

WEIMAR SLAPSTICK: AMERICAN ECCENTRICS, GERMAN GROTESQUES

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# WEIMAR SLAPSTICK: AMERICAN ECCENTRICS GERMAN GROTESQUES

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In *Weimar Slapstick: American Eccentrics, German Grotesques* I examine the wide-ranging popularity of American slapstick film in Germany's Weimar Republic (1919-1933). With its gag-driven narratives, mechanically energized stars and urban, industrial mise-en-scène, slapstick spoke directly to the fears and desires of Germany's first democracy. Using this uniquely American, uniquely cinematic response to modernity as a lens, I offer a transnational account of Weimar culture, with slapstick refracting sites ranging from the film palace to the cabaret, Bauhaus design to modernist text. For those who celebrated the genre, slapstick's shocking, playfully curious humor challenged the traumas and cynicisms that would consume the Republic and which, moreover, still dominate scholarship on this era and its legacy. I approach slapstick cinema against the background of both Weimar Germany's obsession with all things American as well as grotesque traditions in European arts and letters. These films were more than simply received—they were also, to use playwright Bertolt Brecht's term, re-functioned, transformed by context and appropriation. Brecht himself adapted the lumpenproletarian gestures of Charlie Chaplin for developing his epic theater. Aside from this meeting of Tramp and Marxist dramaturge, I analyze a series of American-German constellations: Buster Keaton's androgynous deadpan through Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, white-collar employee Harold Lloyd

through comic schlemihl Curt Bois and uncanny cartoon Felix the Cat through the animated, feline guide of Paul Leni and Guido Seeber's interactive crossword films. I situate these meetings within a broader historical circuit, with exiles from Hitler's Third Reich returning slapstick's favor by transforming American culture, even influencing heroes like Chaplin. Given the continued interest in the thought and culture of the Weimar era, I offer a case study for re-evaluating its legacy vis-à-vis transnational cinemas, the relationship between avant-garde and mass media and modern theories of humor.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Paul Flaig grew up in Brooklyn, New York and Shorewood, Wisconsin. After attending Marquette University High School in Milwaukee he studied at Northwestern University, where he majored in American Studies. Since graduating he has lived and worked in Chicago, Austin, New York, Ithaca and Berlin. He obtained a MA in Comparative Literature at Cornell University in 2009.

*Dedicated to my family.*

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Many friends have aided me over the years of graduate study, helping me understand my work in new ways, pointing me to unforeseen connections or simply being there when I needed them most: Jonathan Berman, Bernard Schwartz, Elena Moon Park, Bret Harper, Sombit Mishra and Gabriel Gerlinger.

Just as I am nothing without my family so is this dissertation nothing without my sister, Robin, my brother-in-law, Mike, my nephew, Benjamin, my brother, John, and my parents, Marilyn and Herbert. Robin has given me a second home in Scotland when I've needed it so

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### I. Introduction

“when I recall those years / I first think of a community of highly / eccentric individuals / some of them strange or just funny with / vague notions / about their purpose for being there, / attracted mainly by the promise of the / unknown, / bohemian, poor, defying weimar’s / bourgeoisie.”—Herbert Bayer (1961).

The novelist and critic Joseph Roth lived in Berlin between 1920 and 1925, an unhappy resident of the Weimar Republic’s capital. Writing for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of his last dispatches during this residence was “The Conversion of a Sinner in Berlin’s UFA Palace,” a satirical account of a visit to a movie theater owned by Germany’s largest film company, responsible for some of the best-remembered films of the period: *Dr. Mabuse* (1922), *Metropolis* (1927) and *The Blue Angel* (1930) among many others.<sup>1</sup> Yet UFA was increasingly required by contract to advertise, distribute and exhibit dozens of American films each year. One such film was Harold Lloyd’s slapstick comedy, *Why Worry?* (1923) and it was UFA’s intense promotion of the film that would provoke Roth’s attendance in November 1925:

