TITLE: Bergson's Boffo Laughter

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ABSTRACT: Beginning with an imagined encounter between Buster Keaton and Henri Bergson, this essay offers a fundamental re-reading of Bergson's *Laughter* and its theoretical, historical and formal links to slapstick cinema. It focuses on neglected references by Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and James Agee to a sympathetic, schizophrenic and "boffo" laughter virtually yet viscerally connecting audiences to slapstick's acrobatic automatons and vitalized machines. It argues for a more dialectical relationship between terms often thought opposed in *Laughter* and with it, both New Bergsonian theories of film and slapstick: vitality and mechanism, laughing and comic bodies, pragmatism and sympathy.

Who Loves that Buster? In his *Billy Wilder, wie haben Sie's gemacht?* (Billy, How Did You Do It?, 1992), Volker Schlöndorff elicits a revealing explanation of how Buster Keaton came to be cast in Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1949). Keaton plays himself as a member of the "waxworks," a group of aged silent film icons invited by Norma Desmond for bridge. In a brief slapstick bit, Keaton darts his deadpan gaze around the table before croaking, "Pass," an admission of defeat in the face of a bad hand, but also, the film suggests, in confrontation with synchronized sound (see Figure 1). In conversation with Schlöndorff, Wilder laughingly

admits to reducing Keaton's tragic career arc into failure at bridge, explaining that it was not Keaton's status as a formerly "great comedian" that prompted his casting, but his reputation as "a very good bridge player." Despite the brevity of Keaton's cameo and Wilder's explanation thereof, both reveal intertwined theories of film comedy and film history, what James Agee and Manny Farber described in their reviews of *Sunset Boulevard* as a "coldness," a "dispassionate" distance in which "tragedy...is largely muffed" by "a mean director with telescopic eyes."¹ Here, tragedy mechanically repeats as farce while laughter depends on a cold, distant and mocking gaze. This gaze underlies Wilder's casting a "very good bridge player" and former silent star only to hear him "pass," an ironic outcome seemingly fated by not only Keaton's then moribund career, but his earlier slapstick, with Buster's melancholic deadpan a necessary point of contrast with the lively laughter of his audience. Just as Keaton had prefaced his resigned "Pass" with a flash of slapstick so does Wilder, in setting up his punchline, hint at this status of "great comedian." He does so by bursting into song, reciting: "Meine Schwester liebt den Buster, / Liebt den Keaton, / und sie zieht'n / Dem Chaplin vor!" ["My sister loves that Buster, / loves that Keaton, / and she'll take him / over Chaplin!"].

What song is Wilder singing and how does its recitation confirm or contradict the theories of film comedy and film history suggested by Keaton's cameo in *Sunset Boulevard*? Written by Friedrich Hollander in 1930 and inspired by Keaton's visit to Berlin, "Meine Schwester liebt den Buster" was sung in cabarets in the early nineteen-thirties, its composer one of the most popular tunesmiths of the Weimar Republic. Wilder frequented Berlin's cabarets, employed Hollander to score songs for *A Foreign Affair* (1948) and had depicted Keaton, in 1927, in a "film farce" written for a movie magazine in which a female fan asks him to obtain an autograph from another male star (see Figure 2).² It is thus not surprising that Wilder would remember this song when discussing Keaton's casting, especially since

Hollander's lyric focuses on a "sister" who is, by contrast, solely devoted to "that Buster." The song describes this sister as "without feeling" and "so modern," excited by nothing but cinema and that medium's avatar, Keaton, who she both imitates and ingests: "She is melancholic / just because Buster is melancholic! / She buys up / all his photos / which she devours with salt and pepper!" Hollander presents the sister as leaping from one contradictory affect to another: "dreary / and yet so sensual, / and yet so sullen / and disgusted by the world / and yet so silly." This schizophrenic spectatorship mimes a set of contradictions in Keaton's slapstick, some trace of which we have detected in an attenuated form in *Sunset Boulevard*, when Keaton's eyes flicker around the table while his face remains inert. As with the sister's devouring of photos, Keaton connotes a photographic stillness animated into comic motion. Yet in *Sunset Boulevard* such comedy cannot infect the spectator in the same way it had animated the sister since Keaton is here overwhelmed not only by his status as waxwork, but by the film's focus on Desmond, who, in a grotesque inversion of Hollander's chorus, later imitates Keaton's rival, Chaplin (see Figure 3). Having come of age in the same, cynical culture of the Weimar Republic as Wilder, Hollander would distance himself from his fashionable "sister" and the passing object of her fancy, Keaton, in the same manner *Sunset Boulevard* depicts the farcical way film history passes by its once "modern" stars, genres and media. Whether fashionable or anachronistic, Keaton and his slapstick produces the same mocking laughter. As Peter Sloterdijk and Helmuth Lethen have argued, such cynicism is based on a cold laughter protective of self and punishing of others since "a farce's subject is always someone other than the observer."³

{PLACE FIGURES 1, 2 AND 3) Buster Keaton as waxwork and Norma Desmond as Tramp in *Sunset Boulevard* (Paramount, 1949) and Keaton as movie star in a "film farce" written by Billy Wilder in 1927.

In this essay, I will return, like Wilder, to slapstick and the schizophrenic spectatorship suggested by Hollander's Keaton-loving "sister." Yet I do so to argue for a

different account of slapstick and its laughter, one that finds less a cold, othering distance and more that sympathetic interplay, schizophrenic scrambling and mimetic exchange posited, ironically, in Hollander's lyric. To do so I turn to a final encounter with Buster, a hypothetical response to his slapstick by the philosopher who argued most influentially for laughter's distance and difference from its comically mechanized cause. In a 1930 German text entitled "Film-Philosophy"—perhaps the first use of this term—we find the following fake news: "Henri Bergson, the French philosopher, will add to his famous book, *Laughter*, a supplementary volume, in which he intends to illustrate the role of film in the development of the comic. He believes to have obtained, through the dramatic art of Buster Keaton, entirely new clues for his system of laughter. 'Henri Bergson / loves that Buster / loves that Keaton / and he'll take him / over Chaplin.' That's what they're singing in cabarets now."⁴

At first glance, this extraordinary if apocryphal report is of a piece with the cynicism of Wilder's film and Hollander's song. Replacing the "sister" with Bergson produces a series of ironic reversals, not least a reduction of the Nobel-prize winning philosopher to the "low" culture of cinema associated by male Weimar cultural critics with the New Woman, caricatured in both "My Sister" and Wilder's "farce." The article also plays off a tension between Bergson's purported love for Keaton and two of the philosopher's best-known texts. In 1907's *Creative Evolution*, Bergson defined the cinematographic as a reduction of life to the dead time of so many inert frames per second.⁵ By contrast, Bergsonian life is a continuously fluctuating whole grasped via "intuition" and "sympathy." As with Wilder's "telescopic eyes," cinema condenses time into a series of divisible before and afters, offering Bergson a powerful image for the pragmatic perception and adaptive action required of modern, cinematographic times. 1900's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* anticipates this argument, defining comedy as a mechanical encrustation of life and laughter as an anaesthetic censure of behaviour comically out of step, like a waxen Buster or silly

sister too stuck within a passing moment. Bergson would be incapable of loving Buster since laughter and cinema share the same exclusion of those sympathetic, mimetic and schizophrenic elements described in Hollander's lyric. Far from leading Bergson to amend *Laughter*, slapstick would confirm the essay's argument and with it, the oppositions between the mechanical and the vital, the sympathetic and the pragmatic constituting Bergsonism. *Laughter* seems to provide the most powerful framework for explaining these various comic sites, from Weimar cynicism to Hollywood waxwork, Hollander's sister to Keaton's slapstick, that mechanically encrusted genre that would for so many recall the essay in the very manner presaged by "Film-Philosophy."

