewing social commentary - particularly with regard to notions of race" in favor of the slapstick and grossout humor of the *Scary Movie* films.[58] I unpack the scholarly response to *White Chicks* more in the next section, but it is worth noting here how its critical reception foregrounds a tension between more flexible approaches to the film, both as a racial critique and a problematic depiction of class and gender, and a continued tendency to dismiss and disdain its use of lowbrow gag comedy.

With *Little Man*'s weak box office derailing Keenen's career (he has not directed a film since) and the Wayans departing the *Scary Movie* franchise after the second film, their gag-based efforts largely returned to parodies. In fact, with the possible exception of 2004's *Soul Plane* (discussed in the chapter's final section), by the late 2000s and into the 2010s the most prominent examples of Black gag-based comedy were all parodies: *Dance Flick* and *Black Dynamite* (both 2009); *A Haunted House* and its sequel (2013/2014); *Scary Movie V* (2013); and *Fifty Shades of Black* (2016). The first two films are also significant because, according to the DGA, they were two of only nine films made by Black directors in Hollywood in 2009, an atypically high

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57 David Rooney, "Cheeky 'Chicks' A Broad Comedy," *Variety*, 28 Jun 2004, p. 42.
58 Laura Sinagra, "White Chicks," *The Village Voice*, 30 Jun 2006, p. C58. Ali Jaafar, "White Chicks," *Sight and Sound*, Dec 2004, p. 71.

proportion of Black gag-based comedies for that year.[59] However, the continued lack of Black-directed films (of all types) in Hollywood signals how, over twenty years after *Disorderlies* and *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*, industrial space for Black gag-based comedies remained extremely limited. Further hampering their industrial clout, other gag-based Black parodies from the 2010s were only very modest commercial successes (at best), providing small returns solely due to the minuscule production budgets of each film, often less than 10% the average cost of a film during this time as detailed in chapter two.[60] The combination of these modest returns for Black parodies and the continued rise in marketing costs across all films, also detailed in chapter two, thus made them increasingly unprofitable and unsustainable across the decade.

Instead, Black gag-based comedy in the 2010s has largely mirrored the fate of gag comedy as a whole. Black stars feature in films with strains of gag comedy that are ultimately hybrids, combining comedy with adventure (Dwayne Johnson and Kevin Hart in the recent two *Jumanji* films), action (Key and Peele in 2016's *Keanu*; Johnson and Hart in 2016's *Central Intelligence*), or the family film (various Eddie Murphy films of the late 2000s and early 2010s). These films are also more frequently directed and written by white men, making them even less effective as vehicles for a clearly *Black* gag-based comedy. In fact, many Black directors of major gag comedies of the 1980s-2000s have done little film work over the last decade or so: Keenen Ivory Wayans only directed one TV episode; Michael Schultz was a TV director-for-hire; *Soul Plane* director Jessy Terrero returned to directing music videos; and *Black Dynamite* director Scott Sanders only made a single film (2016's *Aztec Warrior*) that still has not received

59 Mia Mask, "Introduction," *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, ed. Mia Mask, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 4.

60 *Scary Movie V* grossed $78 million worldwide on a $20 million budget, while the other films grossed less (from $21-60 million worldwide) on much smaller production budgets ($2.5-5 million). All data from website The Numbers.

distribution. If the rise of Black gag comedy seemed to indicate new possibilities as the industry adapted by opening up a new space for Black comedy, its decline shows that, as with the rest of the Hollywood industry, true opportunities for Black voices remain limited.

There do remain a few key exceptions to this, however. While his films are often critically reviled, Tim Story has directed a number of successful Black comedies over the 2000s and 2010s. Examples like *Barbershop* (2002), the *Think Like a Man* films (2012/2014), or the *Ride Along* films (2014/2016) more explicitly deal with Black identity and Black culture, but they are often far less gag-based as well. However, Story's modestly successful 2021 film *Tom and Jerry* goes the opposite direction: it is more firmly gag-based while largely eschewing expressions of Black identity, no matter which definition of Black identity one uses. Beyond Story, though, the biggest success in contemporary Black gag-based comedy comes from Malcolm D. Lee, cousin of Spike Lee and director of *Undercover Brother*, *Scary Movie V*, the hugely successful hit comedy *Girls' Trip*, and many more. An ensemble comedy featuring major Black women comics, *Girls' Trip* is not as heavily gag-based as other films discussed thus far, but it still features a strong streak of slapstick comedy foregrounding vulgar and bawdy "low" gags. It also stands out as a rare opportunity to foreground the performances of Black women in Black gag-based comedy, an avenue that has historically been (and still remains) frequently unexplored. While industrial space for Black gag comedy may remain highly limited, a director like Lee and a hit like *Girls' Trip* signals that potential still exists for popular, and clearly Black, gag-based comedy within the Hollywood industry.

(Dis)Trusting Gags: From Discursive to Cultural Adaptation in Black Gag Comedy

However, the industry still struggles to adapt and maintain a place for Black gag-based

comedy, and the critical reception of recent films highlights a continuing discursive struggle as well. For instance, scathing reviews for the *Haunted House* films frame their humor as "plainly racist" (though it is unclear if this racism is directed at Blacks, Latinx, or other races in the films) and dependent upon "depressingly retrograde" sexual stereotypes and "crassly misogynistic" gags.[61] *Fifty Shades of Black* may have made race central to its comedy, but *Sight and Sound*'s praise for "some deceptively incisive race-based burlesque" was soon followed by their conclusion that it was nothing more than "a cultural curio."[62] Irrespective of how well more recent Black gag-based comedies serve as racial critiques or expressions of Black identity, their reception largely still defaults to simply dismissing them as low and unimportant comic films. Furthermore, this critical hostility to many Black gag-based comedies often aligns with a similar scholarly distrust and dismissal of them as well. *Sight and Sound*'s approach to *Fifty Shades of Black* calls to mind Donaldson's aforementioned passive-aggressive praise of *Sucka*, while for other more gag-heavy films like *Half Baked* (1998) and *Undercover Brother*, Haggins dismisses them by noting that they "will not be remembered as revolutionary comic cinema."[63] Although Black gag comedy may serve as a notable space for Black identity within blockbuster era Hollywood, its popular and scholarly reception largely continues to deemphasize this role.

The question, then, is *why* critics and scholars so often receive Black gag-based comedy in this way. How can we account for the strength of responses to such comedy if it is not "revolutionary" comic cinema but simply a "curio"? A central reason likely relates to the long and complex historical relationship between comedy, Black intellectuals, and Black scholarship. There is not only the common mistrust of a "low" form like gag comedy seen elsewhere, but an

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61 "Plainly racist" and "crassly misogynistic" in Ashley Clark, "A Haunted House 2," *Sight and Sound*, Sep 2014, p. 92. "Depressingly retrograde" in Ashley Clark, "A Haunted House," *Sight and Sound*, Jun 2013, p. 96.
62 Nick Pinkerton, "Fifty Shades of Black," *Sight and Sound*, Apr 2016, p. 75.
63 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p. 184.

additional matrix of historical debates over racism, class, and Black identity that further shape

responses to Black gag comedy. Dating back to the 19th century, Black intellectuals and the

middle-class "either ignored or actively criticized black minstrels" as part of an effort to

legitimize Black culture, pushing back against the role of racist, white-run minstrelsy in

disseminating parodic behavior that came to characterize all Blacks.[64] Such a response set up a

gap between lower-class and middle-class Black audiences. Lower-class audiences were secure

in the knowledge that these were clearly *not* accurate depictions of Black life, and they thus often

took at face value (and enjoyed) minstrel performances. Middle-class audiences, on the other

hand, were unable to laugh at minstrel humor due to a (not unfounded) paranoia that white

responses to minstrelsy would serve as a judgment on all Black culture.[65] This class-based

dichotomy of responses to popular Black comedy continued to be reinforced in the 20th century

as well. From vaudeville to the TOBA Black theater circuit, Watkins reiterates how middle-class

Blacks "zealously resisted any humorous portrayals of blacks" so as to continue a push to

assimilate into 'mainstream' (that is, white) American society.[66] And as is implied by previously

cited reception, this legacy of distrust still informs responses to Black gag comedy today.

It is also particularly relevant to the lack of consideration for Black gag-based comedy in

much scholarship on Black cinema, which includes a frequent lack of engagement with Black

comedy in general (especially Black gag comedy) in major works. Even when not ignoring

Black gag comedy, other scholars of Black cinema and comedy convey a similar sense of disdain

for it in their dismissals, as in Haggins' previously cited characterizations of *Half Baked*,

Undercover Brother, and *Down to Earth*. The legacy of the postwar push towards social realism

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64 Watkins, p. 125-126.
65 Ibid., p. 127-128.
66 Ibid., p. 368.

is also on display via a preference for comic realism over types of often fantastical gag humor. Such expectations lie just beneath the surface when Mia Mask critiques Black drag comedies' "continued reliance on formulaic, slapstick and corporeal vulgarity" (clearly aligning with gags) at the expense of "the cultivation of thoughtful, artful moviemaking" (seemingly akin to a more socially realistic type of cinema).[67] Likewise, in discussing 1990s Black film specifically, Ed Guerrero posits that "the black filmmaker must struggle to depict the truth about black life in America while being inextricably tied to the commercialized sensibilities of a mass audience that is for the most part struggling to deny or avoid the full meaning of that truth," essentially advocating for a realism in Black film that can serve to counteract the effects of a century of default negative, unrepresentative stereotypes.[68] Although much of the scholarship on Black film and comedy remains invaluable, there remains notable blind spots around Black gag-based comedy due to the long history and tension over the role of comedy in Black cinema more generally. Given this, Mask's comment that fat-suit drag films function like "cinematic palimpsests upon which layers of cultural history and meaning are scripted" seems applicable to all Black film comedy.[69]

However, if the approach of Guerrero, Bogle, and others was centered around Black representation in film and comedy, as detailed in the first section, that approach would later be critiqued as a limited, and limiting, way of understanding the role of race in film. Instead, others followed the lead of Cornel West's influential essay "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," which advocated going beyond realism and representation to better adapt to larger societal

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67 Mia Mask, "Who's Behind That Fat Suit?: Momma, Madea, Rasputia and the Politics of Cross-Dressing," *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, ed. Mia Mask, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 159.
68 Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 168.
69 Mask, "Who's Behind That Fat Suit?", p. 162.

trends. West saw the struggle for Blacks "to represent themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by White supremacist ideologies" as still being an important, but ultimately limited, issue.[70] It could be both assimilationist (assuming Black images must be positive to 'fit' and conform with white culture) and overly homogenizing of Black experiences, struggling to adapt to major differences within Black communities along the lines of class, gender, sexuality, and more. Calling "any notions of 'the real Black community' and 'positive images'" ideologically charged, West instead advocated for a new cultural politics based less on images and representation and more on deconstructing past approaches, demystifying power relations, and finding a greater diversity of approaches to better account for the multiplicity of Black identities and experiences.[71] This latter element, soon to become known as intersectionality, provided a more flexible and encompassing approach to Black film and Black comedy. As we shall see, though, it too could still be limited when applied specifically to Black gag-based comedy.

Others built upon this approach, with Tommy Lott calling for a theory of Black cinema "that accords with the fact that biological criteria are neither necessary nor sufficient" and thus avoids essentializing Blackness in favor of "the complexity of meanings" associated with Black political and cultural aspirations.[72] Herman Gray likewise examined issues of "race, gender, class, power, and inequality" in mid-1990s Black television to provide additional context and avoid the "eternal search for either 'authentic' media representations of 'blackness' or accurate

70 Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson et al., New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 27-28.
71 Ibid., p. 28-29.
72 Tommy Lott, "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25.2 (Summer 1991), p. 223.

reflections of African American social and cultural life" endemic to earlier theoretical models.[73]

More textually, Henry Louis Gates' concept of "signifying" as a uniquely Black narrative and

rhetorical function provided a similar flexibility. Gates argued that Black texts 'signify' on other

Black texts with "a second statement or figure" that "repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first,"

creating a complex intertextual relationship between the texts that is "similar to parody and

pastiche."[74] In this way, Black texts thus reference and respond to previous Black traditions,

adding layers of meaning for audiences (Black or otherwise) familiar with the tropes and texts

upon which a given work signifies. Representational approaches remained influential, but other

approaches to Black film became dominant in part by being more adaptive, better acknowledging

that there was and is no single universal Black viewer or single way of looking at Black film.

Signifying also has important implications for the reception of Black comedy, helping to

explain why discourse struggles to adapt to Black comedy's shifting forms and forums. Much as

signifying depends upon complex intertextual relationships and different modes of address for

different audiences, Black comedies are also often highly ambivalent and ambiguous in their use

of Black tropes. Do they simply reinforce stereotypes of Blackness, or do they challenge,

respond to, or even reverse them in various ways? What delineates these various options? And

can many (or even all) of them coexist simultaneously within a given comedy? The difficulty in

answering such questions is likely part of the reason why many theories of Black cinema view

comedy dismissively or with unease. It is explicit in Gray's concern that *In Living Color*'s

ambivalent use of parody "makes it hard to construct a critical space from which to speak ...

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73 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 2-3.

74 Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 21. Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 49.

because it so effectively and cleverly organizes several different social positions" that provide competing, if not conflicting, cues.[75] Empirical data further supports such hesitations. A 2012 Syracuse University study interviewed 36 Black women on their responses to men playing overweight Black women in drag comedies like *Norbit* (2007), the *Big Momma's House* series, or Tyler Perry's *Madea* films. One trend in the responses asked "Why Does She Have to Be a Man," as the drag characters *could* positively remind participants of maternal family members, but "this positive recollection was tainted because they knew men were playing these characters for laughs."[76] Both theoretically and more empirically, then, there are several examples that can justify much of the ambivalence toward comedy that scholars of Black cinema frequently display.

However, I would argue that, although at times certainly justified, when this shades into clearer hostility it is due as much or more to a longstanding, class-based scholarly distrust of low comedy. Leonard explicitly taps into this when he concludes that a series of Black comedies from the early 2000s help "reify colorblind ideologies that ultimately legitimize racism, poverty, and inequality," serve to "reduce blackness to a consumable commodity that ultimately legitimizes white supremacy," and largely "erase or pathologize the black poor in the advancement of racism."[77] Leonard may ignore or downplay the role of comedy specifically in his analysis here, but Mia Mask is blunt in connecting the drag comedy of *Big Momma's House* and *Norbit* to 19th century minstrelsy, asserting that they "reproduce sexist and misogynistic fat-slapstick humor" so as to update these prior racist/sexist comic forms. Additionally, she sees

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75 H. Gray, *Watching Race*, p. 144.

76 Gina Masullo Chen, Sherri Williams, Nicole Hendrickson, and Li Chen, "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective on How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves," *Mass Communication and Society*, 15.1 (2012), p. 125.

77 Leonard, p. 176.

them as repudiating the challenge to patriarchal order in Kathleen Rowe's concept of the "unruly woman," providing us with "simple sight gags of a man *impersonating* an unruly woman" rather than an actual unruly woman herself.[78] In these instances at least, each author links up with the history of condemning gags and low comedy from a perspective of (largely unacknowledged) middle-class taste.[79] The approaches they use may be more flexible than some of their predecessors, but they ultimately reach similar, unacknowledged, and potentially limited conclusions in regard to Black gag comedy as did earlier works.

Other approaches to Black comedy, though, do display a degree of adaptability that at least troubles the longstanding unease around low comedy often displayed by scholars of Black cinema. Bambi Haggins suggests seeing Black comic representations as not clearly positive or negative but instead on a "hierarchy of objectionability" that acknowledges historical context and change, including the legacy of minstrelsy, more effectively without "forcing characters into historical defined racist archetypes" that erases this context.[80] In this way, she provides a greater flexibility for understanding a vast array of positive *and* negative comic representations without resorting to simplistic good/bad binaries. And while she may be leery of Black gag-based comedy, Haggins does see Black comedy writ large as a potentially positive site for "social screen comedy" that, while often unfulfilled, has "the ability to get the audience laughing while slipping in sociocultural truths," further providing a greater flexibility in approaching comic works.[81] Guerrero likewise acknowledges the limits of Black comedy while highlighting how, at

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78 Mask, "Who's Behind That Fat Suit?," p. 158, 163. Emphasis mine.
79 Mask, in particular, complicates this elsewhere, appreciating Whoopi Goldberg's comedy as transgressive, disruptive of stereotypes, and carnivalesque. See Mia Mask, "Goldberg's Variations on Comedic Charisma," *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009, p. 105-140.
80 Bambi Haggins, "Why `Beulah' and `Andy' Still Play Today: Minstrelsy in the New Millennium," *Emergences* 11.2 (2001), p. 249, 252.
81 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p. 6.

their best, they can "allow African Americans, through the subversion of parody and satire, to mask and express insurgent social truths and discontents" that would otherwise make white viewers uneasy, thus disseminating racial truths so as to reach a much wider audience.[82] While in practice both scholars largely dismiss Black gag comedy, they still provide useful theoretical tools that allow us to better unpack the *potential* of such films.

And if many scholars do display a distrust of low comedy and gags, some still more fully engage with and specifically examine gag comedy. For George Yancy and Tracey Ann Ryser, *White Chicks* is an at least partly effective satire of Black masculinity via Terry Crews' character Latrell and his obsession with white women. They see Latrell as a vehicle for the Wayans' satire of how whites view Black masculinity, serving as an exaggerated stereotype of a sexually aggressive, white women-obsessed Black men to signal to the (white) audience "*I* see how *you* see me," potentially undercut that stereotype.[83] They also frame the film as using a Black gaze to tease out whiteness and resist "the hegemony of the white gaze through filmic agency" by invoking Black stereotypes that "interrogate the white imaginary."[84] Yancy and Ryser even go so far as to argue that the film should be *praised* for reviving 19th century minstrelsy with very different aims, here baring the device of race to make whiteness more visible and open to critique.[85] They also point to several moments in the film that engage with whiteness and white privilege using what is often gag-based comedy: "Brittany"'s tirade when asked for ID at the hotel; "her" knowingly racist treatment of a fellow undercover, Latino FBI agent; and "Brittany" and "Tiffany" defending the use of the n-word with the real Wilson sisters' white friends.[86] By

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82 Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 190.
83 George Yancy and Tracey Ann Ryser, "Whiting Up and Blacking Out: White Privilege, Race, and *White Chicks*," *African American Review*, 42.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2008), p. 738. Emphasis in original.
84 Ibid., p. 731.
85 Ibid., p. 733-734.
86 Ibid., p. 737-738.

tapping into hyperbolic stereotypes of Black masculinity and sexual aggressiveness to show a

Black man pursuing *another* Black man dressed as a white woman, as well as by using drag and

race-switching gags to interrogate whiteness, Yancy and Ryser see in *White Chicks* the potential

for a cognitive distance needed to critique such stereotypes. There certainly may be many other

issues surrounding Black men dressing up as white women in the film, but this framework

provides a more flexible way of approaching how gags and racial critique can intertwine.