In the newspapers, but also on a hundred bright and arresting posters, I saw advertisements for America’s funniest comedy, guaranteeing me a rip-roaring evening’s entertainment. There was a gold-braided porter standing in front of the three lofty gates, and funny announcements of the film and a very famous clown’s face in red and yellow. A great swarm of happy people pressed up to the box office and bought tickets for themselves. Nothing betrayed the deep seriousness that awaited me inside the theater, and I had no idea what shocks my poor impious soul would encounter there...<sup>2</sup>

The article goes on to compare his experience at the movies with that of a churchgoer, his language ironically aping the solemn prose of the Old Testament amidst the spectacles of a

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<sup>1</sup> See Klaus Kreimeier, *The UFA Story: A History of Germany’s Greatest Film Company*, translated by Kimber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 114-115.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Roth, *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*, translated by Hofmann (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 170. See also Joseph Roth, *Das Journalistische Werk 1924-1928*, hrg. Westermann (Köln: Verlag Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1989).

priest-like conductor and his fervent jazz-band orchestra. Mocking the profane by speaking as if it were sacred, Roth concludes

...the projectionist began to officiate at the film by Harold Lloyd. But who was there who could laugh? No mirth shook my diaphragm. My thoughts were on death, the grave, and the hereafter. And even as the man on the screen was performing some wonderful comic gag, I decided I would dedicate the rest of my life to God, and become a hermit. At the end of the show I quickly rushed away into a deep dark forest, which I have not left since...<sup>3</sup>

What sin does Roth hereby confess? It is his not falling to his knees in worship of the secular miracle of Americanized entertainment, of his choosing the weighty metaphysical themes of death and nature over the “shocks” one experiences when going to the movies in the Berlin of the Weimar era. A world turned upside-down, where saints have become sinners and sinners, saints.

Roth’s mixture of ironic derision and anxiety in the face of this spectacle confirms many of the assumptions we still have about the culture of the Weimar Republic and its legacy. A failed experiment in democracy and modernization, caught between traumatic war and approaching fascism, this is a period in German history consistently fascinating to scholars, artists and critics. One of the most important features of this experiment was intense exposure to what Germans called *Amerikanismus* [Americanism].<sup>4</sup> At once a uniquely German projection and simultaneously a very real force, *Amerikanismus* tied together a whole range of phenomena associated with the particular modernity of the Weimar years, from 1919-1933: stratospheric

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> The first hand accounts and scholarly assessments of *Amerikanismus* are many and will be quoted throughout the dissertation. For important representatives of the former see the section on *Amerikanismus* in *The Weimar Sourcebook*, ed Kaes et al (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 393-410; Adolf Halfeld, *Amerika und der Amerikanismus* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1927); Herman George Scheffauer, *Das Land Gottes: Das Gesicht des Neuen Amerika* (Hannover: Steegemann Verlag, 1923); Georg Kühne, *Von Mensch und Motor, Farm und Wolkenkratzer: Reiseskizzen eines deutschen Ingenieurs* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1926). For the latter, see Frank Becker, *Amerikanismus in Weimar: Sportsymbole und politische Kultur 1918-1933* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 1993); Peter Berg, *Deutschland und Amerika 1918-1929* (Lübeck: Matthiesen Verlag, 1963), *Amerikanisierung: Traum und Alptraum im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Lüdtkke et al (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1996); Helmut Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924-1932: Studien zur Literatur des ‘Weißen Sozialismus’* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1970); Deniz Göktürk, *Künstler, Cowboys, Ingenieure: Kultur- und mediengeschichte Studien zu deutschen Amerika-Texten 1912-1920* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1998).

inflation, Fordist rationalization, civilization's triumph over culture, ornamental consumerism, athletics, technology, syncopated jazz, urbanization, avant-gardist fascination, racial Others, unsettled sexualities, cosmopolitanism etc. Though this word does not appear in Roth's article, it is the unspoken theme undergirding his dismissal of the movie theater, the jazz orchestra and Lloyd's film. Indeed, the jazz conductor was imported from the Capitol Cinema in New York and *Why Worry?* sparked another journalist to ask "Should this beautiful, large house remain reserved only for the Americans?"<sup>5</sup> Fleeing Berlin, Roth seeks shelter in a medieval forest but his parodic tone makes clear that his readers are not to take him any more seriously than he took the UFA spectacle or Lloyd's slapstick. A perfect example of Weimar's famous cynicism, Roth's irony lays waste to all authority including that of his own voice.