Running the risk of making myself laughable, I would like to take the ironic premise of this article and its Bergsonian appropriation of "My Sister loves that Buster" seriously. Returning to *Laughter*, I argue that the mechanical encrustations of slapstick would require precisely a "supplementary volume," a fundamental re-thinking of the premises of the philosopher's influential, intertwined definitions of the *comic*, *laughter* and the *cinematographic*. Offering itself as this very "volume," this essay finds in *Laughter* an overlooked, limit-case of comedy that far from distancing laughter from farcical object, join the two in a schizophrenic merging of perception, affect and corpus, one crucial to slapstick at its most machinically animated and infectiously funny. Here the cold mockery of farce gives way to what Bergson describes as a child-like playfulness short-circuiting the oppositions that underlay his accounts of both comic and cinematographic perceptions. The comic object is not so much encrusted by mechanism as innervated, a dialectic of machine and life Wilder reduces to the motion of Buster's precise yet energetic eyes in *Sunset Boulevard*. Focusing, by contrast, on slapstick at its most violently, viscerally absurd, I describe this dialectic as a machinic vitalism infecting this genre's crazily animated contraptions on-screen as well as the laughter jolting audiences off-. Finally, I argue that cinematographic perception is no less

infected by slapstick's machinic vitalism. Like a still image thrown into jittery life, the discontinuities and encrustations of slapstick—its sudden stops, shocking starts and impossible leaps—transform cinema and comedy alike into what Bergson called “a machine that should triumph over mechanism.”⁶ Following James Agee's famous typology of slapstick laughter—written the year following his review of *Sunset Boulevard*—I name this Bergson's boffo laughter, one of the genre's essential contributions to the philosophy of film comedy and produced by a series of slapstick figures explored across this essay, from Keaton to Chaplin, Jackie Chan to Roger Rabbit.

Before turning to *Laughter*, I situate the text's ambiguous status as, on the one hand, an essential resource for slapstick scholars and, on the other, ignored by Bergsonism's recent revivalists. *Laughter* is opposed by the former to mimetic, carnivalesque accounts of film comedy and by the latter to the vitality and virtuality taken from Bergson's other writings and applied to film against his critique of cinema. I short-circuit both oppositions by finding in *Laughter* an exceptional comedy in which neither comedian nor laughter can be so easily opposed. Rather, Bergson suggests they share the same self-alienating states of sympathy, playfulness and distraction. Because laughter and cinema would seem to depend on the same pragmatic perception, re-considering *Laughter* leads me to re-consider the theoretical, historical and formal links between Bergsonism and film, and, in particular, the slapstick cinema long considered the essay's film-philosophical proof. Theoretically, I turn to the figure most responsible for both Bergsonism's renaissance and *Laughter*'s curious absence within this revival, Gilles Deleuze, and his and Felix Guattari's slapstick-inspired concept of schizophrenic laughter. Historically, I trace the conditions for this schizophrenia by linking *Laughter* to Bergson and Deleuze's shared interest in extreme pathologies endemic to modern times and which were embodied by slapstick's neurasthenic bodies and hysterical audiences. Formally, I examine a specific emblem for slapstick's machinic vitalism, a comic

prop Agee uses to describe the boffo laughter defining the genre at its most extreme and essential: as rungs in a ladder of laughs upon which spectator and comedian alike wobble, fall and leap. Agee's image recalls both numerous ladder gags compulsively repeated across the genre's history as well as the ladder of discontinuous images forming the filmstrip and animating its own machinic *élan vital*.

Bergson could and should have loved that Buster. His boffo laughter challenges an opposition underlying numerous theories of comedy, where the relationship between laughing and comic bodies is reduced to either literal, physical difference and thus othering opposition or to continuity and sameness, as in those accounts of mimetic, transgressive union opposed to *Laughter*.⁷ Inspired by three uncannily similar accounts of laughter by Bergson, Deleuze and Agee, this essay suggests a third possibility: neither seamlessly united nor statically opposed, what laughter and comedian share in such boffo moments is *the same difference*: an alienating, animating and virtual absence from self that allows each to move back and forth both as and with the other, alternating between spectator and participant, puppet and puppet-master, subject and object. I seek to illustrate not only "the role of film in the development of the comic," but the role of slapstick comedy in the development of film, especially at a moment when the cinematographic seems to be transforming in the wake of newer media ontologies and archaeologies. Neither mourning the tragedy of loss nor mocking, à la *Sunset Boulevard*, farcical attempts to deny it, I identify with that eponymous sister—or imaginary Bergson—in identifying with Keaton, see-sawing between stillness and silliness, mechanism and the liveliest of motions and emotions.

Laughter versus New Bergsonism In recent decades, the status of *Laughter* has become ambiguous. On the one hand, it has been a crucial reference point for scholarship on comedy and, in particular, slapstick. On the other hand, it has been routinely ignored in the "New

Bergsonism” sweeping across the humanities after Bergsonism’s initial explosion at the turn of the last century and subsequent waves of anti-Bergsonist critique.⁸ Among the former, *Laughter* has been indispensable for thinking the comic and especially important for considering links between cinema and comedy during Bergson’s lifetime (1859-1941), an era of intense mechanization reflected by figures like Chaplin, Keaton and Tati on screen. For the latter, the essay is rarely cited because its understanding of laughter seems to contradict the vital, virtual elements of Bergsonism taken up by film and media scholars in the wake of Gilles Deleuze’s “buggering” of Bergson in his *Bergsonism* and cinema books.⁹ Despite this gap, there is an interpretation of Bergson’s essay shared by comedy scholars and New Bergsonists: The “meaning of the comic” is defined by the shorthand of “mechanical encrustation of the living” while laughter opposes itself to this behaviour by mocking inflexibility as vice.¹⁰ Although laughter encourages vitality, it does so by elevating the laughter and punishing the comical, with the latter’s transgressions deterred by the former’s derision. As Stephen Crocker argues, it is this “conservative theme of social regulation” that explains why New Bergsonism has avoided a text that turns comedy into what Michael North has called “a pretty grim affair.”¹¹ No wonder then that a 2019 *JCMS* dossier on comedy and humor studies admits a sense of boredom with canonical, conservative and out of date texts like *Laughter*.¹²

If New Bergsonism has flourished by avoiding *Laughter*, the essay’s reception among film comedy scholars has taken place with little reference to other texts in Bergson’s oeuvre, thus seeming to confirm its outlying status. This is perhaps because Bergson refrains from linking *Laughter* to his other works let alone the early cinematic slapstick contemporary with the essay. Nonetheless, while *Laughter* can be read within a genealogy of superiority theories stretching from Hobbes to Baudelaire, its emphasis on mechanism has made it crucial for scholars of precisely this cinema. As Simon Critchley argues, “Bergson’s account of laughter

really comes alive when one thinks of silent cinema. Whether it is the mechanical rigidity of Chaplin's body, the person-become-thing of Keaton's face or the mute perversity of Harpo Marx, humor is here produced by the different ways in which the mechanical or thingly encrusts itself onto the living."¹³ Yet despite following *Laughter*'s lead, many also give voice to those concerns with the essay's "grim" conclusions and stark dichotomies.¹⁴ Such ambivalence was anticipated in *Laughter*'s modernist reception by critics like Wyndham Lewis, Georges Bataille, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁵ In a discussion of "wrong laughter" of the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, "Laughter about something is always laughter at it, and the vital force which, according to Bergson, bursts through rigidity in laughter is, in truth, the irruption of barbarity..."¹⁶ Bakhtin sought precisely less barbarous concepts of comedy in the carnivalesque and grotesque, which he contrasted with modern "theories of the philosophy of laughter, including Bergson's conception, which bring out mostly its negative functions."¹⁷

Among comedy scholars, "negative" Bergson has been positioned against mimetic, utopian or transgressive models proposed by Bakhtin, Freud, the Frankfurt School and others. Yet in the case of slapstick, it has not always been easy to bridge what Maggie Hennefeld has described as the "chasm between the laughing spectator and the comical body" suggested by *Laughter*.¹⁸ Differentiating "physical clown comedy" from other body genres, Linda Williams locates this gap in the physical difference between laugher and comedian since "...the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown. Indeed, it is almost a rule that the audience's physical reaction of laughter does not coincide with the often dead-pan reactions of the clown."¹⁹ In explicit contrast to Williams, Jennifer Barker has read slapstick's best-known deadpan, Keaton, in mimetic terms, arguing for a muscular empathy between spectator and the acrobatic Buster. Yet when it comes to the physical response of laughter, Barker follows Bergson and agrees with his understanding of a

mocking “distance” contrary to such empathy.²⁰ Also focusing on Keaton, Jennifer Fay theorizes and historicizes a “modernist laughter” that transforms the spectator into that anaesthetic, telescopic gaze we have already seen in Agee and Lethen, Adorno and Horkheimer.²¹ The modernism of such laughter was based on the historical specificity of slapstick as a genre, training mass audiences to distance themselves from the mechanical encrustations unleashed by life’s increasing automation and anomie. It was in appealing to the pre-modern and medieval that Bakhtin sought his positive concepts of grotesque body and carnivalesque laughter, which, in overcoming this gap, reverse *Laughter*’s central premises: comedy as encrustation and laughter as protective and corrective.