Others also note opportunities for gag-based comedy to explore and express Black

identity in the Wayans' work. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade sees both *Scary Movie* and *White*

Chicks as providing an "outsider-inside" Black perspective of whiteness that is worthy of further

study.[87] She acknowledges that the films are limited and/or ambivalent in the efficacy of their

racial critiques, but she also notes how a film like *Scary Movie* can "visualize the tropes of

whiteness that permeate black discourses" or how elements of the Wayans' broader transmedia

work "debunk notions of whiteness as normative, without culture" by foregrounding white

privilege from a Black comic perspective. For her, the Wayans' comedy thus "offers stupidity

laced with poignant satire," an approach that aligns well with the tradition of Black comedy

scholarship that actively embraces a low comic vulgarity in strains of Black humor, as discussed

in the first section.[88] Although this certainly does not mean that the use of vulgar low comedy

necessarily connects with Black folk humor or is an effective vehicle for critique, as many

scholars are quick to note, this approach more flexibly allows for at least the *potential* expression

of a particularly Black comic identity within gag comedies.[89]

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87 Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, "Surviving *In Living Color* With Some *White Chicks*: Whiteness in the Wayans'
    (Black) Minds," *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Daniel
    Bernardi, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 345.

88 Ibid., p. 350, 353.

89 For ineffective uses of vulgar comedy, see Watkins, p. 574, and David Gillota, *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic*
    America, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013, p. 21.

Still, whether scholars tap into a traditional disdain for low Black comedy or approach it more flexibly, stereotypes continue to stand out as central issue for such comedy. Stereotypes have been a staple of comedy throughout history, but they are particularly relevant in the context of minstrelsy, blackface, their legacies for Black performers, and the reception of Black gag comedy. Leonard's aforementioned distrust of 2000s Black comedies is due in part to the what he sees as their continued reliance on racialized stereotypes, strongly implied to be far more central to gag-based comedies (*Soul Plane*) than less clearly gag-based ones (*Barbershop*).[90] He explicitly connects *Soul Plane* to minstrelsy, labeling what are essentially gags in the Malcolm X airport terminal as "blatantly racist representation" that use tom and coon stereotypes so as to make Blackness "a source of laughter and contempt."[91] Although he allows that films like *Soul Plane* and *White Chicks* still have transgressive *potential*, he seems unequivocal in seeing their use of stereotypes as closing off such possibilities. And while more open to the potential for critique in *White Chicks*, Yancy and Ryser also note that the Wayans' putative address to white audiences regarding stereotypes of Black masculinity may be too subtle for many to pick up on, encouraging them to see Latrell as simply *fulfilling* stereotypes of hypersexual Black men rather than *challenging* them.[92] In each case, scholars note how stereotypes can stand out as a particularly central, and particularly limiting, component of Black gag comedy.

At the same time, the stereotype itself has inspired a range of responses that point to ways in which stereotypes can be adaptive as well. For Homi K. Bhabha, stereotypes are inherently ambivalent and thus oscillate between positive and negative uses, occupying a liminal space between "what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously

90 Leonard, p. 126-127.
91 Ibid., p. 129, 128.
92 Yancy and Ryser, p. 739.

repeated." In this way, stereotypes are not essentially about positive or negative images but instead reflect "the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse," indicating that stereotypes are more a process of identity rather than a clear judgment on that identity itself.[93] Bhabha's approach can thus better account for both the frequent ambivalence of, and the divergent responses toward, stereotypes in Black gag-based comedies. They ultimately play out this process of defining the subject so as to fulfill Bhabha's assertion that the stereotype "is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive."[94] Michael H. Epp further integrates this approach with satire and the legacy of minstrelsy by arguing that stereotypes can potentially combat discrimination by undermining themselves to "enact a Bhabhaian ambivalence of celebration and exploitation, of love and theft" for audiences.[95] Of course, Epp sees this as a potential only possible within scholarship and satire rather than in "uncritical mass entertainment," indicative of a continued gap in discourse between the theoretical possibilities of Black gag-based comedy and a struggle to see gag comedies as fulfilling those potentials in practice.[96]

Like stereotypes more broadly, race and gender also highlight the potentials and struggles of Black gag comedy. For Herman Beavers, popular Black comedy of the 1980s, particularly that of Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor, works to incorporate racial identity "within the assumptions that surround masculinity," creating a push and pull that is both progressive in terms of race and reactionary in terms of gender.[97] They use what he calls the "cool pose" that

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93 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 66-67. Emphasis in original.
94 Ibid., p. 70.
95 Michael H. Epp, "Raising Minstrelsy: Humour, Satire and the Stereotype in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Bamboozled*," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 33.1 (2003), p. 19-20.
96 Ibid., p. 17-18.
97 Herman Beavers, "'The Cool Pose': Intersectionality, Masculinity, and Quiescence in the Comedy and Films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy," *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, eds. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 256.

"represents an ideological consensus in the black community that cuts across socioeconomic lines," giving Black men the power to control *how* they become visible and challenge racism at the expense of "maintain[ing] static notions of masculinity" that reinforce patriarchal norms.[98] In this way, Beavers clarifies how various aspects of race and gender can simultaneously benefit certain identities while actively harming others. Akin to Pryor and Murphy's "cool pose," gender is a particularly unstable element in the reception of Black gag-based comedy as well. Black gag comedies can foreground masculinity to the point that Haggins declares Black film parodies like *CB4*, *Blazing Saddles*, and *Soul Plane* to be "informed by masculine zeitgeist," an observation that would apply to many other Black gag-based parodies as well.[99] Critics develop this further, seeing *Scary Movie 2*'s comedy "as an excuse for indulging in an attitude towards women that goes beyond misogyny into a kind of infantile revulsion at the female body" and critiquing *CB4* for doing little more than "pay[ing] lip service to the arguments that rap too often promotes macho displays" of misogyny.[100] By aligning Black gag comedies with a damaging masculinity, these responses develop Beavers' "cool pose" further, seeing such films as reactionary in terms of gender without a concomitant progressiveness in their approaches to Black identity.

Gender and race also point to ways in which the films and gags themselves struggle to adapt across the blockbuster era. For instance, some Black gag-based comedies are unequivocally troubling in their treatment of women or their approach to masculinity: *A Haunted House*'s entire narrative centers around its protagonist's intense fear of commitment to his girlfriend after moving in with her. More often, though, they are simply ambivalent. A Blaxploitation parody like *Black Dynamite* may fulfill what Jonathan Gray sees as parody's

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98 Ibid., p. 258, 262.
99   Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p. 114.
100 Clark, "A Haunted House," p. 96. Clark, "A Haunted House 2," p. 92. Newman, "Scary Movie 2," p. 56. Kevin Lally, "CB4," *The Film Journal*, Apr 1993, p. 32.

ability to create a "critical intertextuality," parodying genres via an example *of* that genre so as to

start "corroding away that which has been allowed to work undetected" in the form.[101] Using this

framework, a gag where Black Dynamite tells a woman, sleepily praising his sexual prowess,

"shh, mama, you're gonna wake up the rest of the bitches," before a cut reveals an entire bed full

of women may not simply be a straightforward example of misogynistic masculinity. Instead,

the gag may simply use exaggeration to highlight the absurd hypermasculinity of Blaxploitation

cliches and their problematic treatment of women. However, this understanding may not be fully

(or even very) convincing and such moments may indeed be driven by unthinking sexism. In

other words, this example may not be poking fun at the sexism of the Blaxploitation era as much

as it is problematically bringing that same sexism into a more modern filmic context.

Ultimately, this is where the limits of industrial and discursive adaptability intersect: in

the *cultural* adaptability on display in the gags and films themselves. Simply put, while many of

the above gags may be able to claim ambivalence as a defense against their more troubling

elements, others are clearly reactionary in their treatment or race, class, or gender. They thus

highlight how gags themselves can also struggle to adapt to changing cultural contexts, partly

explaining why some critics and scholars see such a direct link between Black gag comedy and

minstrelsy, from Richard Pryor's 'cooning' to the Wayans one-upping the racist stereotypes of

Stepin Fetchit and Mantan Moreland. In a similar fashion, examples ranging from *Black

Dynamite* to the array of gags on display in *A Haunted House* or *Scary Movie 2* also struggle to

adapt in regard to their treatment of women and Black masculinity. These struggles of cultural

adaptability cut across the lines of both industry and discourse. By replicating and encouraging

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101 Jonathan Gray, *Watching With the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, New York: Routledge,
2006, p. 46-47.

reactionary tendencies, they again highlight the limits of the industry's ability to adapt outside of a narrow range of Black identities, hinting at another reason why Black gag comedies may have struggled to remain industrially viable. Discursively, it can validate the longstanding distrust of Black comedy, further reinforcing a tendency by critics and scholars alike to dismiss Black gag comedy. To best understand how Black gag-based comedy operates and what is at stake in it, then, we should examine it in relation to all three types of adaptation: industrial, discursive, *and* cultural.

Gags and Adaptability in *Don't Be a Menace*, *Undercover Brother*, and *Soul Plane*

Aside from a few essays on *White Chicks* and *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*, there is relatively little analysis of how specific gags in Black gag-based comedies function. Do they serve as contemporary examples of minstrelsy, replicating damaging stereotypes and confirming a discursive distrust of low Black comedy? Are there also ways in which they offer a space for Black humor and the expression of ideas and anxieties surrounding Black identity? In what ways do they showcase the struggle to adapt culturally at times as well? Given that these questions (and others) are key to understanding how Black gag-based comedy fits within both gag comedy and Black comedy as a whole, I explore them by looking at the use of gags in a trio of Black gag comedies: *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*, *Undercover Brother*, and *Soul Plane*. All are Black-directed, are primarily Black-written, and explicitly deal with forms of Black culture, making them easily identifiable as examples of Black gag-based comedy. They encompass a time period from the mid-90s to the mid-2000s that aligns with the height of Black gag comedy, highlighting their use of gags across this peak period of production. Additionally, each film is largely unexplored in the critical literature on Black

comedy, and so examining them helps move us beyond more widely studied films like *White Chicks*, *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*, or *The Nutty Professor*. And perhaps most importantly, each also features numerous gags that directly or indirectly address issues of race, identity, gender, and class/taste to reflect upon the issues of industrial, discursive, and cultural adaptability I have noted throughout this chapter. Together, these three films allow us to better examine Black gag-based comedy not only in theory, but in *practice* as well.

As its full title indicates, *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* primarily parodies specific entries in the early 1990s cycle of "hood" dramas, from *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993) to *South Central* (1992), *Juice* (1992), and more. Given this, many gags parody characters, scenes, or tropes from the cycle that touch upon the intersection of race and class. For instance, while he did not write or direct *Don't Be a Menace*, Keenen Ivory Wayans has a recurring cameo as a mailman who, after others deliver "serious" monologues modeled after stereotypical examples in the cycle, enters to directly address the audience and shout "message!" In one sense, this running gag defamiliarizes what are indeed overt "message" moments in such films, drawing attention to these tropes through a self-conscious direct address that subtly critiques them as forced, awkward attempts to inject blunt moralizing. Other gags, especially the two tongue-in-cheek title cards that open the film and the subsequent series of potential narrators who address the camera before being shot and replaced, likewise draw attention to and lampoon various tropes of hood dramas. Not only does this serve as a critical intertextuality as *Menace* signifies on this cycle, but it provides a rebuttal to the middle-class values and aspirations on display at times in such films. Instead of forcing uplifting images or a nihilistic futility on lower-class characters in the cycle, *Don't Be a Menace*

uses a more carnivalesque approach to point out the absurdity of such overly pat messages.

In terms of cultural adaptability, though, these gags can also work to undercut the potential for genuinely positive or socially conscious messages present in this cycle, inviting viewers to see the gags as simply incongruous rather than as any type of sustained critique.[102] Consider the final appearance of Keenen's mailman in the film: after Loc Dog (Marlon Wayans) tearfully tells his friend Ashtray (Shawn Wayans) to never forget "about bein' a menace to South Central while they drink their juice in the hood" because "that's what it's all about," the mailman steps into the frame, looks at the audience, and responds "the fuck is he talkin' about?" By including the film's self-consciously nonsensical title as the culmination of this running gag, it ultimately implies that *any* messages in these films are simply too confused or confusing to be worthy of consideration. It also serves as a rebuttal to a simplistic application of Bakhtin's idea of carnival to comedy, echoing Umberto Eco's critique that carnivalesque comedy is merely a false transgression of norms, reinforcing dominant structures rather than upending them.[103] Instead of leveling the playing field, then, the film's carnivalesque approach could simply be seen as giving up and embracing the status quo, merely another example of the cycle's nihilistic tendencies.

If these gags still do provide a potential riposte to middle-class values, though, the film assaults such values far more clearly through gags that revel in low (both in class and taste) comedy. Central here are the series of gags where Ashtray and Dashiki engage in foreplay in the kitchen. Over the course of the scene, the duo parody similar scenes in erotic thrillers/dramas, but with a grossout, knowingly bad taste approach: Dashiki pours Kool-aid on Ashtray's shirtless

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102 See discussion of *Boyz N the Hood* in Bogle, p. 343-347, or of *Juice* in Donaldson, p. 149-151, for more on the socially conscious messages in this cycle.

103 Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom'," *Carnival!*, eds. Thomas A. Sebeok and Marcia E. Erickson, Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984, p. 1-10.

torso; he attempts to seductively rubs a cooked hot dog on her face; she grabs a block of

government cheese and melts it like candle wax onto his torso; she extends a foot for Ashtray to

lick and suck on, but her toes are so dirty and disgusting that Ashtray has to grab hot sauce from

the fridge to pour over them (and still has to stop to dislodge a piece of debris from the foot that

gets caught in his throat). Such gags are complexly disgusting, providing something beyond just

parody and a space for defiantly lowbrow appeals. The food used here is not simply comic, but

recognizably representative of a certain (both real and stereotypical) lived low-income Black

experience, incorporating markers of poverty and cultural marginalization as part of a celebration

of Black sexuality. That celebration may be ambivalent given the explicit cues of disgust, but it

also links to how Tavia Nyong'o, using queer theory, sees the potential for audiences to respond

to racial kitsch by embracing emotions like shame, disgust, and abjection in order to resist

them.[104] These gags therefore may not only evoke disgust but also offer a way for some viewers

to embrace the specificity of a particular sociocultural milieu, including its "low" or disgusting

bits, in staunch defiance of culturally dominant standards of taste. By providing a fantastical,

absurd way to engage with Black identity caught between stereotypes and echoes of reality, such

gags function almost as a rejoinder to the calls for realism in Black cinema seen elsewhere.

At the same time that these gags provide a space to potentially celebrate Black identity, or

at least oppositionality to dominant norms, other gags oscillate between potentially challenging

gender stereotypes or problematically reinforcing them. In an early self-referential gag,

Ashtray's mom tells him that she likely will not see him again because "you know there ain't no

positive Black females in these movies," a particularly incisive, satirical gag targeting the cycle's

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104 See Tavia Nyong'o, "Racial Kitsch and Black Performance," *The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Paula J. Massood, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008, p. 212-227.

lack of strong Black women. It also proves to be prophetic, however, as she does disappear from much of the film while other female characters largely serve as punchlines for gags. Dashiki is the butt of many of these, with gags revolving around her many children from different fathers (trained to introduce themselves to new men by asking "are you my daddy?") that portray her as sexually out of control. Later on, a "poem" she reads to Ashtray describes in increasingly elaborate and graphic detail the violence she would bestow on the next man who leaves her, with Ashtray (in a two-shot) reacting to and mugging at each new detail. This sequence seems to evince a genuine fear of her as a woman, and it is complemented by a later gag where Keisha, a shy woman Loc Dog meets at a party, warns him that she gets "a little crazy" when she drinks. After champagne and Loc's encouragement, she lets out her 'freaky' side and turns into a literal demon, complete with corpsepaint-like makeup, elongated tongue, and deepened voice. Gags like these often display a blunt, direct fear of female sexuality, and particularly *Black* female sexuality, highlighting the limits of the film to culturally adapt and reflect the identities of Black women. When this approach continues over a decade and a half later in a Wayans' film like *A Haunted House*, it highlights just how badly, and stubbornly, out of touch such gags remain.

Gags around Black masculinity in *Don't Be a Menace* tend more toward gentle satire, though, often invoking tropes of tough masculinity on display in the hood cycle only to undercut them to humorous effect. When Loc Dog asks Ashtray for fashion advice about which gun matches which pair of sneakers, he plays up his wannabe thug as a violent stereotype before deflating it by deciding to wear a pair of oversized bunny slippers. Similarly, a non-sequitur gag two-thirds into the film seems to recreate a gang initiation scene from *Colors* (1988) before revealing that the new member is being 'initiated' into a game of jump rope, again setting up

expectations of tough masculinity only to switch them out at the end. Moments later, a stranger drops off a mysterious package of "goods" with Loc Dog, followed by a montage of close-ups as Loc boils water and measures white powder from the package. Playing on our knowledge of crime films, the scene creates an expectation that Loc is cooking up crack, but it is soon revealed to be an elaborate cake, switching out our expectations of a stereotypically masculine activity for a stereotypically feminine one. Perhaps the film's most complex example of masculinity, though, is the running gag of Ashtray's "father," who is introduced as being only a couple years older than Ashtray and, across their encounters, seems to look and act even *younger* than his supposed son. This creates an interesting melange of satire (does Ashtray ironically function as a positive male role model to his own father?) and masculinity (a father telling his son to "be a man" when he himself is still clearly coded as a child.) However, this becomes muddled later in the film when his father encourages Ashtray to drive drunk, praises him for not wearing a condom, and tells him to not get a job, at every turn violating expectations of positive advice on how to "be a man." Like the "message!" running gag and the film's gags at the expense of women, *Menace*'s approach to masculinity highlights the tensions around cultural adaptation. In its use of parody, *Menace* may point out the limits of hood cycle films, but by ignoring the real cultural issues driving (at least some) of those films, it serves to highlight the limits of its own comedy as well.

By contrast, *Undercover Brother* often uses gags to more explicitly interrogate notions of Black identity, albeit still in somewhat limited ways. An opening montage explicitly frames the film in the context of Black identity, presenting scenes from the civil rights struggle and framing the 1970s as the pinnacle of Black culture via music and Blaxploitation films. The 1980s are then presented as a rapid cultural decline represented by, in succession, Steve Urkel from *Family*

Matters (1989-1998), Mr. T, and Dennis Rodman's infamous appearance in a wedding dress. If not quite a gag per se (although the cut from images of 1970s culture to Urkel delivering his "Did I do that?" catchphrase certainly qualifies), the opening frames many of the film's subsequent gags as competing between a more 'authentic' Black culture of the 1970s and a more compromised 'sell out' Blackness of the 1980s and on. Implicit underneath this is a concurrent contrast between 'real' Black masculinity of the past (from Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson to Shaft and James Brown) and later examples that are either empty pastiches of previous forms (Mr. T) or inauthentic, emasculated versions of Black men (Urkel, Rodman in a dress). From its very beginning, then, *Undercover Brother* establishes itself as explicitly concerned not only with Black identity, but a particular form of 'authentic' Black masculinity.