That same year Harold Lloyd would appear at a different movie theater, one less spectacular than UFA's palace, but perhaps more in tune with the *Amerikanismus* that failed to win over Joseph Roth. Working at the Bauhaus, typographer and designer Herbert Bayer drew up a "Kinogestaltung" [cinema design] that sadly never came to construction. A perfect emblem of the Bauhaus's distillation of form into function, architectural space into geometric abstraction, Bayer's theater shows no German films, but rather advertises its perfectly square façade with an image of Lloyd (first known to Germans as "Er" ["He"]), his face below that of American president Calvin Coolidge.<sup>6</sup> So reduced by abstraction it lacks a bathroom, Bayer's cinema offers a counter-image to Roth's cynical dismissal of slapstick and of Weimar's flirtation with the

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<sup>5</sup> *Berliner Morgenpost* 262 (11/1/1925).

<sup>6</sup> President Coolidge was, despite his mirthless reputation, a great of slapstick film, screening Keaton's *The Navigator* three times aboard yacht. See Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 351

United States more generally.<sup>7</sup> In contrast with the monumentalism of UFA's palace, constructed in 1919 to signal the ambitions of the German film industry after the war, Bayer's modest design is rational and efficient, replacing a grand entrance with revolving doors, a prop itself commonly used in slapstick. Here the most orderly of all cinematic environments is best fitting for the chaotic energies of Lloyd, the very icon of the upwardly mobile American go-getter. At the Bauhaus, Bayer was not alone in celebrating the "wonderful comic gag[s]" of Hollywood's slapstick film. Bayer's tri-colored division of his movie theater echoes the scheme of his colleague Oskar Schlemmer's dance-piece, the "Triadic Ballet," its first act featuring a yellow backdrop for a burlesque. Like the "red and yellow" clown advertised by UFA, Schlemmer's dancers would be costumed so as to move like puppets and he would likewise find inspiration for these designs in American cinema: "The theater, the world of appearances, is digging its own grave when it tries for verisimilitude; the same applies to the mime, who forgets that his chief characteristic is his artificiality.... Chaplin performs wonders when he equates complete inhumanity with artistic perfection."<sup>8</sup> Bauhaus photographer László Moholy-Nagy would list Chaplin as a forerunner for his own project of a "Mechanized Eccentric," a modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total art work] fit for the age of technical reproducibility. Chaplin was to be praised for "eliminating the subjective" and merging together "the tragicomic, the grotesque-serious, the trivial-monumental."<sup>9</sup> Although Moholy would, like Schlemmer, seek utopia in projects like his "Eccentric" or "Simultaneous or Poly-Cinema," he would stress that it was important to follow the "instincts and preferences" of the "much disdained masses," whose love