In reading *Laughter* in isolation from other texts by Bergson, slapstick scholars have missed an opportunity to understand the essay’s relationship to Bergson’s own adjective for the modern: cinematographic. If, in seeing, feeling and acting within a present slice of time, we “set going a kind of cinematograph inside us” (*Creative Evolution*, 306), then so too does laughter depend on a cinematographic perception, where time’s creative becoming is chopped up into discrete moments, with encrustation a jam within this mechanical movement and laughter, in turn, as punishing encouragement to keep up with the frenetic pace of this modern temporality. Yet comedy scholars and New Bergsonists alike have rarely drawn attention to links between *Laughter* and Bergson’s references to cinema.²² This is perhaps because New Bergsonism has, after Deleuze, read Bergson against himself, finding in the cinematographic those haptic, virtual elements elsewhere synonymous with Bergsonism’s more positive concepts of duration, intuition and sympathy. Film theory’s turn to body and affect has consistently appropriated this positive Bergsonism, whether to flesh out the tactile dimensions of cinematic time (Laura Marks), develop philosophies of embodied media (Mark B.N. Hansen), or trace the ways film touches a virtual world screened out by habit (William Connolly).²³ To do so it has ignored the philosopher’s most substantial text on art, *Laughter*,

as well as any potential links between this text and the virtual modes of cinema it has sought in the spirit if not the letter of Bergsonism. This is in keeping with *Laughter*'s neglect within New Bergsonism more generally. In explaining *Laughter*'s absence in an Anglophone collection of Bergson's writing, its editors explain that this "one work" was "excluded...because, being a popularist piece of work, its place must be peripheral in an analysis of his academic philosophy."²⁴

Opposed, implicitly, to cinematic New Bergsonisms and, explicitly, to positive theories of comedy, *Laughter*'s argument has been repeatedly reduced to the short-hands of mechanical encrustation and corrective laughter. If we re-read *Laughter* without falling back on such engrained interpretations, it becomes clear that these oppositions themselves mechanically encrust the vibrant, vital contradictions which animate Bergson's essay and place it at the very heart of his philosophy. Indeed, *Laughter* is no less capable of being subverted as the philosopher's account of film, especially in light of the cinematographic perceptions and modern times at stake in slapstick at its most vitally mechanized. To reconsider Bergson's essay will therefore lead to a reconsideration of a comic film genre long declared *Laughter*'s bedfellow.

Laughter Reloaded It is surprising that readers of *Laughter* have reduced its argument to a formula since Bergson warns of this danger right from the start, promising, "we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing" (2). Subject to "the strangest metamorphoses," the comic's definition is presented by Bergson as a slapstick chase, having "a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation" from Aristotle on. At the outset, comedy is defined not by mechanism, but rather by a rebellious vitality. He returns to this point in the essay's conclusion, where the comic is described as froth bobbing on top

of a wave and the philosopher as a child playing on the beach, attracted by the seductive “sparkle” of this foam, but disappointed when it is touched and tasted (200). The joke is on the philosopher, left only with the scant, bitter knowledge gleaned in his study: humour as the “grim affair” described above. Yet as much as this philosopher is the butt of the joke, so too is he/she its willing participant, depicted as no less full of life than comedy, a playful child seeking with all senses, ingesting, touching and thinking in the synaesthetic manner of Hollander’s sister. Rather than opposing the comic to his own spectatorship, Bergson frames the essay by defining the philosopher’s failure as itself a kind of comedy, one not contrary to *Laughter*’s task, but constituting it. The philosopher and the comic share the same liveliness as goal and condition.

We might therefore reverse our understanding of *Laughter*, finding in Bergson’s dichotomies a struggle with his infectious, unruly object, comedy. The same might be said of scholars who have detached the essay from Bergsonism *tout court*. Indeed, the difficulty of separating the essay on laughter from Bergson’s broader philosophical oppositions becomes obvious in the pages following this warning. Placing himself within the Aristotelian tradition he had mocked, Bergson defines comedy as essentially human before developing further oppositions: laughter not only separates human from animal, but group from individual, censuring mal-adapted behavior and binding society against comic eccentricities. And this distinction betrays another, that between adaptable life and mechanized individual: “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (29).

If Bergson had implied a shared, sensational *vitality* spanning the philosopher and comedy, he now suggests a corresponding *mechanism* linking “us” and the comic “body.” As much as the latter is funny because it transforms the living into the mechanical, so too does the former, in their laughter, respond automatically and unconsciously. Yet rather than

distancing, this process is described in terms of an “intimacy” so “we get hold of some of the strings of the marionette with which he [sic] is playing, and actually work them ourselves...” (16). Bergson begins not by consolidating laughter against its comic cause (*pace* Williams, Barker or Fay), but by implying a split shared by both: the comedian is as much mechanized puppet as lively puppet-master while the spectator’s “pleasure” is gained by miming this back-and-forth in their own perceptual movement between self and scene. Given this shared, if slippery ground, is there a comedy that might bridge the “chasm” separating comedian from laughter, mechanism from vitality?

Bergson makes two further distinctions that seem to negate this possibility. First, laughter is conditioned by a lack of “sympathy.” A key Bergsonian term, sympathy does not mean fellow feeling, but rather a more visceral, corporeal identification. To prove laughter’s lack of such sympathy, Bergson conducts a thought-experiment:

Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion: as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance... Now step aside, look upon life as an indifferent spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy (4-5).

Bergson returns to this point when asking, “What is the object of art?” The “object” is precisely this fairy wand, momentarily allowing its spectator this sympathetic opening up to reality. Hence a second distinction: because laughter lacks sympathy, comedy exists in a separate sphere from not only tragedy, but aesthetic apperception as such, operating precisely in coldly *anaesthetic* terms. Evoking his earlier thought-experiment, Bergson asks, “Could reality come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, could we enter into immediate communion with things and with ourselves, probably art would be useless... Between nature

and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness a veil is interposed...What fairy wove that veil?" (150). The "object of art" is to briefly lift this veil and thereby "compel us, willy-nilly, to fall in with [the artwork], like passers-by who join in a dance." (155-157).

This section of *Laughter* has been often cited by New Bergsonists amidst larger discussions of Bergson's historic significance for a range of artistic genres and movements.²⁵ Nonetheless, the context in which this discussion takes place—*Laughter*—usually goes unmentioned. Yet *Laughter* occupies a crucial hinge position within what John Dewey calls the "twofold strain" of Bergsonism: on the one hand, there is what Dewey names the pragmatic, in which perception is oriented around action and thus has to screen out anything unrelated to the present task; on the other, there is what Bergson named the virtual, in which all that is veiled by this pragmatic perception comes to life via an "intuition which installs us within the very movement of reality itself..."²⁶ Despite its seeming utilitarianism, laughter does not fit within either strain. While laughter punishes the comic character for its inattention, it is not itself an action, but rather a reaction to someone absented from the present. Laughter seems equally separate from sympathy and what Bergson describes, throughout his oeuvre, as various, virtual means of appealing to such sympathy, which include not only the "object of art," but dreams, hypnosis and various pathological states, especially those at thresholds between life and death, reality and hallucination.²⁷ These threshold experiences share a capacity to let the subject plunge itself into this "movement," which is no longer separated by the pragmatic requirements forming the "veil" Bergson describes not only in *Laughter* but across his oeuvre.²⁸