While I will return to the film's deployment of masculinity momentarily, there is a particular dichotomy in numerous gags across the film between an authentic Black identity and a compromised one that sells out by assimilating into mainstream white culture. These do appear in brief moments, as in the satirical exchange between Conspiracy Brother and Smart Brother about how the Republican party has benefited Black people, but they are largely centered around Undercover Brother's attempts to infiltrate the organization of (white) villain The Man. As part of his training, Undercover Brother must overcome his disgust at mayonnaise, literally the whitest food imaginable, and is forced to endure a montage akin to the indoctrination video in *The Parallax View* (1974) that immerses him in white culture. Images of white TV (*Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996); *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963)), white sports (auto racing), and white music (polka, *Riverdance*, and an *NSYNC song on the soundtrack) lead Undercover Brother to parodically invoke *The Sixth Sense* (1999) by whispering "I see...white people!" before

repeatedly screaming "Caucasian overload!" The training pays off, though, as Undercover

Brother is able to live up to his name and infiltrate the Man's company, Multinational Inc,

complete with a different, "white-acceptable" accent, hairstyle, and name (Anton Jackson).

These gags may be essentializing in terms of racial identity, but they also humorously display a

distrust of white culture and reinforcement of the authenticity of 70s Black culture seen in the

film's opening and represented by Undercover Brother himself.

His subsequent encounter with the Man's 'secret weapon', White She-Devil, initiates

another series of gags reflecting a greater anxiety around Black identity as Undercover Brother is

caught between pretending to and actually selling out his Blackness. After first literally running

into White She-Devil (masquerading as Penelope Snow) in the company's hallway, the film cuts

to she and Undercover Brother launching into a (painful) rendition of "Ebony and Ivory" in a

karaoke bar, a gag underlined by a reaction shot of a Black couple laughing at Brother's inability

to 'properly' perform Blackness. Further gags culminate when the new, seemingly fully sold out,

Undercover Brother returns to Brotherhood headquarters. Here, his dialect, dress, and even the

guava-mango-broccoli smoothie he drinks are parodically cued as distinctly white and

incongruous in this otherwise markedly Black environment. Later in the scene, he chides Sistah

Girl's use of Ebonics and the Chief for his use of vulgar language, to which Undercover Brother

responds with laughably bowdlerized equivalents ("putting my foot in your patootie", "I don't

give a gosh darn!", "you all can get the bejeebies out of here"). These latter gags frame

Undercover Brother as selling out his Black identity not only culturally, but in terms of the

legacy of Black humor as well. His explicit rejection of both Black dialect and the vulgarity

found in forms of Black folk humor has him implicitly repudiating the 'authenticity' of

predecessors like Redd Foxx, Richard Pryor, and Eddie Murphy as well, each of whom depend

in part on their uses of often raw, unfiltered language and Black dialect to help establish the

'realness' of their Black comedy.

In a sense, gags like these highlight what Derek C. Maus sees as a greater comfort by

contemporary Black comics to be self-critical of Blackness without the same worries earlier

comics faced about demeaning Blackness as a whole.[105] Elsewhere, several moments play up

stereotypes of Blackness to laugh at them. Early on, after Brotherhood members confirm the

truth of several conspiracies against prominent Black figures, they refuse to respond or make eye

contact when Undercover Brother exclaims that "OJ really didn't do it!" Later, the men of

Brotherhood exaggeratedly fawn over Undercover Brother when Sistah Girl (correctly) guesses

that his new "white" racial performance is due to him having had sex with a white woman. At

the same time, *Undercover Brother* also utilizes gags, both gentle and incisive, to poke fun at

whiteness. In a news story introducing the potential run for president by the Colin Powell-esque

character of General Boutwell, two white news anchors praise Boutwell for being "so well

spoken," a slyly satirical gag aimed at this common condescending compliment given to Black

public figures deemed "acceptable" by white culture. Elsewhere, a running series of gags

revolve around how the Man's main lackey, Mr. Feather, eagerly carries out the Man's mission to

stifle Black culture while harboring a secret fascination with it. At times he will slip into Black

dialect or slang, and one gaggy sequence features him unable to stop his body from physically

responding and dancing to a hip-hop song on the radio. These gags particularly align with Eric

Lott's assertion that, in its appropriations of Black culture via minstrelsy and its legacy, white

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105 Derek C. Maus, "'Mommy, What's a Post-Soul Satirist?': An Introduction," *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*, eds. Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014, p. xv-xvi.

culture evinces a strong degree of racial desire for Blackness.[106] By making fun of Blackness *and* whiteness, *Undercover Brother* thus showcases an ability to adapt to and critique multiple racial identities using gag-based comedy.

However, the film's gags around gender can also be more limited in terms of their larger cultural adaptability. As previous gags indicate, much of the film's idea of Black identity revolves around framing Black masculinity as the standard bearer of Black culture. Beyond the film's opening montage, we see this in how Undercover Brother's 'sell out' persona strives to eliminate any elements (accent, hairstyle, clothing) that would otherwise signify his "cool pose" Black masculinity. The role of women in the film is likewise complex, as when Sistah Girl fights off White She-Devil to save Brother and his Blackness. What starts as an action scene turns into an extended gag sequence as the two women begin ripping off pieces of each other's clothing, turning it into a 'catfight' complete with yowling cat sound effect. Upon noticing this, Brother slowly stops fighting with two white henchmen and all three begin to pull up chairs, munch popcorn and chips, drink soda, and ogle the women. Sistah Girl and White She-Devil soon end up in a shower and the film moves into slow-motion as the men (and we) watch. In one sense, this sequence is clearly reactionary in its treatment of gender, objectifying the film's female leads while sardonically (and blatantly) presenting the male gaze as able to transcend racial conflict. At the same time, though, the sequence is also absurd to the point of undercutting its deployment of that gaze, especially when, as the two women seem poised to kiss (a parodic reference to star Denise Richard's (in)famous 'lesbian' kiss from 1998's *Wild Things*), a sharp cut ends the erotic fantasy as Sistah Girl's brutally kicks White She-Devil out of the shower to continue the fight.

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106 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 1993, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 6-7.

Sistah Girl ends up triumphant and Undercover Brother regains his true Black persona, signified by the instant return of his Afro, platform shoes, and 70s chic clothing when he jumps out of the apartment window. In instances like this, then, the film clearly embraces *a* form of Black identity, but one that reflects only a narrow type of 1970s Black masculinity. Much like in *Don't Be a Menace*, the ability of *Undercover Brother* to celebrate Black identity in its gags is hampered by its struggles to culturally adapt to varieties of Black identity as well.

While not as explicit or central to *Soul Plane*, identity still animates a number of gags that provide a different perspective on Blackness, more explicitly addressing elements of class while also leaning heavily on stereotypes so as to struggle even more with cultural adaptability. Class and (low) taste even drive the film's plot, which is set into motion by a toilet gag when main character Nashawn gets diarrhea from an in-flight meal and is literally stuck on a plane's toilet during a bout of extreme turbulence. After winning $100 million in a lawsuit over the toilet incident (and the airline accidentally killing his dog in another gleefully bad taste gag), he creates his own airline, NWA, around which the rest of the film revolves. Although this is far from the last toilet-themed gag in the film, another gag involving sex and the inappropriate use of food is even more striking in its embrace of bad taste disturbing of middle-class values. During NWA's first flight, an older, highly sexual, blind Black man in first class suggests that he is particularly adept at manual sexual stimulation to a woman sitting next to him. She exits off camera, leaving her dinner on the seat, and the man proceeds to narrate as he fondles and loudly finger-fucks a baked potato, believing it to be the woman's genitals. As in *Menace*, this gag again foregrounds disgust, as the audience's reactions likely mirror those of the passengers as they look on in revulsion, and there is an added class-based perversity to setting this grossout gag

within the plane's chic, upscale first-class compartment. Unlike in *Menace*, though, there is less here to cue a resistant *embrace* of that disgust. At best, the gag is humorous due to its outre extremes, while at worst it reinforces demeaning stereotypes of Black men's sexual appetites, especially given the lack of consent and intimations of rape underlying the gag.

As its previously mentioned reception indicates, many of *Soul Plane*'s gags lean heavily into Black cultural stereotypes, enacting a Bhabhaian ambivalence as they exaggerate such stereotypes to an absurd extent while seeming to embrace them at times as well. These include the airline's name (NWA standing for Nashawn Wade Airlines but, of course, also referring to the legendary gangsta rap group), various shops and features of the Malcolm X terminal (a Foot Locker, a 99 cent store, a full basketball court), and the incongruous use of hydraulics on a passenger jumbo jet. All connect to stereotypes of Black culture, embracing and celebrating elements of a specific sociocultural milieu while also reinforcing essentialist, potentially derogatory ways of understanding Blackness. Aboard the plane itself, though, other gags evince a more nuanced approach to class and class-based schisms in Black identity. First-class features comfortable seating, ample space, better food, and an upstairs nightclub that looks like it comes from a rap video (and at one point *is* used to shoot a video for the Ying Yang Twins and Lil' Jon.) In contrast, the plane's economy seating, simply (but revealingly) called "low class," only has one old CRT TV with bad reception, overhead lockers akin to those in a bus station, and instead of a fancy meal, everyone shares napkins and passes around buckets of fried chicken. These contrasts offer clearer satire than the gags in the terminal as, in place of a monolithic stereotypical Black culture, the "low class" gags revolve around a distinct comparison between the haves and have-nots in Black America. They may remain stereotypical, particularly in terms

of the conspicuous consumption on display in the nightclub, but they also serve to highlight and potentially bare the device of inequality between Black classes.

At the same time, *Soul Plane* also features gags revolving around white stereotypes that are reminiscent of the ways in which some saw *White Chicks* as interrogating whiteness. Various running gags center around the white Hunkee (sounds like "honky") family who are forced to take NWA to return home. Along the way, they are subjected to numerous fish out of water gags when thrust into the Black world of the airline before eventually being integrated into the Black community in one form or another. The Hunkees undergo numerous humiliations that allow for white audiences to recognize their faulty understandings of or unfamiliarity with Black culture while allowing Black audiences to laugh at these clueless white folks. One such gag, around Mr. Hunkee and his just-turned-18 daughter Heather, reflects white fears of Black male sexuality. Defying her father, Heather goes to party in the nightclub, leading to salacious looks from a number of Black men and, when news reaches the cockpit, a PA announcement from Captain Mack encouraging passengers to visit Heather in the club. Upon hearing this, Mr. Hunkee lets loose an extended scream as several shots depict stereotypes of barely controlled Black male sexuality (a stream of football players and sailors) rushing past him down the aisle of the plane. Whether real or imagined, these men serve to visualize and mock a deep fear of miscegenation and Black men as sexual predators held by some whites. Of course, this is complicated by the way in which many Black men on the plane *do* act predatory toward Heather, again potentially leaning into a problematic stereotype. However, her assurance that she has not had sex with anyone when Mr. Hunkee storms the club to "rescue" her tries to mitigate this and show up white fears of Black masculinity as unfounded, providing an explicit cue to the audience that these *are*

only stereotypes in a way that a film like *White Chicks* may not.

Other gags also center around Black masculinity, creating space to knowingly deconstruct stereotypes while also replicating them, especially in regard to Black fears of queer men. These can be relatively minor, as in the series of verbal gags around the name of co-pilot Gaeman, who continually defends his sexuality and insists that his name should not be pronounced "gay man." Such gags are firmly within the *Airplane!* mold (vector/Victor, roger/Roger, surely/Shirley), and while they may make for cheap laughs at the expense of queer men, Gaeman's (over)insistence on his straightness provides space to laugh at the insecurities of straight masculinity as well. However, his name also sets up the film's most 'gay' gag. While Gaeman is absent from the cockpit, flight engineer Riggs is forced to call Gaeman over the PA to get back to the cockpit because Riggs has to "drain the monster" (that is, urinate). Flame, a flamboyantly gay flight attendant, hears and misinterprets this announcement, leading him to charge toward the cockpit at the head of a line of stereotypical queer Black men, white drag queens, and Catholic priests as the Village People's "Macho Man" plays on the soundtrack. To the subsequent pounding on the cockpit door, Captain Mack advises Riggs that "I wouldn't answer that shit if I was you." Taken as a whole, this gag leans into every gay stereotype (Black and beyond) available, creating less an embrace of sexual agency than a fear of the sexual aggressiveness and the imminent "threat" that gay men pose for straight Black masculinity. Unlike some other gags, here we seem more clearly cued to laugh *at* rather than *with* a presumed Other, coming across more clearly as an attack rather than as critique or gentle satire.

In a similar vein, and much like in *Menace*, other gendered gags struggle with cultural adaptability as they turn female sexuality into a demeaning punchline. Although Mr. Hunkee's

girlfriend, Barbara, is repulsed by most aspects of Black culture, she becomes flustered with sexual desire when she sees an in-flight magazine cover featuring an attractive Black man with an extremely large penis clearly outlined in his shorts. The man happens to be on the plane, and we last see Barbara chatting/flirting with him; later in the club, a morose Mr. Hunkee tells Nashawn that Barbara went off with the magazine man and now has vocal chord damage. This gag plays into longstanding stereotypes of Black men and penis size that are often celebrated within folk traditions of Black humor, but it also evinces a derogatory view of white women (if not women in general) by portraying them as willing to commit serious self harm in their obsession with large Black penises. If this gag demeans women's sexuality, others evince a fear of women with too *much* sexual agency, as is the case for TSA agent Jamiqua. At the Malcolm X terminal security gate, she is consistently foul-mouthed and abusive toward passengers, sexually objectifying or ridiculing the men in line. When an attractive Black man sets off the metal detector, Jamiqua removes him to a private room, orders him to strip, and excitedly yells "cavity check!" before the man screams and the film cuts away. While this gag *does* give her clear sexual agency, it is ultimately to turn her into another example of frightening Black female sexuality as she uses her position of authority to essentially rape whomsoever she finds sexually attractive, only giving her sexual 'assertiveness' under the guise of sexual assault. As with the approaches to Blackness and queerness, these gags also foreground (if not actively embrace) a lack of cultural adaptability that struggles to allow or account for Black identities beyond a relatively narrow, masculine, straight range.

Conclusion

As a brief epilogue, it is worth briefly comparing a more recent film like *Girls' Trip* to

this trio of comedies. While not as clearly gag-based as them, it still features numerous gags and, unlike the other films discussed here, they are largely by and about Black women. *Girls' Trip* may be set in a resolutely middle-to-upper class milieu, but it also foregrounds physical humor that challenges middle-class notions of respectability and taste: Lisa is forced to pee on a crowd of onlookers while stuck on a zipline (and Dina pees on them by choice after knocking Lisa to the other side); an absinthe-fueled drug trip has the women flirt with lamps, attempt to perform oral sex on a large screen, and hallucinate romantic rivals. In this way, the film continues the same vein of respectability-challenging gags seen elsewhere, but with the progressive twist of allowing Black women to perform (and enjoy!) such comedy. But while this may point to a greater cultural adaptability than in *Menace*, *Undercover*, or *Soul Plane*, it is also challenged by the conflicting cues of Dina's character. She is consistently both an unruly woman that challenges norms via her sexual assertiveness *and* a stereotype of uncontrolled (one might even say unhinged) Black female sexuality not unlike what we see in *Menace* or *Soul Plane*. Even when the reins of Black gag-based comedy are turned over to women (at least in part), then, similar issues and struggles to culturally adapt can and do remain.

Of course, this lack of easy answers only underlines how Black gag-based comedy is suffused with contradictions and a long, complex history, both in theory and in practice. When engaging with Black culture and identity, it can both be a celebratory, freeing comic platform and a potentially problematic avenue for reinforcing and perpetuating harmful stereotypes to a mass audience. In many ways, then, Black gag-based comedy seems to align with Bhabha's description of the politics of struggle "*as the struggle of identifications* and the war of positions," a place where conflicting perspectives and racial self-definitions are constantly being activated

and debated.[107] Given the historical tendency to dismiss and/or demean popular Black comedy, slapstick, and gags in critical and scholarly writing on Black cinema, I hope here to situate Black gag comedy as both a vibrant subject worthy of further study and one that is often troubled, and troubling, as well. At the same time, if I am tentative or conflicted myself, it is due in part to a recognition of the limits of my own approach to this topic as a white, male scholar. As Watkins points out, Black humor has often "been officially interpreted by non-blacks or the black middle-class—groups who for different reasons insist upon literal, mainstream interpretation of black behavior," and as a non-Black scholar, I wish to avoid perpetuating that legacy as much as possible.[108] I thus welcome continued discussion and elaboration of the issues around Black gag-based comedies raised here, particularly by Black and other non-white scholars. There are also a number of other fruitful avenues for research that I have not been able to engage with much (or at all) here, including actual audience responses to Black gag-based comedy, further exploration of such comedy from queer perspectives, or additional work on how Black gag comedy has morphed into other media forms. From the Wayans' involvement in numerous TV comedies to the presence of Black gags in streaming content like Netflix's sketch comedy show *Astronomy Club* (2019), transmedia continues to provide a broader range of perspectives and engagement with issues (especially the racial hostility that particularly flowered in the US under the Trump administration and beyond) not covered here. Much like within American humor as a whole, Black comics and creators have played and continue to play a vital role in shaping gag-based comedy, and their contributions deserve greater recognition, consideration, and evaluation to help us broaden the rich tapestry of gags in film.

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107 Bhabha, p. 29. Emphasis in original.
108 Watkins, p. 132.

Chapter 7

"The Killing Gag: Adapting Gags for Satire in Blockbuster Era Comedy"

As I argue in the introduction and have shown throughout this dissertation, gag-based comedy is not limited to a single comic genre or type. However, as part of its process of adaptation across the blockbuster era, gag comedy has frequently been utilized by and connected with parodies and spoofs. Major scholarly works on film parody, like Dan Harries' book on the subject, cite such gag-based comedies as *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* (1977), *Airplane!* (1980), *The Naked Gun* (1988), *UHF* (1989), *Spy Hard* (1996) and more as major examples of parodies and spoofs across the first decades of blockbuster cinema.[1] Other work from the creators or stars of these films (Mel Brooks, the Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker team, Leslie Nielsen), as well as the series of *Scary Movie* and similar _____ *Movie* films across the 2000s, have likewise been at the forefront of both scholarly and popular critical discourse around parody and gags, further cementing links between the two. While parody and gag-based comedy are by no means synonymous, as I discussed in chapter three, this connection could easily lead one to conclude that parody is one of the primary forms, if not *the* primary one, for creating gag-based comedy in the last several decades of Hollywood cinema.