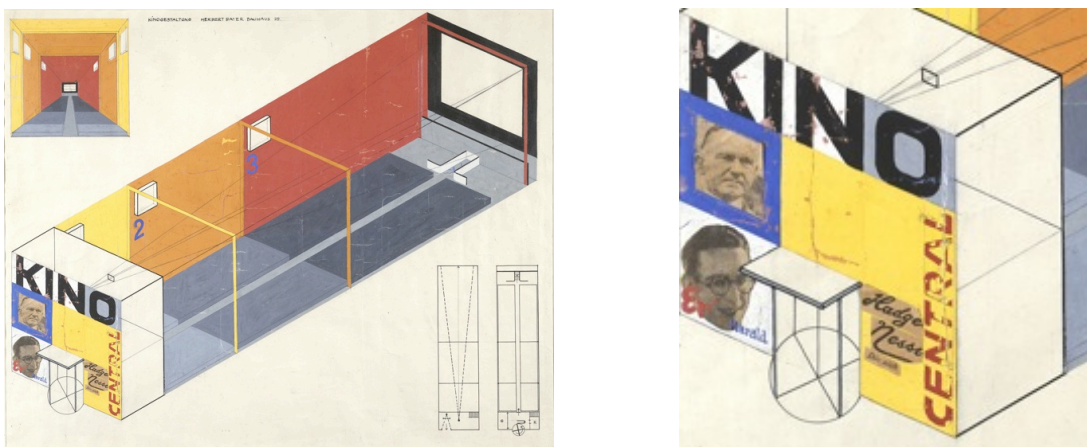
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<sup>7</sup> For a recent reading of this and other contemporaneous designs see Hal Foster, "Kinogestaltung Herbert Bayer Bauhaus 25," in *Bauhaus: Workshops for Modernity 1919-1933* (New York: MOMA, 2009), pp. 174-180. See also Arthur Cohen, *Herbert Bayer: The Complete Works* (Cambridge: MIT, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Oskar Schlemmer, *The Letters and Diaries of Oskar Schlemmer*, translated by Winston (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 1972), p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, "Theater, Circus, Variety," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, edited by Gropius and Wensinger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996), pp. 62-3.

of the clown Chaplin signaled a task of “the creative understanding of the true, and not the imagined, needs” of those masses.<sup>10</sup> Although many of these projects were never completed, the Bauhaus’s “creative understandings” would have profound impact on the culture of the times. This impact is discernible in a 1930 cartoon advertisement entitled “Tea Dance” by animator Hans Fischerkoesen, where chairs designed by the Bauhaus’s Marcel Breuer dance in jazzy tune with a group of well-dressed, hard-partying animals. Like so many German artists before him, Fischerkoesen’s film is inflected by the physical comedy of American cinema, in this case, the barnyard violence of Disney’s early Mickey Mouse shorts, which provide him with a whole stable of funny creatures to inhabit the ad’s Bauhaus-furnished setting.



**Figure 1: Herbert Bayer, *Kinogestaltung* (1924)**

“Tea Dance” was produced and distributed by UFA and almost certainly shown at the very palace that sparked Roth’s ire. With its merging of advertisement, jazz, contemporary design and grotesque *Amerikanismus* Fischerkoesen’s film points, like Bayer’s design, Schlemmer’s puppets or Moholy’s “Eccentric,” to a neglected facet of the culture of Weimar Germany: the many “creative understandings” initiated by artists, actors, filmmakers and critics in celebration and citation of American slapstick comedy. Against Roth’s melancholic yet ironic

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

dismissal of slapstick and its pleasures, Berlin was rife with creative individuals who turned to the genre and its forms for the most innovative of projects and pursuits. Indeed, the Bauhaus was not alone in turning to Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton or Disney as kindred spirits, vital influences or opportunities for creative re-use. This dissertation examines the Weimar Republic through precisely such meetings of German and American cultures of the inter-war period and by doing so seeks to challenge dominant accounts of both the culture of the Republic as well as the way American slapstick film itself is understood. It addresses how Weimar visual culture celebrated, resisted or disavowed the immense popularity of slapstick and with that popularity a plethora of aesthetic forms associated with the genre: the narrative procedure of the gag, the relationship between actor and character, control and dismemberment of the slapstick body, an eruptive mise-en-scene of techno-industrial, urban modernity, a specific politics of social representation (especially in terms of class, gender and ethnicity) and its very status as global commodity and emblem of *Amerikanismus*. By marshalling texts, films and artworks of the period, I analyze slapstick's appeal among German mass audiences, filmmakers, artists and thinkers, but also investigate how this confrontation forces us to reconsider the mass culture of the Weimar period as well as the very concept of "mass culture" at the moment of its increasingly global ascendancy. I argue that the traumas and anxieties of this unstable era were the very terrain of slapstick's appeal and offered not just mere escape or a therapeutic working-through. Rather, the promise of that appeal initiated several emancipatory productions, hybrid meetings of slapstick form and modes of humor drawn from a range of local and global sources: cabaret, folk humor, fairy tales, the avant-garde, the carnivalesque, German-Jewish joking etc. Against cynical readings, I distinguish ironic elements of Weimar culture from the improvisatory humor of a range of artists, who took up the challenge of modernity, like their slapstick inspirations, with