If it is neither purely pragmatic nor sympathetic, where exactly does the "meaning of the comic" fit? At the end of his essay, Bergson gives a surprising answer, one that undoes the dichotomies structuring *Laughter* and with it, the two strains of Bergsonism. If the final chapter of *Laughter* begins by distinguishing the comic from other arts, it ends by describing

the conditions of both comic character and laughter as being the same as those of aesthetic sympathy: absurdity and absent-mindedness, the oneiric and the liminal. Bergson is led to do so by a comic limit-case, an “absurdity” he will describe as sharing the illusion, logic and obsession of dreams and which have a “*crescendo*” (189) when the laugher enters into the comic character’s mad world in the same automatic manner the sleeper succumbs to the illogical universe of a dream or the hypnotized subject to a mesmerist’s suggestion. For Bergson, this “crowning absurdity” is evidenced by one of the few modern, American examples in *Laughter*: Mark Twain’s dialogue, “An Encounter with an Interviewer” (1874), in which a series of nonsensical answers culminates in a story Twain tells of his having already died as an infant. Like the comedian acting as puppet and puppet-master, the absurdity here lies in the conjunction of otherwise contradictory states, with Twain acting as “a third person who tells the tale” *and* as that tale’s deceased protagonist. If “the absurdity of this dialogue is by no means an absurdity of an ordinary type” (193), the laughter such absurdity provokes will be no less exceptional. Yet Bergson goes on to argue that it reveals a repressed condition of all laughter:

...the comic character is often one with whom, to begin with, our mind, or rather our body, sympathizes. By this is meant that we put ourselves for a very short time in his place, adopt his gestures, words, and actions, and, if amused by anything laughable in him, invite him, in imagination, to share his amusement with us; in fact, we treat him first as a playmate. So, in the laughter we find a ‘hail-fellow-well-met’ spirit—as far, at least, as appearances go—which it would be wrong of us not to take into consideration. In particular, there is in laughter a movement of relaxation... (195)

In this extraordinary yet neglected passage, Bergson grants to laughter the sympathy he had excluded so as to oppose it to both the comic character and the “object of art.”

Although he will insist that laughter ends up functioning as a “corrective” (197), its initial, “very short time” of sympathy corresponds to the brief “moment” Bergson had ascribed to art as an “immediate communion with things and with ourselves.” Despite the literal physical difference between laugher and comedian, in the virtual time of this sympathy, such distinction is overcome not unlike a dreamer oscillating between observer and participant or art’s audience between passer-by and dancer. Or the absent-minded comic character provoking this laughter in the first place, with Bergson echoing his descriptions of aesthetic experience and the relaxing of both artist and the spectator’s pragmatic egos. Like both artist and comic character, the laugher splits in two, absenting his/herself from the mind while letting the body fall in with the absurd comic scene. This accords with Bergson’s account of those who “excite us to laughter by playing on the same chords within ourselves, by setting in motion the same inner mechanism...” (13). This shared mechanism, in turn, recalls the philosopher’s earliest discussions of sympathy in the experiences of art, dreams and hypnosis, where the most intense feelings are offered in gestures and images “which our body is likely to *imitate mechanically*” so that the “barrier interposed by time and space” is “broken down.”²⁹

This exceptional laughter is provoked by an exceptional comedy, one exposing a shared “mechanism” underlying the sympathy linking comedian and laugher. Bergson elsewhere describes this as a “see-saw motion” at work in the aforementioned aesthetic and pathological examples, but which, in *Laughter*, he describes as “at the root of a good many comic suggestions” in lulling the minds and bodies of comedian and spectator into accepting the most absurd situations, including “the transformation of a person into a thing” (61). Or, recalling the puppet, the transformation of a thing into a person. Here mechanical encrustations do not deaden, but rather enliven comedian and laugher alike.

Nothing suggests this play of mechanism and life better than the great unexamined concept of Bergson's study: laughter. Despite his title, Bergson offers scant discussion of laughter in and of itself, focusing rather on its cause or consequence. Perhaps this is because laughter is the most direct expression of that absurdity lurking beneath our feet and waiting to trip us up, a nonsensical reaction to nonsense that encrusts the human's body and speech in a mechanical sputtering of meaningless sounds and tics. Before laughter can be territorialized by a referent—something to be laughed at—it is first and foremost an acceding of the spectator to the playful condition of comedy itself. Like inelasticity, laughter interrupts the pragmatic actions of the body—it is hard to perform tasks, adapt to a changing situation, or pay attention when one is laughing uncontrollably. A break in the link between perception, affect and action, laughter is a strange tool for chastising repetition or encouraging adaptation since its own vitality is so mechanical, an encrustation best revealed when laughter reaches an explosive, infectious crescendo in response to the comic scene's "crowning absurdity." In such moments one does not choose to laugh nor does one control the volume or duration of laughter, so that laughter transmutes into automaton. This transformation offers a mechanical imitation of the absurdity of the comic character, where encrustation immobilizes only so as to move it and the world more madly.

I would name this dialectic, *machinic vitalism*, a syncopated yet surprising comic rhythm short-circuiting the two central premises of *Laughter*. First, in these moments of absurd crescendo, mechanical encrustation does not deaden, but rather innervates comic characters and scenes with an uncanny life. Second, laughter does not raise the spectator above or apart from the comic, but mechanizes the laughter's own body and speech in virtual correspondence with its hysterical cause.

Many have drawn attention to Bergson's reticence to discuss laughter, which would seem to undermine the essay's relevance for understanding the latter psychologically,

culturally, or philosophically.³⁰ Others have supplemented Bergson's omission by acknowledging the contradiction between the comic and what North has called the "mechanical process" of laughter.³¹ What North describes as a "circuit" "between the mechanical and the living" (16) applies as much to laughter as to the comic, with Alenka Zupančič arguing that *Laughter* represses the funny way "liveliness...can emerge at the very core of the mechanical, and the mechanical at the very core of life."³² Yet few have looked to *Laughter* itself to find the many places where this circuit is hiding in plain sight. In the passages I have discussed, Bergson acknowledges this possibility before returning, in his own absent-minded way, to opposition. Yet this limit case has revealed something fundamental about comedy—there is the same uncannily vital "mechanism" underlying laughing and comical bodies.

If the dichotomies subverted in *Laughter* cannot be separated from the two strains of Bergsonism, how might we now relate the essay to the philosopher's ambivalent relationship to the cinematographic, no less caught between the pragmatic and the virtual? Is there a slapstick equivalent of the sympathetic laughter described by Bergson, one that would overcome the gap between this most mechanized of film genres and the affect and embodiment of New Bergsonism, on the one hand, and carnivalesque, mimetic theories of comedy opposed to *Laughter*, on the other? How might this re-loaded *Laughter* transform our theories of slapstick as comic body genre, the "modernist" laughter produced by figures like Keaton, or of cinema itself as the machinically vital medium between Buster and his spectator?

Schizophrenic Laughter To address these questions, I will trace theoretical, historical and formal correspondences between the machinic vitalism underlying *Laughter* and the cinematographic sympathies of slapstick comedy during its own "crowning absurdit[ies]."

While one could trace links between this re-loaded *Laughter* and other accounts of comedy, from Freud to Bakhtin, there is, in regard to cinema, no better place to start than the figure most responsible for Bergsonism's renaissance: Gilles Deleuze.³³ Deleuze transformed the pragmatic and virtual strains of Bergsonism into both a theory and historiography of film, the first as movement-images of a "classical," pre-World War II cinema and the second as unmediated experience of duration in the time-images of a "modern," post-war cinema. By claiming that cinema would become Bergsonian, Deleuze motivated film and media theorists to locate those sympathetic, haptic and durational dimensions Bergson ascribes to the aesthetic, oneiric and hypnotic in filmic forms and genres that developed *after* the era in which the philosopher encountered the cinematographic. Yet this historical displacement has required eliding *Laughter* from any such subversion. Across his oeuvre Deleuze mentions *Laughter* only once: In *Cinema 2*, he distinguishes the burlesque movement-images of Chaplin, Keaton, and others from Jerry Lewis by claiming of the latter, "It is here for once, that it can be said that Bergson is outstripped: the comic is no longer something mechanical stuck on to something living, but movement of world carrying away and sucking up the living."³⁴ But Deleuze had never cited let alone agreed to Bergson's definition of the comic as mechanical encrustation. His description suggests that *Laughter* is an exception to his subverted Bergsonism, which found in cinema's time-image that philosophy's essential task: a "true leap into Being."³⁵ Incapable of assisting in this leap, *Laughter* cannot be re-considered beyond repeating this "definition," the acceptance of which is the sole point of agreement between comedy scholars who cite the essay to the exclusion of Bergson's other writings and New Bergsonist film theorists who, following Deleuze, do the reverse.