At the same time, any discussion of parody inevitably leads to a discussion of the thorny relationship between parody and satire. And while discourse largely focuses on the use of gags for *parody*, it does occasionally delve into the use of gag-based comedy to create *satire* as well. This includes approaches to satire within films that are strong examples of gag-based comedy, as in Beth E. Bonnstetter's examination of the use of satire in the Mel Brooks films *Blazing Saddles* and 1981's *History of the World, Part I*, or in numerous reviews noting satiric elements in 1990's

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1   Dan Harries, *Film Parody*, London: BFI Publishing, 2000.

Gremlins 2: The New Batch.[2] In rarer cases, some will connect a film's gags to satire even more

explicitly, albeit most often in popular discourse. At times, gags and satire are framed as in

direct competition, as when *The Independent Film Journal* concluded that 1977's *Fun With Dick*

and Jane suffered because its "potential for sharp, topical satire" largely gave way "to

throwaway gags and surface humor," with the preponderance of gags explicitly working to dull

the film's satirical edge.[3] By contrast, others see the two as able to coexist harmoniously, with

Variety noting how *both* "broad sight-gag comedy" and "sophisticated satire" made 1967's

Divorce American Style effective.[4] In more recent decades, *Screen International* likewise saw

"sharp satire" as present along with the myriad gags in the 1998 film *BASEketball*.[5] We should

remain skeptical of these observations given the loose and at times contradictory ways with

which critics use a term like satire. Still, this strain of discourse around satire and gags, though

smaller than the one around gags and parody, indicates another potentially useful way in which

discourse has adapted to the varying function of gags within comedy as a whole.

What is less clear, however, is the exact role that gags themselves play in creating and

either enhancing or inhibiting satire in such comedies. While critics do offer a large range of

possibilities, the lack of a sustained investigation into the role of gags in satire makes such

conclusions fragmentary at best. To help address this, then, I want to examine several questions

around the relationship between gags and their ability to allow for satire in film comedy: *can*

gags (and gag-based comedy more generally) be adapted to serve as an effective vehicle for

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2   Beth E. Bonnstetter, "Mel Brooks Meets Kenneth Burke (and Mikhail Bakhtin): Comedy and Burlesque in
     Satiric Film," *Journal of Film and Video*, 63.1 (Spring 2011), p. 18-31. For a sample of satire in *Gremlins 2*, see
     "Gremlins 2: The New Batch," *Variety*, 6 Jun 1990, p. 23-24; David Ansen, "Gremlins in the Halls of Greed,"
     Newsweek, 18 Jun 1990, p. 59; Dave Kehr, "'Gremlins 2' Offers a Great Time at the Movies," *Chicago Tribune*,
     15 Jun 1990, p. B.
3   "Fun With Dick and Jane," *The Independent Film Journal*, 4 Feb 1977, p. 7.
4   "Divorce American Style," *Variety*, 7 Jun 1967, p. 6.
5   John Hazelton, "Baseketball," *Screen International*, 7 Aug 1998, p. 23.

satire in film comedy? If so, how do gags cue satire in such films? Are such cues sufficient for films to be understood as satirical, or are they ambiguous in ways that help explain the frequent lack of recognition or acknowledgment of satire in the reception of gag-based comedy? These issues are often left implicit or simply glossed over in discussions of gag comedy, but addressing them is necessary to help us better conceptualize the overall function of gags within blockbuster era comedy, their use of satire as one potential avenue for adaptation, and their ability to provide sociocultural critique. If, as *Variety* once claimed, "comedy and satire … are the best weapons with which to harpoon social mores," or if a gag-based comedy like *Gremlins 2* can claim continued relevance in America's social/media/political climate three decades later, then the study of film comedy will greatly benefit from further unpacking and examining exactly how gags and satire relate.[6]

To do this, I first examine the literature around satire, and its aforementioned fraught relationship to parody, in film and media studies. This provides not only a methodological framework for the later examination of satire in gag-based comedies, but it also highlights certain limitations and an inflexibility in current approaches that helps to explain, at least in part, *why* gags are so rarely discussed in terms of satire. From there, I dive deeper into the discourse around satire in gags and gag-based comedy, further fleshing out the spectrum of approaches mentioned above and briefly examining other films that serve to highlight the discursive struggle on display when popular and scholarly writers link (or fail to do so) gags and satire together. Finally, I examine in more detail two satiric gag-based comedies, *Small Soldiers* (1998) and *1941* (1979). Both films share a number of similarities that make them ideal for study: Steven

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6 "Divorce American Style," p. 6. Brian Raferty, "How the *Gremlins 2* Creators Feel About Their Trump Parody Now," *Wired*, 29 Mar 2016. I cite the latter as *an* example rather than necessarily *the* example that best exemplifies the effects of *Gremlins 2*'s satire; I recognize the complications caused by both the date (prior to Trump's election) of this piece and the use of the term 'parody' rather than 'satire.'

Spielberg's connection to both; a general critical denigration contrasted with a small cadre of critics praising their satire; an emphasis on warfare and referentiality; and a foregrounding of spectacle and special effects. By looking in more detail at exactly *how* both films cue satire through their gags, I argue that these films highlight some of the ways in which gags *can* be adapted and used to cue satire. At the same time, both films also highlight issues of legibility that may be inherent in using gags as vehicles for satire and that help explain why the satire in these films (and other gag-based comedies) tends to be missed or misconstrued by audiences and critics alike. Finally, while much of the literature focuses on clear examples that gravitate toward the poles of parody/satire and form/content, these films serve as ideal case studies by falling somewhere in the middle, creating a productive ambivalence in their use of satiric gags that deserves further unpacking as yet another avenue whereby gags can adapt within blockbuster era Hollywood comedy.

Understanding Satire in Scholarship on Film and Media Comedy

In recent decades, there has been an influx of work on satire in media comedy, especially television satire. In particular, the popularity and cultural salience of *The Daily Show* (1996-) and *The Colbert Report* (2005-2014) across the mid-to-late 2000s served to animate several key studies of satire on television, including the 2009 collection *Satire TV.*[7] Intuitively, this makes sense given the potential for lesser risk in television's shorter programs and sketches, its ability to address extremely current issues, and in the post-network era, its ability to target increasingly niche audiences, all of which would seem to make TV a more welcoming place than film for satire. The editors of *Satire TV* reinforce this when they note that satirical TV shows have

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7   *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, Ethan Thompson , New York: New York University Press, 2009.

"frequently commanded public attention and conversation more convincingly than shows with ten times the broadcast audience" and that, while "satire is ultimately a negative form (albeit with positive intentions)" thus remaining risky in one sense, it also offers the potential for channels to use satire as a marker of distinction, separating them from others by providing a "distinctive appeal and a seemingly unique perspective on the world not found elsewhere on television."[8] Qualities like these make satire on television seem a more natural fit, especially when compared to film, which is longer, generally requires a higher degree of narrative integration, can only address current events months (or more) after the fact, and for mainstream film, must appeal to a far broader range of audiences to be commercially feasible. And while other scholars may also point to the limits of satire on TV, especially for a network show like *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) that Jeffrey P. Jones describes as favoring harmless, apolitical political humor over "genuine political satire," its benefits nevertheless still seem to make it a better fit for satiric comedy than film.[9]

Is this always the case, though? While I readily acknowledge that satire in film comedy can often be more limited than satire in other media forms, I still argue that it is both present and a viable option within a wide range of films, including mainstream Hollywood comedies. The work of Johann Nilsson, discussed in more detail momentarily, reinforces this assertion. Nilsson sees satire as wider in scope than parody, allowing for comic critique of both forms *and* the structures and institutions underlying them, and his list of satires in American film of the 1990s includes such mainstream works as *Wayne's World* (1992), *Mars Attacks!* (1996), *Starship*

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8 Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, Ethan Thompson, "The State of Satire, the Satire of State," *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, Ethan Thompson, New York: New York University Press, 2009, p. 4, 14.

9 Jeffrey P. Jones, "Politics and the Brand: *Saturday Night Live*'s Campaign Season Humor," *Saturday Night Live & American TV*, eds. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, Ron Becker, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 80-81.

Troopers (1997), and more.[10] Additionally, while scholars often prefer to focus on satire that is very overt and largely political, satire in mainstream film comedies can also operate at a more ambivalent, in-between level. I discuss this more momentarily as well, but it is worth noting that, especially when it comes to the use of gags for satire, a major theme of this chapter is that the presence of ambivalent satirical cues does *not* necessarily equate to a lack of satire itself. Instead, we need more in-depth examination of how gags are used for satire, ambivalent or otherwise. This may be even more vital as the film industry changes in the post-COVID era as its continued fragmenting and increasingly niche appeals may actually provide an even greater space for satire akin to the opportunities afforded to TV in the post-network era. In this sense, then, it makes sense to investigate the use of gags for satire not only to document a recent way in which gags have adapted to maintain their place within Hollywood comedy, but to preview an area that may be particularly well suited to their continued adaption in the near future.

If this points to one way in which gags continue to adapt by using satire today, this is also true of the blockbuster era as a whole. Take, for instance, the ways in which the literature on film satire struggles to identify even a few major examples from the classical Hollywood era, and how these are even less frequently tied to gag comedy. Geoff King's discussion of satire in *Film Comedy* spends less than a page noting examples from classical Hollywood, and he frames the only clearly gag-based comedy of those examples, 1933's *Duck Soup*, as favoring the Marx Brothers' "crazy antics" over "any very serious perspective."[11] Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik do cite *Modern Times* (1936) in their own discussion of satire, but this is an exception that foregrounds the lack of classical Hollywood satire in much of the literature. Elsewhere they

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10 Johan Nilsson, *American Film Satire in the 1990s: Hollywood Subversion*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 8, 17.
11 Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, London: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 95.

explicitly reject seeing the "eccentricity" of behavior on display in screwball comedies (often via their gags) as satirical, understanding them more as functions of narrative instead.[12] And while I will soon outline issues with Donald McCaffrey's approach to film satire, he also devotes his entire first chapter on adapting literary satire to film by, essentially, noting the ways in which classical Hollywood *failed* to provide room for 'true' satire up through the 1950s.[13] Many considerations of film satire do not really see sustained examples within Hollywood comedy until 1964's *Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, a widely studied, praised, and influential satirical black comedy that still serves as a major reference point in the discursive response to recent satires like the 2021 film *Don't Look Up*. But while it does contain at least some clear gags (particularly the final sight gag of Major Kong riding an atomic bomb like a cowboy on horse), *Dr. Strangelove* is far from a clearly gag-based comedy. Instead, as the work of Nilsson and others on more recent film satire and my subsequent discussion of satiric gags goes to show, clearer satire is much more prevalent in blockbuster era Hollywood cinema than in the classical era, and thus it has provided gags another opportunity to further incorporate satire as part of their own adaptive processes over this time.

As noted, many agree that satire is an important comic mode within today's media landscape. However, the understanding of satire in media comedy more broadly, and film comedy in particular, remains surprisingly limited in certain respects. This is due to several factors, but arguably none has the historical weight of the centuries of work done on *literary* satire. As many scholars studying satire in film or in humor more broadly are quick to remind us, satire has a long and rich literary history stretching back over 2500 years and continuing to

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12 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 20, 151-156.
13 Donald W. McCaffrey, *Assault on Society: Satirical Literature to Film*, Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1992, p. 1-11.

the present day.[14] As a consequence of this, though, many studies of film satire have been and continue to be primarily invested in approaches derived from an understanding of literary satire.[15] Such work may provide a strong understanding of historical approaches to satire and potential theoretical frameworks for studying satire in film and other media, but it also often struggles to account for and adapt to forms and production/reception contexts that differentiate film from literary satire. While they certainly do overlap, contemporary film satire also deviates from literature in many ways that makes them difficult to theorize together. Consider the various additional audiovisual avenues for creating (and potentially undermining) satire in film, the pressures for clear legibility and broad audience appeal in mass media that can restrict their uses of satire, and the contemporary emphasis in satire on using and replicating many of the same media forms as those in political power, potentially creating a further slippage between satire and its targets. To compare a canonical film satire such as *Dr. Strangelove* to a canonical literary satire like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* thus requires different approaches that will better account for these varying media and contexts, and such issues are only further exacerbated for more commercial (and often more ambivalent) examples of satire like *1941*.

Partly as a consequence of this, some scholars have a difficult time explicitly theorizing exactly what satire *is* in film and television comedy. Literary scholars like George A. Test may allow for satire within filmic contexts, but they conceptualize it using broad metaphors (satire as "aesthetic aggression, an artful attack, a creative assault") or broad categories (satire as identifiable via a mixture of aggression, play, laughter, and judgment) that struggle to provide

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14 For examples, see King, p. 94, and Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997, p. 157-173.

15 For examples, see McCaffrey; George A. Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art*, Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991; and Terrence T. Tucker, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018.

concrete material with which to apply these ideas to film.[16] What does "an artful attack" look and sound like in a film? How would a theorist handle a film that cues aggression, play, laughter, and judgment in different, perhaps even contradictory, ways across its various formal elements (dialogue, acting, cinematography, editing, etc)? These questions become doubly important and complicated when examining *gags* as satire given Test's assertion that complex satire must be "sophisticated, sensitive, and sympathetic," implying that the broad humor of gag-based satire must be simplistic lest it fail to be 'truly' satirical.[17] McCaffrey, another literary scholar, likewise struggles to explicitly and clearly connect satire to film. For him, satire can be confusingly conflated with dark comedy (as he asserts that both provide "correction, adjustment, and release") or can be seen as inimical to gag-based comedy (as he disqualifies Mel Brooks and early Woody Allen films from being satirical due to their "lightness"). Often, this work does not provide a clear sense of *how* or even *what* is being satirized in films, either in terms of textual cues for satire or in the films' satiric targets themselves.[18] In both cases, then, we are left with only a very partial sense of what constitutes satire or how films can and do actually work to create their satiric effects.

Lest it seem that I am singling out literary scholars as easy targets, such discursive struggles apply to film and media scholars as well, albeit in different ways. In particular, the dividing line between satire and parody is often a problematic one for film and media scholars, leading to a haziness around the differences between the two in theory, in practice, or both. Most scholars agree on certain identifying features of both satire and parody: that they can overlap; that satire generally attacks certain real-world targets while parody is more often concerned with

16 Test, p. 4, 33.
17 Ibid., p. 32.
18 McCaffrey, p. 142, 35.

formal and/or textual targets; and that satire is often most concerned with advocating for a positive change in the world at large.[19] These observations largely provide a solid framework and potential foundation for more in-depth examination of the two, but there is often far less agreement on other key features of satire and parody. Are they genres (as Gray, Jones, and Thompson assert in regard to television satire) or modes (as Neale and Krutnik claim both to be)?[20] Is parody a subset of satire, or is it the other way around, as Dan Harries frames the relationship between the two?[21] Or are they simply *potentially* overlapping options, as when Jonathan Gray claims that parody *can* be, but need not *necessarily* be, satiric, or when King sees "satiric parody" as central to 1992's *The Player*?[22] Perhaps most important for our purposes here, how can we understand the fundamental comic units of satire itself? Can they be excerpted and isolated like gags, as Bonnstetter allows for when discussing the (only very loosely narrativized) *History of the World, Part I*?[23] Or, by contrast, can satire *only* be understood within an overarching, clearly satiric narrative framework, as King implies when he frames "absurd broad comedy and caricature" as diluting satire or in Neale and Krutnik's aforementioned dismissal of satire in screwball comedy?[24] These issues raise a host of questions about parody and satire that serve to make connecting satire and gags a particularly thorny endeavor.

Beyond this, there is also a tendency to focus on the difference between parody and satire as a difference between a comic ridicule of *form* versus a comic ridicule of *content*. This can be explicit, as in Gray's explanation of the fundamental difference between parody and satire, or

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19 For overlap, see Jonathan Gray, *Watching With the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 47, and Harries, p. 32. For targets, see King, p. 107, and Neale and Krutnik, p. 19. For positive change, see Gray, Jones, Thompson, p. 12, and Harries, p. 31-32.
20 Gray, Jones, Thompson, p. 6. Neale and Krutnik, p. 19-20.
21 Harries, p. 32.
22 Gray, *Watching*, p. 47. King, p. 108.
23 Bonnstetter, p. 25.
24 King, p. 105.

simply strongly implied, as in King's approaches to satire ("comedy with an edge and a target, usually social or political in some way") versus parody (the targets of which "tend to be formal or aesthetic.")[25] In both cases, however, scholars of parody and satire tend to reinforce the problematic concept of a clear-cut divide between form and content, a notion that has been questioned by numerous film and media scholars in recent decades, particularly neoformalists and those building on their work.[26] Although most scholars and viewers would agree that there are clear examples of satire that are explicitly and primarily concerned with content and examples of parody that are concerned with form, there are also innumerable examples that do *not* fit neatly into either of these poles and satirize or parody both form *and* content to varying degrees. Due in part to this longstanding critical neglect, these in-between cases are the primary types I am interested in focusing on in this chapter, and their liminal status serves to trouble, if not make untenable, the clear alignment of parody with form and satire with content.

By tending to focus on clear examples of these extremes rather than those that fall in the middle, scholars also tend to focus on explicitly *political* satire at the expense of an array of other potential satiric targets (the media, society at large, etc.) As a consequence, this often relegates other types of comic critique to the "lesser" (in terms of seriousness and/or effectiveness) realm of parody, likely one of the forms that Geoff King is referring to when he notes how the "degree and power of satire" can be "often hedged by other comic (or serious) strategies" in mainstream films.[27] For *Satire TV,* this approach can limit the otherwise insightful observations made about satire, particularly the ways in which it theorizes and identifies satire through its use of

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25 Gray, *Watching*, p. 47. King, p. 93, 107.
26 See David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 12th ed., New York: McGraw Hill, 2020, p. 52-54, and Noël Carroll, *Engaging the Moving Image*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 134-139 for discussions of the problem of the form/content divide.
27 King, p. 104.

defamiliarization, its (not necessarily humorous) playfulness, and its frequent lack of clear-cut or easily digestible meanings.[28] In terms of examples, however, the book only applies this approach to those that explicitly foreground what amounts to a 'common sense' understandings of politics. This does makes sense given the discursive understanding of television satire in the 2000s from which the collection is working, but these examples also have the effect of making it seem that satire is limited to the explicitly political, in practice if not necessarily in theory.

This lack of a more flexible discursive adaptation can limit our understanding of the relationship between satire and parody in other ways as well. For Gray's example of how *The Simpsons* (1989-) works to parody the news via its generic conventions (news anchors as entertainers, the jarring juxtaposition of "serious" news and "light" human interest stories, hyperbolic rhetoric, etc), many or most of these elements seem to fit as satire too given the ways in which they also critique the problematic sociopolitical consequences of real world TV news.[29] This is not to refute Gray's characterization of them as parody but instead to identify them as simply one of many examples that do not comfortably fit an "either/or" model of parody/satire and form/content. Instead, it highlights an instance where the line between form and content, and between parody and satire, falls somewhere between the two, making theoretical approaches centered around examples at either end of the spectrum more limited and harder to apply in these cases. Such issues are often limiting when applying theories of satire to film, particularly in regard to what films get to be considered "satirical." Many scholars examine as satire only a relatively small number of explicitly political films within an American, Hollywood context, or they bracket off films that do not fit this criteria as "impure" satire in some way.[30] As a result,

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28 Gray, Jones, Thompson, p. 9, 12-13, 15.
29 See Gray, *Watching*, p. 94-116. Also note how a similar slippage is on display in the combination of parody and satire directed at infotainment talk shows and other such media forms in *Don't Look Up*.
30 See, for instance, the examples of satire, especially in terms of American films, in King p. 93-107.

many potentially fruitful avenues of satire, especially in mainstream, commercial Hollywood films without explicitly/overtly political content, have historically been overlooked and underexamined *as* satire.