cheerful abandon and radically democratic form. Reading films, texts, artworks and performances by playwright Bertolt Brecht, Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, filmmakers Paul Leni and Guido Seeber and actor Curt Bois, this dissertation focuses on figures who integrated and altered slapstick for interventions into a globally mediated public sphere, insistent on the affective power of humor as well as its critical capacity for altering determinant arrangements of thought and life.

In what follows, I will outline the stakes of this project, beginning with canonical theoretical accounts of Weimar culture before moving onto the place of comedy in understanding that culture, especially in regard to the reflections and responses to slapstick among Weimar intellectuals, critics and philosophers. I will then offer an alternative account of slapstick's place within Germany, focusing on the crucial terms of "eccentric" and "grotesque" to flesh out both my method as well as the analysis of "creative interpretations" in subsequent chapters. *Weimar Slapstick* is less a history of reception of American films in Germany and more a construction of an intra- or trans- national network, where the images, icons and attractions of slapstick circulate across screens, stages, advertisements, artworks, songs and bodies. Moving across media as much as it moved across modes of sensation, slapstick cinema here is de-territorialized not only by the dynamics of an ambitious American film industry, exporting its films and stars in radically diffuse spheres of consumption, but also by the complex ways slapstick, a genre endlessly fractured by its loose narrative structure of comic set-pieces, eccentric personality of its star and reliance on intense corporeality of actor and spectator, could so easily be transformed upon its reception. Recalling Moholy's reference to Chaplin, we are dealing with two vitally connected nodes in this network: on the one hand, the "much disdained masses," a loose collection of movie-goers with interests and tastes differentiated according to class, gender and ethnicity but often unified, at various hegemonic points, in their taste for or interest in slapstick;

on the other, the realms of left intellectuals and the avant-garde, just as diffuse in the way they approached and understood American culture, but with a shared interest in the way slapstick was recognized as both an ally and resource, in Bayer's retrospective, mythologizing words, "the promise of the / unknown, / bohemian, poor, defying weimar's / bourgeoisie."<sup>11</sup> Seeking to avoid the "imagined" and thus ideologically imposed "needs" of the latter, those who took up slapstick's "promise," so seemingly different and "unknown" with regard to their native film culture, did so because there was something that the genre offered "true" to the radically new experiences of modernity, a modernity itself defined and understood largely in terms and images of an American nature. In contrast to the mixture of ironic cynicism and tragic fatalism of writers like Roth, so persistently popular as the Republic's most enduring cultural legacy, there is a too often obscured constellation of America-inspired, slapstick-citing artists and thinkers, who adapted the rude energies and playful politics of tramps, deadpans and other eccentrics for their own grotesque displays and lessons.

## II. A pernicious conjunction

*"This is an anthithesis and an either-or. The intellectual human being has the choice (as far as he has the choice) of being either an ironist or a radical; a third choice is not decently possible."* —Thomas Mann, "Irony and Radicalism" (1919).

The Weimar Republic is alive and well and living in New York City. In the last decade numerous exhibitions of art, letters and films of the period have drawn record audiences in that city and aside from the shared historical focus and usual names on display, what links this revitalization more than anything is the conjunction "and." Kicking off the Weimar craze, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's portrait exhibit "Glitter and Doom" was quickly followed by the Galerie St. Etienne's "Decadence and Decay" while more recently the Museum of Modern Art

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<sup>11</sup> Herbert Bayer, *Herbert Bayer: painter, designer, architect* (New York: Reinhold, 1967), p. 10.