As I have argued, the perception at stake in laughter and in that of the cinematographic are the same. Both seem to offer a view Bergson described as "utilitarian," Dewey as "pragmatic," and Deleuze within a sensory motor schema governing cinema's

movement-images and ruptured with the historical advent of the time-image. Deleuze aligns the classical era of slapstick with this schema, against which not only later examples like Jerry Lewis are made to contrast, but the Bergsonian cinema opposed to *Laughter* in *Cinema 2*.³⁶ Yet if Bergson already struggled with this tension between the pragmatic and the sympathetic in the passages of *Laughter* I have discussed, we might turn the tables, using the machinic vitalism lurking there to subvert the distinctions Deleuze draws in theorizing and historicizing slapstick. If the perceptions of laughter and cinema correspond, then to short-circuit the former necessarily short-circuits the latter and above all how we approach the machine gags and hysterical laughter of a genre that would gestate, not by coincidence, in the same era when Bergsonism first flourished. Neither coolly pragmatic nor seamlessly sympathetic, movement-image nor time-image, the machinic vitalism animating slapstick offers, I argue, a comic-cinematographic version of Bergsonism's "true leap into being." Such a leap is not based on the virtual continuum Bergson elsewhere ascribes to art's fairy-wand or Deleuze to cinema's time-image, but rather by virtue of a sudden stumble or repeated pratfall, a jittery comic motion setting off a correspondingly mechanical innervation in the laughing body. Far from safeguarding life for fear of encrustation, slapstick reveals that only by letting such mechanism trip them up could performers and spectators discover the infectious, intoxicating energies of a technologizing, modernizing era in which Bergsonism was as much neurasthenic symptom as vitalizing cure.

Ironically, it is in a text largely lacking in reference to either film or Bergson that Deleuze would suggest a laughter both specific to slapstick and uncannily resonant of the machinic vitalism of *Laughter*. This is not surprising since in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Felix Guattari present their concept of the desiring machine as undoing any opposition between vitalism and mechanism. Neither pragmatically efficient nor farcically encrusted, this Rube Goldberg-esque machine functions through dysfunction, "operat[ing] only by fits

and starts, by grinding and breaking down, in spasms of minor explosions.... No one has ever died from contradictions. And the more it breaks down, the more it schizophrenizes, the better it works, the American way.”³⁷ Instead of dichotomy, we get schizophrenic conjunction, a “productive synthesis...connective in nature: ‘and . . . ‘and then’.” (5) They refer, briefly, to a “schizophrenic laughter” provoked by such “productive synthesis” and exemplified by that most machine-obsessed of film genres, slapstick. Focusing on a film famous for its depiction of this machinic “American way,” they quote an analysis of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) by the critic Michel Cournot:

The moment...Chaplin makes the board fall a second time on his head—a psychotic gesture—he provokes the spectator’s laughter. Yes, but what laughter is this? And what spectator?... It is as though the spectator, at that very moment, were no longer in his [sic] seat, were no longer in a position to observe things. A kind of perceptive gymnastics has lead him, progressively, not to identify with the character of *Modern Times*, but to experience so directly the resistance of the events that he accompanies this character, has the same surprises, the same premonitions, the same habits.... Chaplin perverts the laughter, which comes to be like so many short-circuits of a disconnected piece of machinery. (316-317)

Like the passages in *Laughter* to which it uncannily corresponds, this quotation has been ignored by scholars, not least Deleuze and Guattari, who say nothing more on the subject with Deleuze, in his later cinema books, never discussing the laughter produced by slapstick. Using the same emphasis on the momentary, what Bergson called a “very short time” when the laughter “adopts [the comic character’s] gestures,” Cournot argues that the Tramp’s repetitive yet manic behavior is doubled by the spectator, who moves between sitting in their seat *and* being hurled on screen in the same schizophrenic manner Chaplin is

perversely caught between masochistic victim *and* psychotic perpetrator, or as Bergson put it, puppet *and* puppet-master. The more contradictory the two terms—Chaplin and his Tramp, the Tramp and his board, the spectator and *Modern Times* itself—the better the opportunity for absurd connection, that “and” Deleuze and Guattari describe as “productive synthesis” and which Bergson, in his example of Twain dead *and* alive, recognizes as absurd exception to the dichotomies structuring *Laughter*. The gag of the board falling finds its echo in the gagging of the audience’s throat, their laughter re-staging the “short-circuits” experienced by the Tramp on-screen. In doubling each other, laughter and comedian are no longer statically opposed. Instead they comically see-saw back and forth from laughter to laughability, physical reality to virtual screen.

When he turned to cinema, Deleuze would describe this schizophrenic confusion as an *indiscernibility*, but one that was possible only in the post-war time-image. The “modern times” of slapstick thus could not correspond to the time-image of “modern cinema,” a distinction founded on film’s necessarily belated Bergsonism. Yet as Jacques Ranciere has pointed out, Deleuze’s “avowed attempt to historicize” here is haunted by another indiscernibility, whereby the time-image’s “properties [are] discernible already in the constitution of the movement-image...”³⁸ In the case of slapstick’s schizophrenic laughter, this historiographic indiscernibility is readily apparent. Indeed, such laughter short-circuits the two “strains” of Bergsonism, pragmatic and virtual, Deleuze transform into discrete epochs in film history. How then are we to understand the historical conditions for this schizophrenic laughter and, in particular, the coincidence between Bergson’s essay and early cinematic slapstick?

In *Cinema 2* Deleuze suggests an answer when he recognizes this indiscernibility at an “early stage” in film history, in a cinema that “confront[ed] a group of phenomena; amnesia, hypnosis, hallucination, madness, the vision of the dying, and especially nightmare

and dream” (55). Here he explicitly follows Bergson’s own analyses of dreams, hypnosis, and déjà vu, which Deleuze would elsewhere describe as “a whole pathology of duration” essential to Bergsonism.³⁹ He links such pathology to various avant-garde movements in European cinema of the nineteen-twenties, where the indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary is demonstrated by filmmaker-theorists like Jean Epstein, who would anticipate the “movement of world” Deleuze ascribes to later figures like Jerry Lewis.

As we have seen, this “pathology of duration” is central to *Laughter*. Cournot’s emphasis on perverse perceptions shared by the Tramp and his spectator is anticipated by the links Bergson draws between absurdity and hypnosis, mesmerism and dreaming. These are the very pathologies of time and space at stake in the slapstick *Modern Times* resuscitates, not least the figure of the Tramp, whom Epstein would describe in 1921 as a form of “photogenic neurasthenia” in which a “character’s absent-mindedness becomes that of the actor” as well as that of an audience infected by the “nervous gestures” of Chaplin’s “overwrought hero.”⁴⁰ Epstein was part of a generation of slapstick-obsessed avant-gardists who would, well before Deleuze, read Bergson’s critique of cinema “against the grain.”⁴¹ It is not surprising that Deleuze would focus on this moment when admitting this historiographic indiscernibility, claiming Chaplin and Keaton as Surrealist and Dadaist *avant la lettre*. Epstein’s reference to the infectious absent-mindedness circulating between actor, character and spectator follows the philosopher’s own alignment of the absent-mindedness of the artist in their sympathetic unveiling of reality with that of the dreamer and the hypnotized, on the one hand, and the comedian and laugher, on the other. As Rae Beth Gordon has shown, Epstein’s account of this “neurasthenia” is part of a broader genealogy linking the unconscious automatisms diagnosed by Charcot, Janet and Freud, the hysterical laughter and neurasthenic bodies of cabaret and film comics from Chaplin to Lewis, and Bergson’s own emphasis on mechanical encrustation and absent-mindedness in his accounts of mesmerism

and comedy, dreams and déjà vu.⁴² She argues, “Bergson would never have made mechanical rigidity and automatic movement the centerpiece of his theory had it not been omnipresent in cabaret, mime, circus, and early cinema” (14). *Laughter* is continuous with the philosopher’s life-long exploration of fractured or threshold states, from his early experiments with self-hypnotism to the mnemonic disorders of *Matter and Memory* to his account of déjà vu, which he describes in simultaneously comic, cinematographic and sympathetic terms.⁴³ So the suggestion that cabaret performers sing “Henri Bergson loves that Buster” is all too appropriate, no less than as an addendum to *Laughter* written under the influence of slapstick! Stripping Hollander’s song of its irony, we can read the hypermodern sister as a historical avatar of slapstick’s schizophrenic laughter, one following the subversive model of female patients and performers described by Gordon. And in both loving and copying Buster Keaton, the sister recalls the animating contradictions of slapstick’s machinic vitalism, being “dreary / *and* yet so sensual, / *and* yet so sullen / *and* disgusted by the world / *and* yet so silly.”