How can we effectively conceptualize satire and its connection to gags, then, especially for these "in-between" cases? To start, although there are a number of issues that should give us pause in some of the scholarly work on satire, they also provide a variety of valuable and effective models to use. As previously stated, there is potential wide applicability in the way Gray, Jones, and Thompson frame satire as using defamiliarization and ridicule to provoke, aiming for positive change in the world at large even if it is not necessarily clear cut in either its forms or its conclusions. This approach also provides more distinct categories we can use to further examine satire in terms of how it is both created and received, namely by looking at concrete ways satire uses methods of defamiliarization and how/what it ridicules in order to provoke and advocate for change. And while the frameworks that Gray, King, and others use in their own approaches to and understandings of satire may be limited at times, they also provide provocative observations, useful questions to ask about satire, and effective approaches to explicitly political satire that are invaluable. Although none of these approaches fully work for my purposes here, they all contain elements that are useful for understanding satire more broadly and thus underlie at least parts of my subsequent analysis of satire and gags.[31]

For this chapter, though, I primarily borrow from two major approaches to satire. The first derives from Dan Harries' work on film parody that, while obviously centered around parody rather than satire, nevertheless provides a strong theoretical framework that can be

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31 Though I do not use her approach here due to its problematic framework for examining satiric cues, see also Bonnstetter for an example that adapts literary satire theory (Kenneth Burke's poetic categories) for film.

adapted well to satire. By focusing on parody as something that is both "besides" and "against" its target, and by likewise noting how it must both evoke *and* avoid its target (e.g. a parodied genre), Harries theorizes parody in ways that seem largely applicable to satire as well. In particular, this framing of a critical comic form as being both besides and against its target of critique helps to account for some of the ambivalence that is crucial to understanding satirical gags and their reception. In contrast to an either/or approach of parody critiquing form and satire critiquing content, Harries explicitly sees such a distinction as untenable, calling the idea that aesthetic norms (that is, form) are somehow removed from social discourse at large an "illusion" and positing that "the violation of *any* norm has social and political consequence."[32] Harries does acknowledge later on, through his concept of "conservative transgression," that such formal strategies need not necessarily be radical or positive, but his approach still broadens the scope of what can and does constitute satire in film.[33] Additionally, Harries provides a typology of ways in which films parody their targets that, again to a certain extent, can be effectively applied to satire. His categories of reiteration (the quoting of other films or film genres), inversion (uses of irony), misdirection (comic reversals of expectations), literalization (visualizations of puns, idioms, and other concepts), extraneous inclusion (anachronistic insertions of other genres or similarly atypical elements), and exaggeration (caricatures of a genre's particular elements) may not all apply perfectly to film satire, but they provide a variety of concrete ways to frame, identify, and examine *how* gags can be used to create satire.[34] Together, both Harries' theoretical approach to parody and his categories of parodic technique will be particularly influential on my

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32 Harries, p. 32. Emphasis in original.
33 Ibid., p. 120.
34 See Harries, p. 43-89 for discussion of these categories. Also note that certain categories, such as exaggeration, do coincide quite neatly with common definitions of satire (as in Robert Stam, Richard Porton, and Leo Goldsmith's characterization of satire as being "classically defined as exaggeration to prove a point," *Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics*, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 86.)

later examination of satire and gags in *Small Soldiers* and *1941*.

Even more central is Johan Nilsson's work on 1990s American film satire. Explicitly framed as addressing a gap in the literature that fails to effectively account for the "devices that are at the medium's disposal" when looking at film satire, Nilsson turns to David Bordwell's concept of film poetics to examine exactly how satire is cued in films via specific formal and stylistic techniques.[35] For Nilsson, "*satire is an effect of viewers being cued through the particular uses of formal and stylistic devices*" that only "emerges through the interaction between film and viewer."[36] I borrow from this approach and am interested in how gags align with formal and stylistic devices to (potentially) cue us to see them as satirical. This framework is also extremely useful for looking at examples of film satire, especially gag-based ones, that are less explicitly political, allowing us to better gauge when and how they function to cue satire and to ask why viewers do or do not perceive satire in these films. Although Nilsson's major examples do, by and large, continue to focus on explicitly political films and thus continue the tendency to narrowly define satire in practice, his approach still allows for greater flexibility in application and provides greater resources for examining satiric cues. Nilsson's use of poetics also makes no claims to *universal* techniques of satire across all films, instead calling for an examination of satire in specific cases to see how they make use of both representative *and* unique techniques so as to cue us to understand them as satirical.[37] This further provides greater flexibility when looking at individual films and their use of satiric gags.

Additionally, Nilsson's work is useful for the way it frames the role of irony in satire. Irony is fundamental to Nilsson's approach, and he defines satire itself as "a work that comprises

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35 Nilsson, p. 7, 22.
36 Ibid., p. 22, 15. Emphasis in original.
37 Ibid., p. 17.

the ironic in statements, techniques, and effects," further adding that this ironic technique is often

developed via defamiliarization, encouraging us to see difference via the "*ironic* play with

aesthetic, social, and cultural norms" that is present in satire.[38] As is implicit in many of the

satires mentioned in this chapter, and as is explicit in my two case studies, irony is indeed central

to numerous examples of film satire. In this way, then, Nilsson's work is also useful for not only

noting the importance of irony, but for providing a strong explanatory principle for why so much

film satire is highly ambivalent, especially within mainstream film. As King notes, irony often

leaves the attitude of the author uncertain, and it is this uncertainty that motivates both many

dismissals of film satire and many of the in-between examples of satiric gags that I examine

here.[39] Finally, I also follow Nilsson's lead in balancing the importance of examining texts and

audience responses. He does acknowledge the key role that historical context plays in the

understanding of satire by contemporaneous audiences, but he also states that "whether or not

satire is actually understood as satire [by audiences] is less interesting than how satiric meaning

is cued" via various filmic devices.[40] I likewise focus on satiric cues rather than actual audience

responses, albeit while also strongly considering the discursive context around gag-based

comedies to provide a better sense of how audiences may, or may not, have been encouraged to

view such films as satirical.

One additional model also informs my approach to the use of gags for satire: Arthur

Koestler's concept of bisociation as applied by Jeff Smith to the use of musical puns in film.

Characterized as "the movement between two associative chains of logic, each of which

represents a different interpretive frame," Smith notes that bisociation can often be applied to our

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38 Ibid., p. 10-11. Emphasis in original.
39 King, p. 94.
40 Nilsson, p. 13.

understanding of verbal puns, sight gags, and musical puns, albeit in a somewhat different manner for each.[41] Of particular interest is the way in which Smith sees bisociation functioning in musical puns to simultaneously cue the spectator to understand the song's original context *as well as* its recontextualization within the film itself to create its humorous effects.[42] As we shall see, many gag-based comedies, and *Small Soldiers* and *1941* in particular, make use of satiric cues that similarly depend on the simultaneous contextualization and recontextualization of extratextual and intertextual references for their comic effect. Bisociation thus strikes me as a particularly useful framework for understanding how these moments work as comedy, and potentially as comic critique, while also helping to explain why these satiric cues may fail to be picked up by viewers. As Smith points out, audiences must have familiarity with a song for the humorous bisociative effect to work, and musical puns therefore gravitate to the familiar (if not overfamiliar) in order to ensure that they will be understood.[43] The very lack of recognizability in certain satiric cues for many, if not most, audiences may help explain why certain gag-based films struggle to be discursively recognized or otherwise marked as satire.

Understanding Satire and Gags in Popular Discourse

Examining critical discourse further highlights the relationship between gags and satire in blockbuster era Hollywood comedy. I have already sampled some of this, but other examples show how critics tend to frame satire and gags as in opposition, as working together, or as falling somewhere in between these two extremes. As in the review of *Fun With Dick and Jane* mentioned in the chapter opening, some see gags as ill-suited to satire and frame them as

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41 Jeff Smith, "Popular Songs and Comic Allusion in Contemporary Cinema," *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, eds. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 416-417.
42 Ibid., p. 417.
43 Ibid., p. 418.

inevitably weakening a film's satiric effect. Even when not *explicitly* opposed, though, there is

often a strong sense that gags inhibit satire in some way. If 1981's *9 to 5* is an "often brilliant

satire," this is *in spite of* it being "overrun with gags in its second half," a response that implicitly

equates better satire with fewer gags.[44] This opposition is present in the reception of more recent

films as well, as Wojciech Małecki's 2006 essay on *Borat* (2006) opens by asking a series of

rhetorical questions including whether it is "an important sociopolitical satire, or just pointless,

scatological slapstick," again setting up an opposition between the two.[45] Such a binary

studiously ignores the ways in which a film like *Borat* (and its 2020 sequel) is clearly rife with

satirical moments *and* scatological gags, often at the same time. In contrast to this stark divide

between gags and satire, other discourse occasionally frames the two as being more or less

compatible. *Screen International*'s review of the 1981 "satirical comedy" *In God We Trust* notes

that the film's many visual gags are "here and there … sharply flavoured with satire," offering an

explicit assertion that gags themselves can, at least potentially, serve as a vehicle for satire.[46]

However, such explicit connections are rare, and satire and gags are usually only connected with

qualifications. Even the *BASEketball* review cited in the chapter's introduction is hesitant to

clearly draw a line between gags and satire, as its characterization of the film's satire as

"underlying" its gags simultaneously connects the two while implying a fundamental separation

between them: satire *as well as* gags rather than satire *through* gags.[47] All of this is further

complicated by the highly dubious understanding and usage of the term satire within critical

discourse, but these examples still serve to highlight the ways in which gags and satire are

44 David Linck, "9 to 5," *Boxoffice*, Jan 1981, p. 18.
45 Wojciech Małecki, "*Borat*, or Pessimism: On the Paradoxes of Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Laughter,"
     Post Script, 28.3 (Summer 2009), p. 123.
46 Marjorie Bilbow, "In God We Trust," *Screen International*, 4 Jul 1981, p. 17.
47 "BASEketball," p. 23.

generally separated, both positively and negatively, in popular discourse.

Even more indicative of a discursive struggle to adapt to the use of satire within Hollywood comedy, however, is the critical approach to films containing gags and satire where the two are *not* explicitly connected. This especially applies to a number of science fiction films of the 1980s and on that are, at least to a certain extent, both gag-based and satirical, including *The Running Man* (1987), *RoboCop* (1987), *Starship Troopers*, *Southland Tales* (2006), and *Gamer* (2009). All of these films share a number of similarities: they each feature clear gag-driven moments; all have been received by some as at least ambivalently satirical; all have generally been critically excoriated (especially *Southland Tales* and *Gamer*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Running Man* and *Starship Troopers*) for their failures as comedies or satires; all also have a few vehement defenders that see them as using satire effectively.[48] Irrespective of their response, though, many reviews for these sci-fi satires explicitly note a *lack* of separation between the films and their satiric targets, indicating that critics often easily saw these films as being *beside* other mainstream or "trashy" sci-fi films, but not necessarily *against* them as well. This is quite explicit at times, as in the claim by *Variety*'s Rob Nelson that *Gamer* "cannot … conjure anything that remotely resembles satire" or when *Variety* criticized *The Running Man*'s satire of TV for being "paperthin [sic] and constantly contradicted" by the violence it was supposedly targeting.[49] This tendency shows up in other ways as well, from a distinct lack of the word "satire" in major trade reviews of *Starship Troopers* to the various critical responses that

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48 A sampling of any review aggregate site will provide ample evidence of the negative critical reception for most of these films. For defenses of *Southland Tales* and *Gamer*, see the writings of Steven Shaviro, both via his blog "The Pinocchio Theory" (http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/) and in the chapters on each film in Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, Winchester, UK: O Books, 2010. For discussions of the use of satire in the Verhoeven films, see J.P. Telotte, "Verhoeven, Virilio, and 'Cinematic Derealization," *Film Quarterly*, 53.2 (Winter 1999-2000), p. 30-38; Brian E. Crim, "The Intergalactic Final Solution: Nazism and Genocide in Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers*," *Shofar*, 28.4 (Winter 2010), p. 104-115; and (briefly) Nilsson, p. 63.

49 Rob Nelson, "Gamer," *Variety*, 14 Sep 2009, p. 36. "The Running Man," *Variety*, 11 Nov 1987, p. 12.

labeled *Southland Tales* as both a satire *and* a terrible film, if not necessarily in the same breath.[50] In a way, these responses perversely seem to validate Nilsson's assertion that satire is inherently ironic, as each of these sci-fi satires uses irony to such an extent that it veils or renders ambivalent their satiric ends.

On the other hand, there are also examples of each film being received as productive satire that both works with *and* against its targets. *Boxoffice*'s Jim Kozak sees *The Running Man* as continuing the "Kill-Anything-For-A-Laugh" trend in recent Arnold Schwarzenegger films before noting that "there's actually quite a witty satire bubbling just below the surface" of the film's violent narrative, clearly placing the film both beside and against other Schwarzenegger vehicles.[51] For *Southland Tales* and *Gamer*, we see this in their reception from critics such as J. Hoberman, who praised the former for its social satire by way of complex media overload, and Armond White, who saw *Gamer* as satire that functioned as "complex pop art."[52] This is also evident in the reception of each film by scholar Steven Shaviro, who frames *Southland Tales* as, at least to a certain extent, "a dark satire in the tradition of Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*" and *Gamer* as a "brilliant" and "audacious" film that "fully embrace[s] the logic of entertainment, and spectatorial involvement, that is the target of [its] satire."[53] For each film, Shaviro reiterates their potential to be deeply embedded within contemporary society and media *while* still being able to critique it. Satire may not always be central to these critics (Shaviro explicitly calls

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50 A search for "starship troopers" and "satire" in *ProQuest*'s Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive returns no results from contemporaneous reviews of the film, even though the database covers such industry trades as *Variety*, *Boxoffice*, *Screen International*, and more. For *Southland Tales* examples, see Roger Ebert, "Strange Daze: 'Southland Tales' Aims for Satire but Settles for Incoherence," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 Nov 2007, p. B.8, and Desson Thompson, "Much Ado About Nothing," *The Washington Post*, 16 Nov 2007, p. T.32.

51 Jim Kozak, "The Running Man," *Boxoffice*, 1 Feb 1988, p. R-12.

52 J. Hoberman, "Revelation," *Village Voice*, 7 Nov 2007, p. 66. Armond White, "The Lost Dimension," *First Things*, Jun/Jul 2010, p. 77. White is a noted contrarian, but others (including myself) mirror his positive take on the film.

53 Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, p. 66, 116.

Southland Tales a science fiction film rather than a satirical comedy), but they nevertheless find value in the satirical approaches of these films.

Where do gags factor into this reception, then? What are some of the ways that such films adapt gags to create satire? While I would argue that all of these films utilize at least some gag-based comedy to create their comic effects, they are rarely framed as such discursively, with *Variety*'s chiding of *The Running Man* for "sledgehammer[ing] home the most obvious gags" being a rare exception to this tendency.[54] Looking at specific moments from each film, though, we can better see how particular gags function to create potential satiric cues. For instance, each film uses gags that draw from popular media forms to cue satire, including examples that align well with a number of Harries' categories of parody to instead satirically critique contemporary popular media. These include *RoboCop*'s recurrent "I'd buy that for a dollar!" catchphrase from a popular *Benny Hill*-esque sitcom (exaggeration); the "Would you like to know more?" media breaks scattered throughout *Starship Troopers* that exaggerate violent imagery and nationalist rhetoric to help us to see them as satiric propaganda (extraneous inclusion and reiteration); and the *Southland Tales* commercial for Baron von Westphalen's alternative energy SUV that literalizes common phallic and sexual undertones in advertising by showing two vehicles fucking (literalization and exaggeration). These films also use satiric gags revolving around the effects of media consumption. In *The Running Man*, this includes an elderly woman in the game show audience who profanely bets on Richards to make the next kill because "that boy's one mean motherfucker." For *Gamer*, the alternation between dark close-ups of a sweaty, morbidly obese man stuffing his face with waffles and the bright, garish appearance of Rick Rape, his avatar in the popular Society life simulation game, highlights the absurd, unsettling, and ironic disconnect

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54 "The Running Man," *Variety*, 11 Nov 1987, p. 12.

between the two. Such examples of media satire barely scratch the surface of these films, especially when we consider the frequent casting of familiar media personalities in ironic or against-type roles (Richard Dawson as the *Running Man* TV host; Justin Timberlake, Dwayne Johnson, and Sarah Michelle Geller in *Southland Tales*; a cameo from Troma head Lloyd Kaufman in *Gamer*, which frankly *should* be a clear cue to see the film as satire). By placing familiar faces within these roles, the films prompt knowledgeable audiences to simultaneously see these actors both as characters within the fiction *and* as their extratextual personas.

However, this also points to a key reason why these films are only ambivalently seen as satire: the degree of knowledge needed by audiences to understand many cues *as* satiric. *Southland Tales* could at least be recognized as satire by many reviewers thanks to its preponderance of contemporary reference points both political (the war in Iraq, the Bush administration's response to terrorism post-9/11) and pop cultural (the aforementioned pop stars and actors in the cast). However, the sheer number of moments in the film that refer to sources as disparate as the novels of sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick and the trio of *Southland Tales* graphic novels released in conjunction with the film meant that many viewers would be unlikely to understand a number of these as being referential or as using reiteration to cue satire. Here the high degree of audience knowledge needed to understand satire, far from being a marker of distinction as on cable TV, simply serves to make the film pretentious or incoherent for many audiences. Similarly, the number and variety of references in *Gamer*, which repurposes footage from the experimental documentary *Baraka* (1992) and includes brief, overt citations of *Blade Runner* (1982) and other works, again offers a potentially overwhelming density of cues that make the film's satire more difficult for many audiences to recognize, both in general and in

conjunction with gags. Marketing can also further obfuscate such satiric cues. It is likely that one reason why *Starship Troopers* was only rarely referred to as a satire in contemporaneous reviews was its positioning as a straightforward sci-fi/action blockbuster, emphasized by its release date (in November, at the start of the holiday season), a wide release strategy, and advertising and previews of the film that reinforced such a generic positioning. Taking these paratexts at face value, critics and especially audiences would likely have had little reason to expect satire from such a film, making it even harder for viewers to adapt to the film's uses of satire or for satiric cues to hit their mark.