(MOMA) offered a landmark exhibition of Weimar films entitled “Daydreams and Nightmares.”<sup>12</sup> Describing this influx of bifurcated German art, an article in the *New York Observer* asked “What is it about the Germans?” presenting this question to the historian Eric Weitz.<sup>13</sup> Weitz’s own important study precedes this obsession in its title, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, one that gives us an important basis for elaborating the various poles by which each of these exhibitions stage contemporary understandings of Weimar culture and its legacy.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, there is the Republic’s tumultuous history, what Weitz calls its “Greek tragedy.”<sup>15</sup> While Weitz is himself critical of the morbid fascination with the morbid driving many of these exhibitions, the logic of his “and” is ultimately no different: far from representing some absolute distance or separation it is clear that in each of these cases what is promising, glittering, dream-like or decadent about the Weimar years is never far from doom, decay, nightmare or tragedy. The two sides of each “and” are constitutively linked, two halves of the same broken whole. In Weitz’s case, one of the great elements of tragedy in his history is precisely Weimar’s often forgotten “promise,” those “utopian” aspects he highlights in discussions of architecture, art, sexuality, technology, philosophy and many other intersecting realms within the cultural life of the Republic.<sup>16</sup> Utopia is never far from dystopia, daydreams from nightmares and it is this very interplay between extremes that justifies the “and” of these titles, especially in a period when, according to the *Observer* article, Americans, and New

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<sup>12</sup> *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from 1920s*, edited by Rewald et al (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006); *Weimar Cinema, 1919-1933: Daydreams and Nightmares*, edited by Kardish (New York: MOMA, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> W.M. Akers, “What is it about the Germans? They’re Invading!” *New York Observer* (5/4/2011).

<sup>14</sup> Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 361.

<sup>16</sup> For two other related titles, with relevant subject matters, see Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: MIT, 2002) and Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Yorkers especially, are themselves dealing with the traumas of terrorism, war and financial ruin. This suggestion of a contextual echo seems apt, especially since these exhibitions provide only the surface of a much broader resurgence of things Weimar, from MOMA shows devoted to German Expressionism and the Bauhaus to permanent and visiting collections of German and Austrian art at the Neue Galerie, from the world-wide success of a restored version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to an explosion of interest in the history and forms of Berlin cabaret.<sup>17</sup> Peter Lorre, best known as the child-killer of Lang's film *M* (1931), has inspired a punk cabaret show with its lead performer explaining the actor's appeal: "It's the lure of the other. He's the underdog, the outsider."<sup>18</sup>

This phrasing recalls one of the most important accounts of this era, Peter Gay's *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*.<sup>19</sup> Gay's book was part of, and in no small part responsible for, the first great American resuscitation of Weimar culture during the nineteen sixties, where articles much like the *Observer* piece intimated parallels between periods, suggested by both members of the New Left and various neo-avant gardes as well as conservatives like Walter Laqueur, who detected, in a review of Gay's book, "fascinating similarities between the intellectual milieu of the two cities [Weimar Berlin and sixties New York]."<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Gay or Laqueur's accounts, themselves symptomatic of a broader Cold War cultural politics often initiated by German-Jewish exiles<sup>21</sup>, the three most important theoretical accounts of Weimar culture were written by three men writing in Germany, who constructed their vision of Weimar's modernity in explicitly post-sixties, post-modern terms: Klaus Theweleit's two-volume *Male*

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<sup>17</sup> See the recent film *Cabaret-Berlin: The Wild Scene* (2010).

<sup>18</sup> Ben Sisario, "Addicted to Peter Lorre (That Voice, Those Eyes)," *New York Times* (1/7/2009).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Norton, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Walter Laqueur, "Berlin, Brecht, Bauhaus and a Whole Generation of Isherwoods," *New York Times* (1/24/1968). See also Laqueur, *Weimar: A Cultural History* (New York: Putnam, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> Udi Greenberg, "Turning 'Weimar Culture' into a Cold War Symbol," presented at Cornell University German Studies Conference, "'Turns' of the Century" (2008).