Deleuze’s application of Bergsonism’s two “strains” to discernible epochs in film history may have been driven by Bergson’s seeming refusal to engage the contradictions and conditions of his own historical reality, a frustrating lack of dialectics that would form the basis of critiques of Bergsonism by Gaston Bachelard as well as Horkheimer, Adorno and Benjamin.⁴⁴ Yet in the laughter Bergson named sympathetic and Deleuze and Guattari schizophrenic, we find neither a trans-historical “meaning of the comic” nor a response reducible to either movement- or time-images. Rather, they are symptoms of a “pathology of duration” specific to what Benjamin called, in his critique, “the alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism.”⁴⁵ For Benjamin and his peers in both the Frankfurt School and the European avant-garde, the shocks of slapstick and cartoon comedies corresponded to the “mass psychoses” of this era, sharing with Bergson a sense that the

technical reproducibility of cinema and apperception of laughter shared the same difference from the traditional work of art.⁴⁶ Where they seem to disagree is the role of comedy, with the modernism (Fay) of Bergsonian laughter betraying the therapeutic, innervative and utopian dimensions of slapstick debated by these interwar critics and later taken up by scholars like Miriam Hansen, Tom Gunning, and Jennifer Bean.⁴⁷

As I have argued, these dimensions cannot be so easily opposed to Bergson in his accounts of laughter or the *élan vital*. Full of its own dialectical tensions and productive syntheses, *Laughter* betrays a complex relationship with the cinematographic perception of its doppelgänger, slapstick, on the one hand, and the aesthetic, apperceptive pathologies of Bergsonism, on the other. Following Gordon as well as Paula Amad, it is not incidental that *Laughter* was written in the very era in which perception itself was mechanically encrusted and uncannily doubled by cinema.⁴⁸ Nor is it incidental that the example that would inspire Bergson's sympathetic laughter—Mark Twain—was contemporary, American, and a precedent for and influence on slapstick. As one critic wrote in 1929, Twain could be considered the “inventor” of slapstick, in part, because of how he “garishly illuminated the effective mechanization of our life.”⁴⁹ We can locate laughter's “pathology of duration” as a symptom of Bergson's own struggle to account for the transformations of perception within the alienating “experience” described by such critics. This struggle is evident in the often positive, technological metaphors—ranging from photography to the telephone to film—Bergson uses to, in Leonard Lawlor's words, “*conceiv[e] the living body as a machine*.”⁵⁰ The schizophrenic laughter and photographic neurasthenia of slapstick suggest that this conception applies as much to the comedian or laugher as it does to the machine become living body of cinema. Film needed not wait to become Bergsonian, if we understand this term not through polar oppositions between time and movement, machine and vitality, but rather through its schizophrenic contradictions and productive syntheses. Far from coldly

insulating audiences, slapstick revealed that only by stumbling through the encrustations and discontinuities of cinema could one join the movement of a world maddeningly alive with mechanism. Here the Bergsonian leap is accomplished with the twitchy grace of the Tramp, with the aplomb of Buster's stumble from dreaming spectator to slapstick screen in *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924).

The Boffo Having traced their theoretical and historical conditions, I want to examine a comic form that fleshes out slapstick's machinic vitalism and schizophrenic laughter. I do so by turning to a third, final and famous account of its laughter. In "Comedy's Greatest Era," a nostalgic paean to American slapstick films of the teens and twenties published in *Life* in 1949, James Agee offers his own name for the laughter Bergson describes as sympathetic and Deleuze and Guattari, schizophrenic—*boffo*:

In the language of screen comedians four of the main grades of laugh are the titter, the yowl, the bellylaugh and the boffo. The titter is just a titter. The yowl is a runaway titter. Anyone who has had the pleasure knows all about a belly-laugh. The boffo is the laugh that kills. An ideally good gag, perfectly constructed and played, would bring the victim up this ladder of laughs by cruelly controlled degrees to the top rung, and would then proceed to wobble, shake, wave and brandish the ladder until he [sic] groaned for mercy. Then, after the shortest possible time out for recuperation, he would feel the first wicked tickling of the comedian's whip once more and start up a new ladder.⁵¹

As a (fabricated) typology of laughter, Agee's passage has been oft cited by slapstick fans and scholars.⁵² Few, however, have analysed Agee's choice of allegorizing laughter through the very image of a gag, one based on the pathological model suggested by both Bergson and Cournot. It is a ladder-based gag in which the more violently one laughs, the closer one

comes to the point of mortal danger, falling off the ladder because of the “boffo,” killing laugh. In other words, the comic dynamics of the slapstick on screen and that of the laughing spectator off are the same, both subject to the same stumbles and slaps in the very manner Cournot described as “perceptive gymnastics” and Bergson, a “game.” Agee, Bergson and Cournot also share an emphasis on laughter as a threshold experience, with the boffo resembling Twain’s “crowning absurdity” placing both comedian and laughter between life and death. Yet while Bergson admits this possibility only on the margins of his text, Agee begins by acknowledging it directly. Indeed, he reverses the relationship between laughter and laughed-at: Rather than the comedian being the object of mockery, it is the audience who plays “victim,” forced to act like the wildly automated bodies on screen whether it wants to or not. A slapstick version of Bergson’s “fairy wand,” the boffo rudely trips at thresholds separating character, spectator and screen, providing the ideal term for the laughter that Bergson cannot name, but which he acknowledges as absurd limit and playful condition of comic experience.

Agee did not choose this particular gag by chance. The ladder has an impressive comic history, being used as a prop by Chaplin, Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy and many others discussed in “Comedy’s Greatest Era.” This makes good sense as it provides a generative image of slapstick’s dialectic of mechanism and vitality, the ladder’s rungs measured and proportional, yet at each step up the possibility of falling at a dizzying height escalating, especially if something breaks or someone below wobbles it. When the ladder is transported it becomes a more lethal version of the plank described by Cournot, full of gaps in which to trap unsuspecting bodies. The ladder’s germinal form can be glimpsed in more advanced technologies central to slapstick, ranging from the broken horizontality of train tracks to the discontinuous verticality of the skyscraper, a genealogy Laurel and Hardy would

acknowledge in *Liberty* (Leo McCarey, 1929) when they totter on a ladder quaking at the top of a skyscraper frame.

I would suggest that Agee's ladder of laughs may have been inspired by Buster Keaton's especially virtuosic use of this prop and, in particular, a scene from his first solo two-reeler, *One Week* (1920), which "Comedy's Greatest Era" calls one of the "funniest short comedies ever made" (11). Indeed, Buster's use of ladders in this film, which concerns the construction of a prefab house, offers a case study of slapstick's ladder of laughs. The scene in question begins and ends with ladders. Buster starts with the most rudimentary of ladders—one of his own making and featuring four awkwardly nailed rungs—to climb from a ground floor window when he could easily step down. The ladder falls apart so that he slides down the rungs, a malfunction speeding his arrival rather than stopping it. Here we are at the titter stage, with things escalating into yowl when Keaton ties a rope to his chandelier to use as a pulley to lift a piano through the window. Buster transforms into a puppet, the pulley flipping his lithe body rather than lifting the piano. Recalling the Rube Goldberg-esque causality described by Deleuze and Guattari, his release of the pulley converts his second-floor ceiling into a sling-shot, one that sends a painter working through the roof, his head becoming stuck among shingles, perhaps provoking a bellylaugh in the audience. A second ladder literally enters the picture: in a reversal of the earlier gag, where a ladder collapsed into its parts, here Buster produces a ladder by detaching the front rail of his porch, taking part from whole, horizontal decoration becoming vertical device. Rather than correcting maladaptation, laughter here comes from intuitive creativity, physical plasticity and machinic connection, Buster automatically adapting an object according to a ceaselessly contingent yet comically fated situation. Buster scales the free-standing ladder without aid or support, uniting the two figures in Agee's metaphor, being both the figure climbing and the figure wobbling from below since he relies on his own balance to keep the ladder stable. Once he

has reached the roof, Buster tries to dislodge the painter—or rather his head—by employing a metal pipe as a lever to wrench it up, mis-perceiving the head as an organ without body. Buster throws the pipe down in frustration, hitting the painter and thus inadvertently knocking him back below. A lack of empathy for the painter’s head does not mean the audience is uninvolved in the scene—with Buster’s solution, we might flinch in shock while laughing all the more because of the mounting absurdity of each image, which culminates here with the violent release of the head. The perverse pleasure of the boffo is expressed through laughter, which might make one’s face look like the caterwauling painter. The painter’s face is, in turn, a synecdoche for the house upon which his head sits since the latter resembles a human face with the ladder as its rictus grin, a ladder become laughter (see Figure 4).