Further complicating all of this is each film's aforementioned use of exaggeration, which creates additional issues for the legibility and efficacy of satire. Although the garish production design and blunt, sexually aggressive names in Society *can* easily cue us to see them as satiric, they also are close enough to "normal" examples of such quasi-exploitation films that they also can, and did, strike many as simply being in bad taste, yet another example of the type of mindless mass entertainment the film supposedly satirizes. This exaggeration also intersects with a particular focus on the body and bodily functions to create gags that may be overlooked as satire because of their distinctly lowbrow, bad taste appeal. Vomiting, urinating, and bowel movements form recurring motifs and/or have narrative importance in *Gamer* and *Southland Tales*, and while they are used for some potent satirical gags, this very focus on "taboo" bodily functions makes them less likely to be recognizable as cues for satire. *Gamer* often works to satirize the relationship between mind, body, and capital in contemporary technology, although perhaps never so colorfully as when Kable, after drinking an entire bottle of vodka, vomits and urinates into an abandoned vehicle on the Slayers battlefield to literally fuel his escape.

Including shots from *inside* the gas tank of the vehicle as he purges the alcohol, this is a clear gag

with satiric undertones, but it is likely not what one reviewer was referring to when they

castigated the film for being "a futuristic vomitorium of bosoms and bullets."[55] Instead, critical

responses often take such moments at face value, struggling to adapt their expectations for these

films to see their uses of the body as anything more than shock value or as part of the expected

trashiness of a mainstream exploitation film. *Southland Tales* also utilizes toilets and bathrooms

to similarly satirize consumer consumption, but in ways that again foreground lowbrow bodily

functions and that were subsequently ignored by most critics.[56] It seems ironic that this very

focus on the body may have prevented such gags from suggesting satire to many viewers.

Such factors play a large role in the mixed reaction to the use of satire in the two gag-

based comedies I will examine later, but they also shape the response to the work of a key creator

of gag-based comedy across the blockbuster era: director Joe Dante. While I have previously

examined the myriad gags and gag-based referents in Dante's work across this dissertation, I

have generally eschewed considering his uses of satire. However, critics and scholars alike often

note the presence of a satirical streak in Dante's films. Tom Shone highlighted the use of satire in

Dante's work as part of what he termed a cadre of "cartoon gothic" filmmakers in the early

1990s, while Christoph Huber noted the satirical "weapons" in Dante's arsenal in an entry from

the 2013 book devoted to the filmmaker.[57] These serve as merely two examples of how Dante's

use of dark, quirky comedy for satire is a recurring theme in many assessments of his work.

However, there is also a great deal of ambivalence and limited flexibility in assessing the degree

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55 Jeannette Catsoulis, "Bullets, Buttocks and Button Pushing," *The New York Times*, 5 Sep 2009, p. 4.

56 See Luke Holmaas, "Some Years from This Exact Moment: Ambivalent Dystopian Science Fiction Satire,"
    Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy, 5 (2020), p. 83-84 for more.

57 Tom Shone, "Direct Steal from Reel Life," *The Sunday Times (London)*, 29 Nov 1992. Christoph Huber, "Eat at
    Joe's (A Scientific Study of Corporate Identity)," *Joe Dante*, eds. Nil Baskar and Gabe Klinger, Vienna:
    SYNEMA, 2013, p. 138-145.

and effectiveness of satire in Dante's filmography, especially when looking at films that fall outside of the realm of explicitly political satire, as his TV movies *The Second Civil War* (1997) and *Homecoming* (2005) clearly position themselves.

This is nowhere more apparent than in Dante's two *Gremlins* films, 1984's *Gremlins* and 1990's *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*. While some may have seen it as satirical upon its release, the first film primarily acquired a reputation for its strong satirical vein in subsequent years, both from critics of the late 1980s (as a precursor to what John Powers called the "New American Gothic") and film scholars of the 21st century (in James Kendrick's 2009 characterization of the film as "anti-nostalgic" satire).[58] And, indeed, the film does provide numerous cues, including via its gags, that help push audiences toward this satirical approach. These range from minor "chicken fat" gags such as the Nixon poster glimpsed in the house of the xenophobic, jingoistic Futtermans to numerous visual gags as the gremlins mimic a variety of human behaviors at Dorry's pub. It even includes musical puns, as in the use of Johnny Mathis' version of "Do You Hear What I Hear?" as Lynn ascends the stairs to Billy's room that functions as both a lyrical pun and a satirical use that ironically defamiliarizes a Christmas classic by recontextualizing it within a horror setting. In examples like these, the film embraces the irony underlying these gags so as to give them a strongly satiric bent. The presence of these and other gags thus function as satirical cues, both obvious and subtle, that help to explain why some viewers have been able to adjust and see *Gremlins* as a satiric horror-comedy over the decades.

At the same time, though, the film was not necessarily received as a satire in critical discourse upon its release, and there are also ways in which the film complicates or downplays

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58 John Powers, "Bleak Chic," *American Film*, Mar 1987, p. 48. James Kendrick, *Hollywood Bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American Cinema*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009, p. 191.

its use of satire. While most reviews of the film note its humor, the majority of them do not

specifically characterize it *as* a satire.[59] Even those that do hint at its use of satire, under the

guise of referring to its "black comedy," "sick" humor, or parody more generally, provide little

acknowledgment of specific satiric cues that hint at the reputation it would later build.[60] One

reason for this relates to the film's positioning via its marketing and promotion. Numerous

industry- and popular-oriented previews of the film, including stories highlighting the security

surrounding the script and mystery around the appearance of the creatures themselves,

emphasized its status as both a Steven Spielberg-produced project and its toyetic potential,

neither of which positions it as a satirical (or even necessarily comic) film.[61] This latter element

may have been particularly significant, and it foreshadows the reception of Dante's *Small

Soldiers*. *Gremlins* was often framed as a family film, aided in no small part by the dozens of

licensed products made for the film that included children's sleepwear, slippers, raincoats,

backpacks, and more.[62] Furthermore, the approach to minimize *Gremlins*' comic or satiric

elements was carefully arranged by the studio itself. Publicist Rob Harris acknowledged in an 10

August 1983 memo concerning his work on the film's press kit that it was his decision to

"emphasize the fantasy and fun in the picture" rather than its horror or comic elements, explicitly

stating that, while he acknowledges the film's degree of humor, he believed "that positioning it as

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59 See, for example, Alan Karp, "Gremlins," *Boxoffice*, Aug 1984, p. R-93-R-94. "Gremlins," *Variety*, 23 May 1984, p. 12, 27. Vincent Canby, "'Gremlins', Kiddie Gore," *The New York Times*, 8 Jun 1984, p. C-10.

60 For "sick jokes," see Roger Ebert, "Gremlins," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8 Jun 1984. For "black comedy," see Gene Siskel, "'Gremlins' Rots the Brain – Delightfully," *Chicago Tribune*, 8 Jun 1984, p. E2. For the discussion of ambivalent parody, see Pauline Kael, "Current Cinema," *The New Yorker*, 25 Jun 1984, p. 99, 103.

61 For examples, see "Gremlins," *Boxoffice*, Jul 1983, p.8 and Janet Maslin, "At the Movies," *The New York Times*, 13 Apr 1984, p. C-8. Additionally, while I will examine satire in a pre-*Gremlins* Spielberg film momentarily, I should note that popular conceptions of a "Spielberg-production" at the time would likely *not* have connected his name with satire.

62 See "Licensee List," container 10, Joe Dante and Michael Finnell Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA, for a full list of licensed products for the film.

a comedy (or black comedy) would be neither accurate *nor to the picture's advantage*."[63] Given

this attempt by the studio to guide *Gremlins*' promotion *away* from its comedy, including its

satire, it should come as no surprise that critics and others were initially unwilling or unable to

see the film's cues for satire functioning as such.

The mixture of generic elements Harris' memo alludes to (including fantasy, horror, and

comedy) does help provide a rationale for the ambivalence of satire in *Gremlins* and

contemporaneous responses to it. For *Gremlins 2*, however, this is complicated by the ways the

film more explicitly positions itself as a comedy. Early mentions of the sequel are far more open

and communicative in comparison to the veil of secrecy surrounding the first film, with pre-

release references to the "Donald Trump-like character" at the heart of the plot, the casting of

horror icon Christopher Lee, or the cameo of Leonard Maltin (upon whom the *Chicago Tribune*

expected Dante to "exact some artistic revenge" for his pan of the first *Gremlins*) all hinted at the

parodic, referential, and generally comic tone of *Gremlins 2*.[64] Likewise, initial reviews of the

film itself tended to highlight both the more comedic tone of the film in general, and, at least at

times, its greater use of satire. In terms of its comedy, the *Washington Post*'s Hal Hinson cited

the film's opening as setting the tone for the film as "a kind of live-action Looney Tunes" while

Roger Ebert bemoaned the film's quick dismissal of narrative to become "a series of gags."[65]

Additionally, critics for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsday*, and the *Globe and Mail* all

highlighted the film's use of satire, particularly via its references to popular figures and other

63 Memo from Rob Harris to Rob F. re: *Gremlins* Presskit, 10 Aug 1983, p. 2, Rob Harris papers, box 26, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA. Emphasis mine. It should be noted that this was not a blanket approach: in a story about the film, *Time* quoted star Zach Galligan as describing the gremlins themselves as being "little satirists, walking parodies of humanity" (Richard Corliss, "Creature Comforts and Discomforts," *Time*, 4 Jun 1984, p. 65).
64 "Hollywood Report," *Boxoffice*, Sep 1989, p. 6. "TV Notes," *Chicago Tribune*, 19 Jul 1989, p. C7.
65 Hal Hinson, "'Gremlins 2': Old Tricks From the New Batch," *The Washington Post*, 15 Jun 1990, p. C1. Roger Ebert, "Gremlins 2: The New Batch," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 Jun 1990.

targets that contemporaneous adult audiences would likely recognize.[66] Promotional materials

such as the film's press kit likewise reinforced the sequel's more comic approach, noting how this

time around the film "take[s] off into the realm of a free unfettered comedy."[67] Much as the

original *Gremlins* was being understood more clearly as a satire by this time, so too was its

sequel more frequently framed as making use of satiric cues.

Of course, such satire is also not as straightforward as it first may seem. While many

critics easily picked up on general satiric cues (the many aspects of Daniel Clamp's character

clearly inspired by then-real estate mogul Donald Trump) and those that were gag-based (a PA

announcement touting the Clamp Network's new colorized, happier version of 1942's

Casablanca, an unsubtle allusion to the recent Ted Turner colorization controversies), their

reception of the film's satire as a whole was far more ambivalent. For every notice that praised

the film's "satirical riffs on pop culture" that were "tart and sophisticated" or satire that was "just

as savage as the gremlins themselves," others characterized the film's satire in far more hesitant

terms.[68] Some dismissed it, with one reviewer framing the film as a "throw-away satire about

modern life" while another saw its satire as clever but "tangential."[69] Even more strongly, others

actively condemned the film as a hypocritical corporate product that tried to satirize "corporate

control mania" while remaining clearly (and irredeemably) embedded within it.[70] And, of

course, the film incorporates a wide range of parody or examples that fit somewhere between

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66 David Sterritt, "'Gremlins 2' Signals Clone-Filled Summer," *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 Jun 1990, p. 13. Mike McGrady, "Here's a Flick Filled With 'Gremlins'," *Newsday*, 15 Jun 1990, p. 8. Jay Scott, "Gremlins 2: The New Batch," *The Globe and Mail*, 16 Jun 1990.

67 *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* press kit, p. 4, *Cinefantastique* Magazine Records, 36.f-705, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.

68 Peter Rainer, "New Video Releases," *American Film*, Dec 1990, p. 54. Doris Toumarkine, "Gremlins 2 The New Batch," *Film Journal*, Jul 1990, p. 19.

69 Shaun Usher, "Video Special," *Daily Mail*, 15 Mar 1991. Edmond Grant, "Film Reviews: Gremlins 2," *Films in Review*, Oct 1990.

70 David Elliott, "'Gremlins 2' Too Full of Commercial Cuteness," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 15 Jun 1990, p. E10.

parody and satire as well, making it even trickier for critics to be able to (or to even want to) try and identify and comment on the use of satire specifically. These responses highlight several key issues around satire in gag-based comedies like the *Gremlins* films: even if it is clearly identifiable, does that necessarily mean that satire is effective or consequential in these films? Is critical discourse nuanced enough to clearly differentiate between satire as sociopolitical critique and parody as a non-sociopolitical critique (as Harper Barnes fails to do when he calls *Gremlins 2* the best satire since *Airplane!*, a film that is clearly *not* a sociopolitical critique)?[71] And can such satire neutralize the impact of merchandising and other synergistic corporate elements of studio-based Hollywood production, or do those elements simply cancel out satire's effects as an industrial adaptation negates a textual one? Especially for high-profile gag-based satires, these questions are central to understanding the ambivalence of satire in terms of both their discursive adaptation and the films themselves.

Gags and (the Limits of) Satire in *Small Soldiers* and *1941*

Small Soldiers

While *Gremlins 2* provides a good snapshot of several of these issues, it is another Joe Dante film, *Small Soldiers*, that is an even more ideal entry point for investigating the difficulties of adapting gags for satire in Hollywood comedy. In particular, *Small Soldiers* serves as a strong example of a film that consistently makes use of less clear stylistic devices or more ambivalent examples of irony that can *under* cue its satire for many viewers. The film is reminiscent of *Gremlins* in its story of a small-town teen struggling to contain an outbreak of miniaturized monsters (in this case roboticized toy soldiers implanted with military-issue microprocessors) from destroying his town, and it was one of the major commercial and critical disappointments

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71 Harper Barnes, "Wild, Funny Satire (With a Little Gore)," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 15 Jun 1990, p. 3F.

of the summer of 1998. Released in July with an estimated $40 million production budget (to

say nothing of its massive marketing campaign), the film ended up with mixed-at-best reviews, a

soft $55 million domestic box office take, and only about another $16 million from international

markets.[72] The film's middling response squashed hopes for potential sequels and failed to

reignite Dante's directing career after a series of similarly underwhelming films in the wake of

the original *Gremlins*. It was a particularly painful disappointment for production company

Dreamworks given the early interest the film had sparked at March's ShoWest convention (where

Variety declared it to be "probably [the] most warmly received" of Dreamworks' offerings) and

the vast array of licensees and tie-ins the studio had lined up in the months leading to the film's

release, from action figures and computer games to a highly touted promotional partnership with

Burger King.[73] In the end, though, issues ranging from complaints about the film's violence and

PG-13 rating (particularly from partner Burger King) to the high-profile murder of actor Phil

Hartman prior to its release all helped contribute to the film's subdued box office performance.

In fact, the film's massive pre-release push may have also helped to steer critics and

audiences away from seeing the film *as* a satire. Simply put, the massive deal with Burger King

and the barrage of tie-in merchandising that coincided with the film's release functioned as an

industrial signal that this was nothing more than a film for (white, male) children/teens and was

thus incapable of containing any important or critical commentary. Some critics did explicitly

praise the film's use of satire, including the *Calgary Herald*, *Financial Times*, Melbourne's *The

Age*, and, most strikingly, Jonathan Rosenbaum's simultaneous praise for *Small Soldiers* and

condemnation of Dreamworks' critical and commercial hit *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) for the

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72 Budget and box office data taken from box office website The Numbers.
73 Andrew Hindes, "D'Works Plays Host at ShoWest," *Variety*, 12 Mar 1998, p. 5.

Chicago Reader.[74] However, critics more commonly noted the film's attempts at satire but saw them as compromised or flawed in some way. Several questioned if the film's satire would be understood by its presumed audience of preteen boys, as when Roger Ebert expressed concern about kids knowing "where to stand" in relation to the film's violence committed by and against its toy characters.[75] Others likewise framed the pre-release marketing blitz as weakening or completely neutralizing the film's satire. For Montreal's *The Gazette*, the film was "slyly subversive" and *not* "just another Hollywood toy tie-in," but they also framed it as "almost perfect brainy, mindless entertainment," simultaneously portraying the film as smart *and* stupid.[76] Elsewhere, the *New York Times* chided the film for "forgetting" to direct more sustained satire at the toy industry before turning its attentions to the suburban battlefield.[77] Perhaps most damning, the *Globe and Mail* bluntly criticized *Small Soldiers* for "speak[ing] out of both sides of its mouth" by ultimately being a satire on the toy industry that is "designed to sell violent toys to children."[78] These critics *did* see satire in the film, then, but the studio's positioning of the film via marketing and merchandising served to undermine or neutralize any potential these critics saw for meaningful critique well before its release.

What does all of this mean for the relationship of the film's gags to satire? As previously stated, there were critics who *did* see the film as an effective satire, and there have been scattered attempts in the two decades since the film's release to rehabilitate its satiric reputation, such as

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74 See Mike Boon, "Pre-teens will love this war of toys: And their dads may just enjoy it, too," *Calgary Herald*, 10 Jul 1998, p. D5; Nigel Andrews, "Cinema," *Financial Times*, 22 Oct 1998; Jim Schembri, "Small Soldiers, Big Buzz," *The Age*, 18 Sep 1998, p. 9; and Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Cutting Heroes Down to Size," *Chicago Reader*, 24 Jul 1998. It is interesting to note that all of these instances come from non-American sources (or in the case of Rosenbaum, an American who has lived and worked in Europe and often takes a more international-focused approach to his film criticism).

75 Roger Ebert, "Small Soldiers," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 10 Jul 1998. See also Christopher Smith, "Audience Goes AWOL on 'Small Soldiers'," *Bangor Daily News*, 13 Jul 1998.

76 Brendan Kelly, "Small Soldiers, Big Firepower," *The Gazette*, 10 Jul 1998, p. C3.

77 Janet Maslin, "The Few, the Proud, the Computer-Generated," *New York Times*, 10 Jul 1998, p. E18.

78 Liam Lacey, "Dudes with 'tude Star in Extended Toy Commercial," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 Jul 1998, p. C7.

Christopher Kelly's paean to the "unsung pleasures" of *Small Soldiers* (along with 1998's *Babe: Pig in the City*) for *Film Quarterly* in 2000.[79] However, these examples largely eschew the role of gags in creating the film's satire, likely due to the higher cultural capital for satire than for gags, as noted earlier in this chapter. Thus, it is easier for an ambitious critic or scholar to try and redeem the reputation of a film like *Small Soldiers* by foregrounding its use of satire rather than by appreciating its use of "mere" gags. For my purposes, however, a more useful approach would be to look at the ways in which the film uses gags to cue satire, examining how these both have the potential to signal satire and why they may fail to do so for many viewers. Again borrowing loosely from Harries' categories for parody, we can point to three major categories of gags that serve to provide satirical cues in *Small Soldiers*: reiteration (particularly of elements from war films), inversion, and exaggeration. While I want to reiterate that Harries' categories do not fit perfectly for satire, and they may at times reinforce the somewhat messy overlap between parody and satire, they still provide a more organized, effective sense of *how* we can be cued to see *Small Soldiers* as a satire of militarism, corporatism, and consumption.

Reiteration, especially of previous war films, animates a number of the film's satirical gags. This is perhaps most striking in a gag where Chip Hazard, leader of the malfunctioning Commando Elite toys, delivers a fractured motivational speech to his troops while standing in front of a screen-filling American flag. On the one hand, this sequence serves to parodically recreate the mise-en-scene of the opening of *Patton* (1970), a link that is further reinforced by Jerry Goldsmith's self-citation of his score from that film. Indeed, several critics made note of this gag, but more in terms of parody than of satire.[80] Although the mise-en-scene and music do

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79 Christopher Kelly, "Toys in the Attic: The Unsung Pleasures (and Terrors) of *Babe: Pig in the City* and *Small Soldiers*," *Film Quarterly*, 53.4 (Summer 2000), p. 41-46.

80 See Steve Murray, "'Soldiers' Falls Short, Except in Violence," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 10 Jul 1998, p. 15P, and David Hunter, "Small Soldiers*,*" *The Hollywood Reporter*, 9 Jul 1998 for two examples of this

clearly parody *Patton* by creating a comic, bisociative effect, I would also argue that the use of

malapropic versions of famous patriotic American quotes ("Damn the torpedoes, or give me

death!," "you are the best of the best of the few and the proud," or "ask not what your country

can do for you, only regret that you have but one life to live!") in lieu of *Patton*'s more

straightforward militaristic nationalism cues us to see the sequence satirically as well. By

reiterating the (already bombastic) rhetoric present in *Patton* and further fracturing it, *Small*

Soldiers knowingly cues us to see these as simply empty, cliched soundbites, highlighting the

meaningless of such rhetoric and making the sequence both a parody *and* a satire. Some critics

also picked up on other cues from previous war films, including the gag (both as a gimmick and

a comic stimulus) of having actors from 1967's *The Dirty Dozen* voice the other Commando

Elites, repurposing the voices of famous war film antiheroes for even more immoral and

repulsive (toy) soldiers. If the *Dirty Dozen* already presented a troubling example of wartime

morality, its reiteration here satirically pushes that amorality to scathingly absurd levels.

Elsewhere, Phil's one-liner that "I think World War II was my favorite war" while watching the

1955 Audie Murphy film *To Hell and Back* on his state-of-the-art home theater system also

invokes a previous war film to critique its ideology. By citing a film where Audie Murphy,

playing himself, helped to define the heroic, "good war" cultural mythology of WWII, *Small*

Soldiers creates an implicit critique of such mythologizing and the absurdity of choosing a

"favorite" from among America's destructive and bloody conflicts.

    Beyond these examples, *Small Soldiers* also features reiteration that is not noted in the

critical discourse or that cites other film genres. Immediately prior to the previously mentioned

gag, an assault by the Commando Elite on Timmy segues directly into war footage from *To Hell*

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tendency.

and Back on Phil's TV, drawing parallels between the two. This may not strike many viewers as an immediately humorous gag, but this transition does certainly offer a cue (if a subtle one) for us to see it as a darkly comic moment. Similarly, when the Commando Elites later send a VHS tape send to Alan, the film's protagonist, that shows love interest Christy held hostage, its shaky video cinematography and mise-en-scene clearly (even for a pre-9/11 audience) serve to mimic real-life terrorist hostage videos. While again arguable as a clear gag, the absurdity of the moment and its mixture of the bizarrely fantastical (talking toy terrorists) with very real danger provides a potential example of pitch-black comedy akin to Kate's infamous Christmas speech in *Gremlins*. The film's uses of music also provide several bisociative musical puns that evoke previous real world military events and war films. The Commandos' initial assault on Stuart's house blasts the Spice Girls' song "Wannabe" to try and drive out the humans, which a few critics likened to the US military's use of music as psychological warfare against Panamanian dictator General Noriega.[81] Similarly, Chip's later invasion of the house in a toy helicopter is accompanied by "Ride of the Valkyries," made famous by the helicopter assault in 1979's *Apocalypse Now*, providing another musical pun that helps link *Small Soldiers* to the history of the war film for audiences. Such cues highlight the ironic overlap between "play" war, cinematic wars, and, as seen in the reception of the Spice Girls' song, real world military events. And as the film's promotional material and critics frequently noted, not only did *The Dirty Dozen* cast provide most of the Commandos' voices, but the bulk of the Gorgonites (the peaceful "enemy" of the Commandos) were voiced by the actors who portrayed the eponymous band in 1984's *This Is Spinal Tap*, complete with similar faux-British accents. This places the film in direct conversation with a comic forerunner and, by recalling the lovable idiots of the band Spinal Tap,

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81 Jonathan Romney, "Small Soldiers," *Sight and Sound*, Oct 1998, p. 55.

further undermines the Commandos by ironically highlighting the absurdity of their psychotic

crusade against the perfectly harmless Gorgonites.

Elsewhere, the film uses inversion for a number of gags to ironic and (at least potentially)

satiric effect. Consider the film's very first sequence, a commercial for GloboTech Industries

that directly links GloboTech's military and arms technology with families and the home. Not

only is this an ironic linkage between warfare and domesticity, but it is also strikingly similar to

satiric commercials from previously mentioned science fiction satires like *RoboCop* and *Starship

Troopers*. An early musical pun also uses "Also Sprach Zarathustra" to bisociatively invoke

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), albeit in this case simply to introduce the Chip Hazard toy in a

proof-of-concept commercial. Far from its connection with the lofty intellectual and

metaphysical questions of *2001*, the music here is used ironically to sell a mere toy. Later, when

Christy's Gwendy dolls are reformed into monstrous allies by the Commandos, a citation from

Franz Waxman's score for the 1935 comedy-horror film *Bride of Frankenstein* plays on the

soundtrack. This serves multiple functions, fitting under both reiteration (as a musical reference

that underlines the comic horror of this moment) and inversion (ironically linking this gag, and

by implication parts of the film as a whole, with the lineage of classical Hollywood horror films).

Even more overtly, a later brief ironic gag features a shot of one of the Gwendy dolls attacking

Christy being thrown into an anti-war poster on her bedroom wall, a chicken-fat mise-en-scene

gag that creates a humorous, and deeply ironic, juxtaposition both with the violence in the scene

and the militarism satirized throughout the film.

Finally, *Small Soldiers* is also rife with gags that cue satire through exaggeration. The

film is permeated with exaggeration in terms of its performances and broadly caricatured

characters, especially the film's parents. This culminates in a late gag where Phil's neighbors refuse to call the cops upon hearing the Commando assault because they assume he is simply watching another war film too loudly. And while the Commando Elites are clearly modeled on stereotypical war film types, their behavior is so unrelentingly sadistic and amoral as to exaggerate those stereotypes into the realm of anti-war satire: one Commando throws eggs out of a bird's nest without any clear motivation besides casual sadism; in Alan's kitchen, various gags revolve around the Commandos using kitchen implements as torture devices while they constantly spout cliched combat phrases as one-liners; and previously cited gags (the faux *Patton* speech, the terrorist video) likewise use strong exaggeration to highlight the amorality of the Commandos and mock their cliched and deranged notions of military heroism. On the one hand, these gags can be seen as parodic to an extent, making use of war and action movie cliches to help create an absurd, cartoonish sensibility. At the same time, though, these cliches are exaggerated to such a degree that they provide a distance from the animated characters, highlighting the irony and satire underneath these gags and creating an even greater contrast between these toys and the very real danger in which the human characters find themselves.

Given the numerous examples of gags that seem to provide satirical cues via one-liners, musical puns, ironic uses of editing, and more, why then was *Small Soldiers* generally received as a weak or compromised satire? Why weren't these cues picked up on by critics and audiences more broadly? While I have pointed to some potential marketing and promotional reasons that help account for this, I would further argue that although the film makes use of a number of exaggerated and broad cues, it also *under* cues its satire in a variety of ways that encouraged this strongly ambivalent reception. The exaggeration and caricature of certain characters in the film

do provide strong cues that many viewers would likely pick up on, but it seems far less likely

that the majority of viewers would easily pick up on satirical cues like the use of *The Dirty*

Dozen or *This Is Spinal Tap* casts as voice actors. Furthermore, even for audiences that *do* pick

up on such connections, it is not always obvious or clear exactly how such references cue satire.

It is just as likely, if not more so, that viewers would simply see the use of these voice actors as

an homage, a parody, or a pastiche rather than making the leap to seeing them as cues for satire, a

fate that could befall many of the film's myriad references to other works. Many audience

members would likewise struggle to recognize other film references, making it far less likely for

their satiric effects to be cued. Given that *Small Soldiers* was indexed as a mainstream, big

budget, studio summer film ostensibly targeted at children, audiences would likely not be primed

to pick up on and understand references to *Patton* and *Apocalypse Now* (much less the even more

esoteric references to *Bride of Frankenstein* and *To Hell and Back*) as necessarily being satiric.

A risk of such uses of reiteration and inversion for satiric purposes, both in this film and others

(like *Starship Troopers* or *Gamer*), is that they will fall too far outside the schemas that most

audiences bring to the film to be understood *as* cues for satire. By often cuing satire through

these tactics and by utilizing exaggeration that will more likely cue *comedy* but not necessarily

satire, *Small Soldiers*' gags were too weakly cued for the majority of audiences and critics

(cinephiles like Rosenbaum aside) to be effectively understood as satire.

1941

In many ways, Steven Spielberg's *1941* is a perfect companion piece to *Small Soldiers* for

examining the role of gags in satire. Both films feature numerous gags, are centered around

warfare, incorporate moments of self-reference to their director's and composer's previous works,

and contain numerous references to other films. They also bear a strong resemblance in terms of their reception: both were highly anticipated films and difficult productions, and each received a mixed or negative critical response and a disappointing (although not strictly negative, as their subsequent dismissals may imply) box office take. Most importantly for our purposes here, though, are the ways in which each film features a number of gags that either failed to provide cues for satire for many critics and audiences or simply failed to serve as effective satire for them. And if *Small Soldiers'* ambivalent response can be best explained due to its under-cuing of satire, then *1941* presents its own set of issues, from a similarly misleading positioning of the film in marketing and pre-release discourse to the frequent use of even more ambivalent gags that may be *too* ironic to provide viewers with clear cues for satire.

As the followup to Spielberg's two previous blockbuster films, 1975's *Jaws* and 1977's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, it was inevitable that *1941* would be highly anticipated. However, once production started, it quickly spun out of control as its pre-production budget of $12 million eventually ballooned to $31.5 million over the course of a sprawling 247 day shoot.[82] And, much like *Small Soldiers*, it would go on to gross a respectable, but disappointing (especially given the severe cost overruns), sum of $90-95 million worldwide, nearly two-thirds of which came from international markets.[83] Exacerbating this relatively modest box office take, though, was the film's damage to Spielberg's critical reputation as a wunderkind who could do no wrong after *Jaws* and *Close Encounters*. Of course, with his next film, 1981's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Spielberg once again regained his position as a major Hollywood force, thus relegating

82 Budget and shooting information from Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography*, 2nd ed., Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010, p. 305.
83 Exact box office tallies for the film are somewhat imprecise: McBride reports that the film had a worldwide gross of $90 million (ibid., p. 309), but box office websites The Numbers and Box Office Mojo report worldwide takes of nearly $95 million and about $92.5 million, respectively.

1941 to a mere footnote in most discussions of his work and legacy.

Both contemporaneous reviews of the film and subsequent scholarly work on Spielberg display a tendency to dismiss *1941*. In terms of satire, many of the film's most prominent reviews were not only negative, but they also did not explicitly (or often even implicitly) frame the film as satirical. Instead, the critical response often pointed to an overabundance of other types of humor in the film, with *Boxoffice* labeling it "a confusing, nonstop stream of high-energy action, sight gags, technical effects and ideas that probably sounded very funny on paper" while *The Film Journal* saw the film as "bursting with slapstick routines, sight gags, [and] giddy homages to other movies," noting many different types of comedy found in *1941* without any reference to satire.[84] Those that did hint at the film's use of satire did so offhandedly, as in Roger Ebert's linking of the film to satirical forerunners like *Dr. Strangelove* and *MAD* magazine, or in a clearly negative light, such as the *Los Angeles Times*' characterization of the film as using frequent irony for no purpose beyond nihilism.[85] Furthermore, while later evaluations of the film in the context of Spielberg's career frequently do see the film as using satire in addition to broad comedy, this often served as a means for the authors to then critique its use of satire. Biographer Joseph McBride was unequivocal about the film's satirical failure, calling its "attempts at social satire" witless because "social satire, however farcical in spirit, cannot depart so far from reality that it turns into outright fantasy" (which McBride saw the film doing) "or much of the satirical sting is lost."[86] Nigel Morris likewise judged *1941*'s satire harshly by reasoning that while "comedy requires shared understanding that it both challenges and confirms," Spielberg's film was instead "both indiscriminate and arbitrary, proffering no subject position for the spectator

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84 Gary Burch, "1941," *Boxoffice*, 31 Dec 1979, p. 27. "1941," *The Film Journal*, Feb 1980, p. 16.
85 Roger Ebert, "1941," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 Dec 1979. Charles Champlin, "Spielberg's Pearl Harbor," *Los Angeles* Times, 14 Dec 1979, p. C1.
86 McBride, p. 301, 302.

other than largely un-amused detachment," implying that it was the very lack of clarity in the film's comic cues that ultimately doomed its satire.[87] And even when allowing for potentially effective satire in *1941*, scholars rarely analyze the satire itself. In discussing experimentation in three of Spielberg's 1970s films, James Kendrick calls the film "audacious in refusing to play by the accepted dictates of Hollywood screen comedy while celebrating the more uncivilized impulses that drive animal comedy, which, when unleashed within a historical military setting, inherently undermines traditional notions of order, patriotism, and respect."[88] While a provocative claim, it is unfortunately not reinforced by any evidence of exactly *how* the film does this. Even when satire is both present and effective, then, it is unclear exactly how it is being cued at all, much less how the film uses gags to cue that satire.

However, Kendrick and others do provide potential explanations for *1941*'s failure, both commercially and in terms of its satire, upon release. Primary among them were the aforementioned expectations created by its status as the next Steven Spielberg production. As Lester D. Friedman points out, Spielberg and others acknowledged as much in the wake of the film's release, and Friedman concurs by noting that "at this point in his career, Spielberg's skills seem ill-matched with the black cynicism shrouding the heart of *1941*."[89] Given the emphasis on wide-eyed wonder and optimistic fantasy in Spielberg's previous *Close Encounters*, both of which would be further emphasized in later successes like 1982's *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, it is unsurprising that the broad, ambivalent, ironic, and indeed often cynical humor of *1941* would violate the expectations of critics and audiences alike. Additionally, the film's busy, nonstop, breakneck comedy was often framed as another potential stumbling block to understanding it as

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87 Nigel Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, London: Wallflower Press, 2007, p. 65.
88 James Kendrick, "Finding His Voice: Experimentation and Innovation in *Duel*, *The Sugarland Express*, and *1941*," *A Companion to Steven Spielberg*, ed. Nigel Morris, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017, p. 115.
89 Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg*, Lester D. Friedman, 2006, p. 191, 197.

satire. An exhausting, overwhelming barrage for many contemporaneous reviewers, Kendrick

likewise saw the film's broad comedy, mockery, special effects, and soundtrack as being "simply

more than viewers could process at the time" and another reason for the film's failure.[90] Even if

the film's satire was strongly cued, then, the sheer density of its narrative and audiovisual

information could drown out or minimize those cues to the extent of near-imperceptibility,

leading viewers to see parody, slapstick, and the other comic modes present in the film *instead* of

satire rather than in addition to it.

Where does the film itself fit into this matrix of comedy and satire, then? While there is a

high degree of density in the film's gags, references, and general comedy that complicate how it

cues satire, a closer look at those gags also challenges this explanation some. Again adapting

Harries' model of parody to examine the film's use of satire, *1941* resembles *Small Soldiers* in its

use of reiteration and, in particular, inversion and exaggeration. However, it also makes use of

literalization gags that often provide their own satirical cues. In terms of reiteration gags, they

do appear across the film but are only infrequently used as cues for satire. The opening of *1941*,

which closely apes the opening shark attack of Spielberg's *Jaws* (down to casting the same

actress in the same skinny-dipping role and John Williams reusing his famous shark theme),

serves as a clear parody of that previous hit and likely would (and should) be seen as such by

viewers. At the same time, though, it also works to establish a recurring satiric link between

phallic imagery, militarism, and aggressive masculine sexuality in its payoff: instead of a shark,

the nude swimmer is lifted out of the water by a phallic Japanese submarine tower. This specific

instance recalls the opening of *Dr. Strangelove* and its own ironic use of romantic music and

sexualized, phallic military imagery to establish a satiric conflation of warfare and the phallic-

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90 Kendrick, "Finding His Voice," p. 114.

frenzy of male sexual paranoia. However, other reiterations in *1941* are more diffuse in cuing

their satire. The film's casting, for instance, provides numerous potential satiric cues: *Saturday*

Night Live stars John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd portray irresponsible, putatively heroic American

war heroes; real-life WWII veteran and cult film director Samuel Fuller appears in a cameo role;

and Slim Pickens, arguably most recognizable as Major Kong from *Dr. Strangelove*, also appears

in a small, but important, role in the film. However, such casting choices are not gags per se, nor

do they *necessarily* offer clear cues for satire. The *SNL* actors, rather than being seen as

satirizing WWII heroism, may only be associated with comedy more broadly, a link that is

reinforced by Jones' claim that *SNL* as a show generally used its political humor less for satirical

ends than as "a narrative strategy linking comedians to character types that encourage repeated

viewing for audience engagement with these characters," thus foregrounding comic performance

over satiric heft.[91] And audiences may simply fail to recognize Fuller or Pickens, much less

make a connection between them and their previous history or roles.

　　Satiric literalization gags are also relatively infrequent, but they generally offer stronger

cues for satire, especially during the chaotic later sections of the film. While some examples

may fit more with inversion (examined in a moment), two particular literalization gags stand out.

As a brawl started by rivals Wally and Stretch balloons, it spills out of the downtown Los

Angeles USO club and into the street, turning into a free-for-all between various branches of the

armed forces. As a mob of sailors runs to clash with a mob of soldiers, a stoplight/sign in the

right foreground of the shot switches to green/go a moment before the two groups collide. This

'go' sign literally (and ironically) spurs these American military men on to combat, underlying

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91　Jones, " Politics and the Brand," p. 80. This may apply to *Small Soldiers* as well given Phil Hartman's long-
　　running connections with *SNL*, *The Simpsons*, and other TV comedies.

the eagerness with which virtually all of them seem to want to fight each other as much as, if not more so, the nebulous 'enemy' throughout the film. Later, as Ward uses the antiaircraft gun stationed at his house to try and sink a Japanese sub off the coast, he swivels the massive gun into a carefully composed image dividing the sub in his target sight on the right half of the frame and the barrel of the gun itself pointing directly at his house on the left side of the frame. This presentation of a literal juxtaposition of fantasy (what Ward *thinks* he is shooting at: the sub) and reality (what he will actually hit: his house) provides a brief but concrete bisociative gag that summarizes and literalizes a major satirical theme of the film. Much as the soldiers are more eager to fight their fellow soldiers then a vaguely threatening absent other, even the film's civilians are often portrayed as psychotically paranoid Americans that destroy all around them to ironically "defend" themselves from a (mostly) absent enemy.