{PLACE FIGURE 4} Ladder as decoration, device and laughter in *One Week* (Eureka Entertainment Ltd, 1920)

While Agee describes the ladder of laughs of “comedy’s greatest era” in nostalgic terms, this prop would have a rich afterlife among those later inspired by slapstick during no less machinically vital times. The ladder has been used in everything from televised wrestling matches to martial arts action-comedies, perhaps most famously in an extraordinary fight sequence from the Jackie Chan film, *First Strike* (Stanley Tong, 1996). With their skyscraper acrobatics, dizzying street chases and factory showdowns, Chan’s Hong Kong films in this period intensify those neurasthenic dimensions of slapstick critics like Benjamin traced to the unsettling conditions of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Describing Hong Kong cinema’s “reformulat[ion]” of these dimensions in an “age of...accelerated speed, escalated violence, and refined mechanisms of power,” Miriam Hansen would, in contrast to Deleuze, refuse to consign such conditions to a discernible past, claiming in 1999, “More than any other contemporary film practice, [this cinema] seems to me to resonate with Benjamin’s

efforts to theorize mass-mediated modernity.”⁵³ Even those suspicious of this modernity thesis like David Bordwell argue that Hong Kong cinema, with its “pratfalls, spills, bodily functions, ladder accidents,” both “preserve[d]” and “revitalized silent-film techniques” developed in popular genres like slapstick and celebrated by the 1920s avant-garde.⁵⁴ Indeed, Buster Keaton’s films especially resonated with Chan, who would re-boot the boffo dynamics of films like *One Week* in *First Strike*, where he uses a metal, double-hinged ladder against four, stick-wielding opponents. Set in a cavernous factory, this sequence demonstrates how and why the ladder is ideal medium and metaphor for Bergson’s boffo laughter. It is a transportable tool, letting its user perform a precarious task in any number of possible locations. Yet when carried, it is awkwardly unwieldy, its back invisible to its carrier and inevitably leading to violence, all the more so when adding a hinge and thus a chance for the ladder to open or close as if of its own volition. Converting these threats into the very means of defending himself, Chan transforms the ladder into weapon, shield, pivot and cage. Spinning, flipping, throwing, turning, he also uses the ladder to transform himself and his opponents, becoming both puppet and puppet-master with the ladder as strings. And as much as Chan becomes thing so too does the ladder take on an uncanny life of its own. In perceiving this scene, spectators are also animated, eyes leaping from one shocking collision to another. The pragmatics of action give way to the visceral yet child-like sympathies of Bergson’s “game.” The scene goes boffo because of the increasingly absurd see-sawing between mechanism and vitality that transforms Chan, his opponents and spectator alike into twitchy, delirious automatons.

There is another reason Agee might have chosen this prop for the start of his essay: the ladder is also the very image of the filmstrip, those 24 frames per second across which Keaton and Chan stumble, chase and leap. The ladder’s play of difference and repetition, discontinuity and continuity, links what Bergson described as cinematographic perception to

corresponding technologies ranging from the train-track to the assembly line, which, as Benjamin wrote, “plays such a fundamental role in the process of production” but is “represented by the filmstrip in the process of consumption.”⁵⁵ This link between filmstrip and ladder is wonderfully demonstrated in the Roger Rabbit cartoon, *Rollercoaster Rabbit* (Cook et al, 1990), which, like *First Strike*, both recalls and radicalizes the earlier live-action slapstick and cartoon comedies that tickled Benjamin’s generation. Bridging the pro-filmic and the drawn at an especially boffo moment, Roger hurtles down a rollercoaster track so high its apex reaches into outer space so that when his cart goes over the top, it moves at such speed it not only leaps off the wooden track, but off the filmstrip! Impossibly standing to the side of a flickering reel, Roger pushes his cart back onto the unspooling strip, which transforms into a rollercoaster track, each sprocket hole echoing and then becoming the tracks of the ride (See Figure 5). As with Agee’s ladder of laughs, Roger’s dizzying ride on the rollercoaster becomes both allegory and demonstration of slapstick’s photographic neurasthenia. Mixing rollercoaster with flicker effect, this moment also recalls the desiring-machine, with the gaps between individual frames as well as between reel and off-screen void functioning as connective “and” by which Roger makes his impossible leap between contradictory times and spaces. This moment is not simply an abstract, meta-joke, but rather acts as Bergson’s “crowning absurdity,” Agee’s highest rung. The laughter produced kills in the very manner of the boffo, a result Roger achieves in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988), when a group of hyenas laugh so violently at his antics, they literally expire.

{PLACE FIGURE 5 HERE} Roger Rabbit rides the rollercoaster ride of the filmstrip in *Rollercoaster Rabbit* (Walt Disney Studios, 1990)

We find a more recent connection between the ladder of laughs and the ladder of the filmstrip in *After Midnight* (Ferrario, Italy, 2004), which takes place in the National Cinema

Museum in Torino. The film's protagonist, Martino, works in the museum, but also lives there, finding, like the sister in Hollander's song, a role model in Buster Keaton, who he watches for work and imitates in life. One evening, Martino splices a 16 MM reel and we watch him watch a scene on an editing table from none other than Keaton's *One Week*, and specifically a gag in which an absent-minded Buster falls flat on his face after he exits a doorway leading him not to another room, but rather outside and one story straight to the ground. Martino is so distracted by Buster's distraction that he rests his hand on the spinning plate where the film is unspooling so that just after Keaton falls, the editing table sends Martino crashing down as well. Keaton's pratfalls are so hypnotic that Martino "mechanically imitates" his absent-mindedness, literally leaping in Buster's footsteps. And what should play the role of banana peel, both encrusting and animating Martino, but the rollercoaster of cinematographic perception itself?

Whither the boffo? Shot digitally yet obsessed with the lively mechanisms of analogue film, *After Midnight* suggests a concluding question: If Bergson's boffo laughter is a byproduct of a cinematographic perception spanning filmstrips and factories, what are its fortunes in post-Fordist, post-cinematic and, dare one say, post-modern times? This question returns us to our starting point, Keaton's cameo in *Sunset Boulevard*. After all, Wilder's 1949 film is concerned with the finitude of cinema amidst technological and industrial transformations, which included not only the preceding shift from silence to sound, but, implicitly, what Marshall McLuhan would describe as the competing, cool, new medium of television. Appealing to both McLuhan and the Weimar coldness that we heard in Wilder's laughter, Wolfgang Ernst has suggested viewing such media shifts through the "cold mechanical eye" of media archaeology.⁵⁶ Seen with such "telescopic eyes," film's finitude is understood as one stratum among many in which the bodily warmth of vitality or sympathy is extinguished

by the deep, post-human time of technical media. Following Ernst, Rob King has persuasively linked this gaze to the vision underlying both early cinematic actuality gags and the cruel consumption of pranks online, the latter producing “a separatist laughter,” “a Hobbesian gesture of superiority and remove...”⁵⁷

I have here sought a different understanding of the relationship between laughter and mediated vision by re-considering the relationship between Bergson’s own account of laughter’s separation and superiority, and various theories, histories and forms of slapstick cinema. While this genre certainly includes the encrustation and coldness long associated with *Laughter*, its fundamental appeal lies in that absurdity and sympathy Bergson himself recognized in ways profoundly related to slapstick’s dialectic with the “alienating, blinding” pathologies of technological life. Riding the filmstrip like Roger Rabbit, the spectator is torn by a “perceptive gymnastics,” wrenched from one’s seat like a marionette pulled by “the comedian’s whip.” In such boffo moments, laughter and comedian are not opposed, but virtually connected across chasms of time and space. This re-loaded *Laughter* can be linked to both numerous theories of comedy, from Bakhtin to Benjamin, as well as revealing vernacular encounters with slapstick, from “My Sister loves that Buster” to Agee’s ladder of laughs.

The question remains: will we still hear Bergson’s boffo laugh after cinema? Is there too much historical distance between slapstick in its modernist heyday and the “cold mechanical eye” of comedy’s online consumption today? While it is tempting to be nostalgic in the manner of Agee’s essay or *After Midnight*’s archivist, I would argue against such temporal separations in the same manner that I have questioned spatial separations between laughter and laughed-at. As we have seen in the example of Chan’s mid-nineties Hong Kong, when slapstick (or its laughter) was, is or becomes modern need not follow a linear or mechanically causal model of history whereby one can discern, whether in Deleuzian or

media-archaeological terms, before from after, now from then. Whether it be Keaton's house or Chan's factory, cartoon rabbit or twitchy Tramp, the apperceptive, cinematographic conditions that give rise to Bergson's boffo laughter are not necessarily confined to a specific period or medium. Instead we might find them in what King, see-sawing between early cinema and Web 2.0, describes as a non-chronological, inter-medial "zigzagging through [the history of moving image comedy]" (311). Tracking such zigzags, scholars might chase after the "meaning of the comic" in the same schizophrenic manner Bergson ascribes to the child-like philosopher playing on the beach or "Film-Philosophy" to a Buster-loving Bergson seeking "to illustrate the role of film in the development of the comic." Rather than defining the boffo to the exclusion of other genres, media or epochs, I would instead emphasize its capacity for absurd connection between seemingly dichotomous terms, whether these be mechanism/vitality or cinema/post-cinema. Perhaps the boffo might be generated by the gag *and* the glitch, filmstrip *and* digital stream, old media *and* new. Despite our present preoccupations, slapstick's matter and memory need not be relegated to a lost time, for, "To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless..."⁵⁸ Or, we might add, the laughable.

¹ James Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism* (New York: Library of America, 2005), 467; Manny Farber, "Sunset Boulevard," *The Nation* (9/23/1950).

² Billie Wilder, "Rund um die Prominenten," *Das Bilderbuch des Filmes* (1927), 43.

³ Helmuth Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 529-532.

⁴ Lutz Weltmann, "Film-Philosophie," *Die Literatur* (1930), *Buster Keaton*, ed. Helga Belach and Wolfgang Jacobsen (Berlin: Argon, 1995), 122.

⁵ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. A. Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 304-308. See also Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. M. Andison (New York: Dover, 2007), 14-17, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul & W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone, 1991), 38, 189 and 207-208, “Henri Bergson Talks to Us About Cinema,” *Le Journal* [2/20/14] in *Cinema Journal* 50:3 (Spring 2011), 81-82; Paul Douglass, “Bergson and Cinema: Friends or Foes?” *The New Bergson*, ed. John Mullarkey (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1999), 209-228.

⁶ *Creative Evolution*, 264.

⁷ As Norbert Elias asks, “Is laughter an expression of our revolt and a relief from social constraint? Or is it a social corrective, punishing us if we do not conform? Are there not examples of both these functions? The riddle deepens.” See his “Essay on Laughter,” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017), 299.

⁸ Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 66.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 6.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (London: MacMillan, 1911), 37.

¹¹ Stephen Crocker, “Man Falls Down,” *Bergson and Phenomenology*, ed. Kelly (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 89. Michael North, *Machine Age Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.

¹² “In Focus: What’s So Funny about Comedy and Humor Studies,” ed. Maggie Hennefeld et al, *JCMS* 58:3 (Spring 2019), 137-170.

¹³ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 57.

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- ¹⁴ See, for instance, Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 3-4; Noel Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 45-48; and Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths," *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Henry Jenkins & K.B. Karnick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 99-103.
- ¹⁵ See Jan Walsh Hokenson, "Comedies of Errors: Bergson's *Laughter* in Modernist Contexts," *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, ed. S.E. Gontarski et al (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 38-53.
- ¹⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 112.
- ¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 71.
- ¹⁸ Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 44.
- ¹⁹ Linda Williams, "Film Bodies," *Film Quarterly* 44:4 (Summer, 1991), 4.
- ²⁰ Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye* (Berkeley, CA: California, 2009), 106.
- ²¹ Jennifer Fay, "Keaton's Climate Control," *Modernism/Modernity* 21:1 (January 2014), 38-39.
- ²² Exceptions include Tom Gunning, "Animation and Alienation: Bergson's Critique of the Cinématographe and the Paradox of Mechanical Motion," *The Moving Image* 14:1 (Spring 2014), 6-8, and Stephen Crocker, *Bergson and the Metaphysics of Media* (New York: Palgrave MacMacmillan, 2013), 133-140.
- ²³ Laura Marks, *The Skin of Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 41-74; William Connolly, *Neuropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2002), 23-49; Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT University Press, 2004).

²⁴ See *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey (New York: Continuum, 2001), 376. The same gesture is made in Ansell-Pearson's *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 8.

²⁵ See A.E. Pilkington, *Bergson and His Influence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 2012), Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1993), Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1996), Hilary L. Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism, 1900-1930* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

²⁶ John Dewey, "Perception and Organic Action," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 9:24 (1912), 645; "A Letter from Bergson to John Dewey," *The New Bergson*, 86.

²⁷ See Henri Bergson, "De la simulation inconsciente dans l'état d'hypnotisme" *Revue Philosophique* 22 (1886), 525-531; *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1910), 11-18; *Dreams*, trans. E.E. Slosson (London: Adelphi, 1914), 29-30 and 37; *The Creative Mind*, 24, 143-145, 163-164.

²⁸ *Creative Evolution*, 272, *Time and Free Will*, 133.

²⁹ *Time and Free Will*, 17-18.

³⁰ Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 4-5; Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 16-18; F.C.T. Moore, *Bergson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 87-89.

³¹ *Machine Age Comedy*, 95-96.

³² Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 125.

³³ Both Freud and Bergson found death-driven modes of humour in the example of Mark Twain. See Paul Flaig, "Life Driven by Death: Animation Aesthetics and the Comic Uncanny," *Screen* 54:1 (March 2013), 6-10. Bergson's contradictory account of laughter as

corrective and sympathetic also recalls Bakhtin's discussion of carnivalesque laughter as "gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding." (*Rabelais and His World*, 11-12).

I thank a reviewer for suggesting this link.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II*, trans. Tomlinson & Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 66.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone, 1988), 47.

³⁶ On slapstick as movement-image, see D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time-Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 3-5, and Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press), 59-86.

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley et al (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 152.

³⁸ Jacques Ranciere, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 114 and 112.

³⁹ *Bergsonism*, 115.

⁴⁰ Jean Epstein, "Magnification," trans. Liebman, *October* 3 (Spring 1977), 13.

⁴¹ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3-4.

⁴² Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁴³ See Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, trans. H.W. Carr (London: Greenwood, 1975), 143 and 180.

⁴⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Dialectic of Duration*, trans. M.M. Jones (Manchester: Clinamen, 2000), 28-29; Max Horkheimer, "On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time," trans. Peter Thomas, *Radical Philosophy* 131 (May/June 2005), 10, 15-17; Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Selected Writings IV*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael Jennings (Cambridge:

Belknap, 2003), 314-336; Theodor Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 6: Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 20-21.

⁴⁵ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 314.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael Jennings et al (Cambridge: Belknap, 2008), 38.

⁴⁷ Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 47, 99, 164-169; Tom Gunning, “Buster Keaton, or the Work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Cineaste* 21:3 (1995), 14-16; Jennifer Bean, “The Art of Imitation: The Originality of Charlie Chaplin and Other Moving-Image Myths,” *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. Rob King and Tom Paulus (New York: Routledge, 2010), 236-261.

⁴⁸ Paula Amad, *Counter-archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 96-132.

⁴⁹ Gerhart Pohl, “Grotesk-Filme,” *Film und Volk* 7 (1929).

⁵⁰ Leonard Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 16.

⁵¹ *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 9.

⁵² See Anca Parvulescu, “‘So We Will Go Bad’: Cheekiness, Laughter, Film,” *Camera Obscura* 21:2 (2006), 162-163, Lauren Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies and American Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press), 140-141, and Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick*, 44.

⁵³ Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema,” *Critical Inquiry* 25:2 (Winter 1999), 306.

⁵⁴ David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Madison: Irvington Way, 2011), 4-5.

⁵⁵ *Work of Art*, 340.

⁵⁶ Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 46.

⁵⁷ Rob King, "Laughter in an Ungoverned Sphere: Actuality Humor in Early Cinema and Web 2.0," *New Silent Cinema*, ed. Paul Flaig and Katherine Groo (New York: Routledge, 2016), 310.

⁵⁸ *Matter and Memory*, 82-83.