However, the gags that provide the strongest cues for satire are likely those employing ironic inversion and outrageous exaggeration. As various critics pointed out, *1941* is rife with irony, and numerous gags ironically contrast military authority or major icons of American culture/capitalism with wanton destruction. Some of these are explicitly framed as ironic, such as the bomb (accidentally released as Donna and Birkhead attempt to have sex in a grounded bomber) that rolls up behind General Stilwell while he assures the LA press that "there will be no bombs dropped here," or the film's ending as Ward, following a lengthy speech about unity, the American spirit, Christmas, and peace, nails a Christmas wreath onto his bedraggled house's front door, causing the entire structure to slide into the ocean. These gags, through their elaborate setups, payoffs, and timing so as to undercut the ostensibly authoritative characters' assertions, provide clear cues for satire targeting the empty rhetoric of these figures. Other gags,

though, are much quicker and less explicitly (or at least less redundantly) cued. As downtown antiaircraft guns turn to track the two (American) planes flying over the city, one crashes through a Coca-Cola billboard, leading to a shot framed so it looks like a Coca-Cola bottle being held by Santa Claus is firing flak into the sky. Moments later, after crashing in the middle of downtown, Wild Bill Kelso stumbles out of his plane only to find himself pinned down by a massive plastic figure of Uncle Sam dressed as Santa. And in a preview of a gag that foreshadows the similarly ironic use of a Christmas song for a musical pun in *Gremlins*, Bing Crosby's recording of "I'll Be Home for Christmas" continues to play on the turntable after Ward's antiaircraft gun punches a massive hole through his house. All of these gags, though brief, create an ironic inversion between the characters' actions (manic, misguided defense of their home soil) and their results (wanton destruction of that same home soil), particularly when combined with such potent symbols of American culture and capitalism as Coca-Cola, Christmas, Santa, and Uncle Sam.

Exaggeration is also rampant throughout the film. As in *Small Soldiers*, many of the soldiers in *1941* are presented as broad, and often unsettling, caricatures, adding an ironic edge to their role as the putative "good guys" of WWII films. John Belushi's Wild Bill Kelso is likely the most prominent example of this: gags feature him openly stealing food from a desert gas station (which he precedes to carelessly blow up by accident), wildly firing his weapons along with the equally caricatured Col. Maddox at a phantom target (again destroying a great deal of buildings and equipment in the process), and generally acting out the same boorish, slovenly persona as his character from the previous year's *Animal House*. Although largely not to the same degree, this behavior is replicated by many of the other American soldiers as well. Sgt. Tree's tank platoon fails to stop their antiaircraft gun from rolling through Ward's front door a

split second after Joan declares she "will not have guns in this house," and the same platoon later wildly guns down lights and Christmas decorations throughout downtown Los Angeles to create another ironic juxtaposition of American culture and wanton destruction. Additionally, we see exaggeration in a series of gags revolving around the sex-obsessed duo of Donna and Birkhead and the aggressive, would-be rapist actions of Stretch. The latter of these is best exemplified when, after Stretch stares down a sailor at the USO who asks to dance with Betty, a close up reveals that he has squeezed a donut he was holding into an amorphous blob, comically representing the unsettling, violent, aggressive sexuality constantly below (or at) the surface of his character. Given such frequent use of exaggeration and irony to paint virtually all of the military members (and most civilians as well) in the film as self-obsessed, irresponsible idiots of one kind or another, it seems clear that *1941*'s gags help to maintain its strong satiric streak.

However, much like *Small Soldiers*, in many other instances the use of gags to cue satire is by no means as clear cut. The sheer number of gags within the film does have the potential to, as Kendrick posits, overwhelm viewers, making individual gags (much less the satiric cuing of certain gags) difficult to ascertain. Along with this, the use of clear moments of parody (of *Jaws* at the opening), homage (via Pickens and Fuller), and other broader comic forms (especially the personas of *SNL* stars) make satire that much more difficult to pick out from the film's general comic assault. Not only that, but the editing that the film underwent after poor previews served to make both the narrative and some of the film's satire less clear as well. All of the previously cited examples are from the original theatrical release of the film, but comparing it to the nearly 30 minute longer extended edition of the film, available on various home video releases since the mid-1990s, showcases several other elements of the film that serve to further flesh out the satiric

and ironic elements already mentioned. These include implicit class conflict in the introduction

of Wally, who comes from "the wrong side of the tracks;" a brief early scene at the USO where

an older women advises the young women of the city to forego their "precious morality" to

dance (and, implicitly, do more) with the men in uniform; an additional ironic juxtaposition of an

air raid warden dressed up as Santa; and a series of gags relating to the ongoing racial conflict

between Pvt. Foley and Pvt. Jones. Adding to the confusion, a graphic novel adaptation of the

film by Heavy Metal publishing complicates the film's positioning even more, featuring a

tongue-in-cheek introduction (supposedly) by Spielberg himself; frames packed with *Mad*-style

chicken fat gags throughout; nudity, bloody violence, R-rated language; and a vast array of

outlandish racist caricatures of the Japanese enemy.[92] In essence, this paratext takes the film's

exaggerations and amplifies them to a dizzying degree, making all of the characters and events

that much more cartoonish, amoral, ironic, and fantastical (not to mention far more nihilistic than

the film itself).

This curious graphic adaptation points to the other major issue motivating the discursive

struggle to understand the film's satire: exactly how satirical *are* we as viewers supposed to

understand these gags to be? Are the film's uses of American paranoia, militarism, and ineptness

understandable as ironic satire or, as the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed (and the Heavy Metal

adaptation further foregrounded), are they simply nihilistic, void of the positivity and desire for

change frequently associated with satire? Although I would argue that a number of the

previously cited examples do offer salient satiric cues (to admittedly varying degrees), one can

easily point to other gags that offer conflicting cues that make satire more ambiguous. Sgt.

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92 Stephen Bissette and Rick Veitch, *1941: The Illustrated Story*, adapted by Allan Asherman, New York: Heavy
     Metal/Pocket Books, 1979.

Tree's speech to the brawlers downtown, with its reiteration of his mantra-like disdain for "American fighting Americans," seems to cue us to see it as *both* an ironic speech *and* an at least partially sincere paean to the wartime American spirit.[93] The racial tensions between Foley and Jones are mostly excised from the theatrical version, but both versions still keep the culminating gag of their conflict as Foley is covered with soot inside the tank and Jones is covered in flour, creating a blackface/whiteface gag nearly as old as film comedy itself. Again, is this an *ironic* gag that satirizes Foley's incessant racism, or should we see it as merely an *incongruous* (and possibly racist in itself) gag? Especially given the emphasis on broad, gag-based humor throughout the film, many times without any kind of clear satiric cues, it can be very difficult for *any* viewer to know what to make of such moments, either individually or within the film's larger, even more jumbled and only semi-coherent whole. If films like *Small Soldiers*, *1941*, and others evince a tendency to adapt gags more to satirical ends in blockbuster era Hollywood, issues like the under-cuing of satire or uses of excessively ambivalent irony make it that much more difficult for viewers to likewise adapt to and understand such satirical gags.

Conclusion

Can gags be utilized as a vehicle for satire, then? I hope to have shown at several points that, yes, gags and gag-based comedies certainly can and do use gags that cue us to see certain moments as satiric. But there are also numerous issues around the use of gags for satire that help explain why many films, from the science fiction satires of *Gamer* and *Southland Tales* to the *Gremlins* series, *Small Soldiers*, and *1941*, have received and continue to receive a highly ambivalent discursive response to their uses of satire. The ambiguous positioning of these films and their use of satiric cues that may be difficult to grasp, too ambiguous, or too densely packed

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93 The fact that it is delivered quite earnestly by Dan Aykroyd, a Canadian, only adds further confusion.

to be clearly understood as satire, are major reasons why such films struggle to be taken seriously as clear and/or strong examples of satire. And, of course, this ties into a larger context that sees gags writ large as often being incompatible with satire. Still, while such hesitance may indeed be justified at times, there is a great deal of value still to be found in engaging with these less clear cut, middle-ground examples when looking at satire in contemporary film and media comedy. Doing so allows us to better adapt discursively to this particular way in which gags have adapted, and continue to do so, within blockbuster era Hollywood comedy.

That being said, I also recognize that there are numerous other possible reasons for the ambivalent response to gags and satire, especially within these examples. Given that all of the films cited here are genre works in some way and are largely high (or at least higher) budget, special effects-heavy films, other issues relating to authorship, corporate risk management, marketing, and their effects on audience legibility (among other things) all factor into the presence or absence of satiric cues in such films. Additionally, while I have examined these films in terms of, primarily, violence/warfare, American ideology, and capitalism, there are clearly other important aspects of satire that could be examined in these and other gag-based films, such as race and, in particular for *Small Soldiers*, gender. The issue of race, gags, and satire does relate to my examination of Black gag-based comedies in the previous chapter, but there is a great deal of work to be done on the role of race in the films cited throughout this chapter as well, particularly given the way several examples may display a lack of sociocultural adaptability in some of their satiric gags. The differing responses between American critics, scholars, and box office take and the non-American responses that I have alluded to at times would also provide an intriguing and worthwhile topic for further investigation, as would its

inverse: an investigation of the American response to foreign gag-based satire. Ultimately, I concur with scholars like Johan Nilsson that satire remains an understudied area of film comedy and with Gray, Jones, and Thompson that satire is of vital importance to understanding contemporary media comedy, and its potential for positive effects, as well. By more explicitly opening up the study of gags and their increasing use as an avenue for satire, then, I hope that we can continue in this vein and better assess both satire and gags in their many and varied forms.

"Conclusion: The Best Gag Is Yet to Come"

Although the sheer breadth of the blockbuster era (at four and a half decades and counting) means that some of my observations in this project may vary in their applicability across different decades and contexts, the seismic industrial shifts we are currently experiencing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic may make their application seem even more tenuous. The fate of theatrical exhibition, distribution windows, corporate entities, and even the continued relevance of film itself as a separable artistic and economic form all remain unsettled as we look forward. On top of this, early indications point to the continued development of extant trends that seem to leave little room for gag-based comedy. The biggest theatrical and VOD successes are often (though not necessarily always) big, spectacle-heavy blockbuster films, reinforcing the trend of fewer, larger films as the primary route for viable domestic box office juggernauts, especially for major franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Global appeal remains an ever more important factor, especially as major markets like China enjoy a head-start on American theaters in recovering from the pandemic. Smaller films largely seem to only gain traction on streaming platforms, where they compete with a deluge of content that makes it harder for both individual films to break out and for films in general to separate themselves from the other media available on such platforms. All of this exacerbates general industry trends of the big getting bigger, the small getting smaller, and the middle becoming an ever more nebulous and fraught terrain. If gag comedy still best fits in that middle category, then, its future remains unclear.

From another perspective, though, is this situation really that much different from any time over the past decade and a half? In some key ways, of course, it is, but in other important

ways it also is not. Gags endure on screen and gag-based comedies still find a place within the

Hollywood industry. To take only two examples, both of which I have briefly mentioned across

this dissertation, consider the 2021 films *Tom & Jerry* and *Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar*.

The former continues the tradition of combining live-action and animation as a major avenue for

gag-based comedy, incorporates gags into a broader "family" film format that allowed it to find

at least modest financial success domestically and globally, and although it largely eschews any

kind of overt racial identity, it also provides a highly visible platform for a Black comedy

director in Tim Story. As for *Barb and Star*, while the film did not initially receive a theatrical

release due to the pandemic, it still managed to make waves by garnering positive critical notices

and a rapidly developing cult upon its February VOD release. Although the shifting markets for

distribution and the lack of effective data on them make its financial success unclear, *Barb and*

Star remains an obvious transmedia success story. It stars a major *Saturday Night Live* (1975-)

alum in Kristen Wiig, effectively found an audience via streaming platforms, and took advantage

of online buzz to help draw attention and connect enough with a set of passionate viewers to

warrant a small theatrical release for the film in September 2021.[1] The film accomplishes all of

this in part by making use of numerous gags dependent upon both performances and effects, thus

allowing it to fit as a strong example of a gag-based comedy *and* a quirky, fantastical action film.

Thus, while gags do remain a secondary element for many films, they still play a small

but important role within the Hollywood industry as a whole. Looking at other recent 2021

releases only serves to highlight this further. Many examples that do or likely will include gags

as one of their many appeals range from family animation (*The Addams Family 2*) and live-

action/animation hybrids (*Space Jam: A New Legacy*) to comic hybrids (action in *Free Guy*, sci-

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1   Rebecca Rubin, "'Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar' Is Finally Coming to Theaters," *Variety*, 10 Aug 2021.

fi in *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*) and superhero films (*The Suicide Squad*, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, *Venom: Let There Be Carnage*). And while this list specifically points to theatrical or day-and-date theatrical and VOD releases, streaming platforms highlight even more gag-based and gag-adjacent films. These include streaming entries on Amazon (2020's *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* and *Coming 2 America*), Netflix (2021's *The Mitchells vs the Machines* and *Thunder Force*), Hulu (2020's *Palm Springs*) and many, many more. That is to say nothing of the array of previous blockbuster era gag-based comedies available to stream, rent, or purchase on these and other streaming venues. In other words, it is exceedingly clear that gag comedy will continue to grace screens big and small in a variety of forms for the foreseeable future.

A bigger question, then, is how gags will continue to evolve and how the discourse around them will also adapt moving forward. Will understandings and usage of the term "gag" itself continue to morph as it did in the classical Hollywood era? Will gags continue to be aligned with silent comedy and visual humor, or will we see a more nuanced engagement with them by critics and scholars alike? Will new gag-based cycles arise, and will gags develop new (or rediscover old) associations with particular genres or film types? How will gags continue to make use of technology and effects for non-embodied gags across a variety of mainstream films? As *Tom & Jerry* or *Space Jam: A New Legacy* seem to indicate, will live-action/animation hybrids continue to be a prominent film type well-suited for gag comedy? Or will gags instead gravitate more toward the free interweaving of live-action and digital effects on display in comic superhero films? Will we see a resurgence of Black gag-based comedy in film, or will Black comics find more effective platforms to create and disseminate gags in other media? And will satire continue to make use of gags in the future? If so, how will it be cued for viewers, and will

it signal itself well enough to be better recognized as satiric within critical discourse? I hope that my examination of these issues (and others) across this dissertation serve to indicate potential answers to each of these questions as Hollywood gag comedy, its reception, and comedy scholarship all move forward.

That being said, there are also a number of other issues and areas of gag comedy that I am unable to address in this project but that are eminently worthy of further study. Foremost among these is an investigation of gag comedy outside of an American, Hollywood context, whether it be building on the scholarship around European gag comics like Jacques Tati or looking at gags beyond a Western, American, or Eurocentric frame. Such an undertaking would be particularly useful in relation to other popular cinemas, from Bollywood and Hong Kong's industries to the still-rising powerhouse of mainland China's film industry. Given the presence of gag comedy and effects-based gags in massive global hits like the 2016 Chinese comedy *The Mermaid*, grossing over half a billion dollars with a negligible American release, how do such films compare to and contrast with Hollywood comedies in their use of gags and effects? As a form, is gag comedy industrially better defined for other popular cinemas and does it have greater or lesser importance than it does in a Hollywood context? And how are such films discursively received across different global markets? Similarly, how do gags adapt as they move across global production contexts? If a director like John Woo was seen (by some Western trades, at least) as "Hong Kong's answer to Mel Brooks" early in his career, or a director commonly associated with crime films like Johnnie To could make a gag-heavy film like 1990's *The Fun, the Luck & the Tycoon* early in his own career, how does this influence our understanding of the industrial role of gag-based comedy for Hong Kong cinema?[2] Examples like these open up a

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2   Eli Carpena, "John Woo: Hong Kong's Answer to Mel Brooks," *Screen International*, 24 Sep 1977, p. 23.

whole Pandora's box of possibilities when it comes to investigating the ways in which gags can move between Hollywood and other popular cinemas, how they influence later gag-based films within global popular cinema, and how they can likewise return to Hollywood (in Woo's films or the work of action-comedy star Jackie Chan) to further influence gag comedy closer to home.

The role of gags in global film comedy, particularly popular comedy, does strike me as the most fruitful avenue left unexplored by this project, but there are of course numerous other potential avenues as well. Some of these could further develop issues that I only briefly touch upon, from the role of gender in the creation and reception of gag-based comedy and the place of gags within contemporary animated family films to the impact of queer filmmakers and performers in shaping gag comedy and the ways in which gags flow back and forth across contemporary media forms. For others, they could touch upon issues that are only implied by some of my work here. This could include looking at the use of gags and their reception by racial groups outside of Black gag comedy, particularly Latinx comedy in the work of Cheech Marin (in his films with Tommy Chong or 1987's *Born in East L.A.*) or Robert Rodriguez (including both comic family films like the *Spy Kids* series and comic action films like 2010's *Machete* and 2013's *Machete Kills*). It could also include, as I hint at in several chapters, more empirical data about actual audiences that would further flesh out and complement the discursive responses to gag comedy that I detail. How do viewers understand the term "gag"? Do audiences prefer or find more memorable a comedy's gags, its narrative, or something else? The possible questions for such research are nigh endless, and they would be an important additional vector for understanding the reception of gag-based comedy, creating a more complete circle between creators, industry, discourse, and audiences.

Ultimately, though, whether undertaken by myself or other scholars, a vast array of work on gags and gag-based comedy still remains to be done. I have claimed at various points that this is a particularly understudied area of film comedy, and given the uncertainty around film itself and film-specific scholarship rather than a broader multi-media approach, there is a chance that gags will remain little examined. However, my own experiences lead me to believe that this will not be the case. This may only be anecdotal, but I have been constantly amazed at the responses from other scholars at conferences and elsewhere when I discuss my own work. At some point I will mention the importance of Joe Dante's films and, in particular, 1990's *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* for motivating my interest in blockbuster era gag-based comedy. Almost inevitably, I am greeted by enthusiastic responses as others express their shared interest, fascination, and/or love of *Gremlins 2* and its dizzying barrage of gags. Perhaps this cult of *Gremlins 2* will continue to remain in the shadows and eschew further study of what lies at the heart of this quintessential gag-based comedy. My hunch, though, is that more scholars will, like me, choose to step out from the shadows and do their part to develop our understanding of the wild and woolly world of gags and gag comedy.

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