*Fantasies*, Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* and Helmut Lethen's *Cool Conduct*.<sup>22</sup>

And as with Gay or Lorre, it is precisely the tenuous relationship between the outsider and the unstable norms of society that guides each of their accounts of the Republic and its tragic descent into fascism and genocide.

Theweleit's monumental study of the literature of the Freikorps, the proto-fascist reactionaries who put down communist revolutions following World War I, is theoretically staked on the opposition between the armoring of body and spirit against the diffuse, ever-threatening flood of femininity, masses and desire, an opposition between self and other, subject and object against which Theweleit turns to the heterogeneity and difference of French post-structuralism. Likewise departing from a literary basis, specifically the novels, poems, plays and handbooks associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Lethen's account emphasizes the Weimar experience as "the immediate confrontation with modernity as a freezing shock."<sup>23</sup> There are two options in responding to this shock. On the one hand, succumbing to the constructed codes of behavior and "other-directed" masks by which one armored one's self against the too visible trauma of shame, an option exemplified by the "radar type." On the other, one exposes one self to such shame, an abject state of humiliation and "otherness" Lethen defines using the term "creature," a figure most consistently depicted by *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s aesthetic Other: Expressionism. When the shameful creature appears in the cold eyes of the radar type, it takes the specific form of farce, "the genre of comedy" being "how a shame culture puts its humanity

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<sup>22</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Males Fantasies, Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, translated by Carter and Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) and *Male Fantasies, Vol. 2: Male Bodies—Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, translated by Carter and Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, translated by Roneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, translated by Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. ix.

on display.”<sup>24</sup> What Lethen, following Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, calls farce Sloterdijk, in turn, calls cynicism. Although his *Critique* tracks the philosophical history of cynicism from Diogenes to Adorno, its final section is a case study of the Weimar Republic, which serves as a matrix for understanding both the culmination of a certain dynamic within modernity as well as a prelude for the post-modernism of Sloterdijk’s contemporary nineteen-eighties. Yet it is not quite right to conflate farce and cynicism since the former is the latter’s inevitable outcome: when everything is externalized in the form of representations there is an overwhelming sense that this ornamental world is ungrounded, arbitrary and contingent, that a gap between representation and reality is both irreducible and inevitable. Cynicism is, for Sloterdijk, the name for a mode of consciousness that revels in the space of this gap. Like Lethen’s radar type or Theweleit’s armored subject, the cynics “ceased to expose themselves as eccentrics to the attention and mockery of others.”<sup>25</sup> Given the unstable authority structures of the Weimar Republic not to mention its endlessly fraught democracy it should not shock that Sloterdijk would turn to its various cultural expressions and documents as the verdant soil in which cynical reason reached full bloom. In an afterword entitled “The Pleural Shock: On the Archetype of Weimar Laughter” he claims that “A nation that has just lost a war and two million killed in action will not find laughing all that easy.... In the laughter of this decade, gaiety has to step over dead bodies, and in the end, people will laugh about the thought of corpses to come.”<sup>26</sup> According to his taxonomy of “Weimar laughter,” one either laughs sadistically at the exposure and shame of others (the underside or precursor to the “healthy” laughter of the National Socialist), nervously about one’s

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<sup>24</sup> Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 125.

<sup>25</sup> Sloterdijk, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 529.

own victimhood or, in the extreme, masochistically so that “The laughter no longer recognized himself in his laughter, just as if a stranger within him was laughing himself to death.”<sup>27</sup>

In the seemingly impossible space between these extremes there are other modalities at stake in the culture of the Weimar Republic and they are hinted at only on the margins of a text like Sloterdijk’s *Critique*. Writing about Bertolt Brecht’s *Mann ist Mann* [Man equals Man], Sloterdijk describes the play’s protagonist, Galy Gay, as a “bashed ego,” one

who has got caught up in the clockwork (rather like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*) who makes its hands as dirty as the circumstances are and who, in the midst of the goings-on, only takes care to observe alertly what it encounters. With Brecht...the pugnacious irony appropriate to modernity makes itself felt: kynical irony. It does not resist reality with ‘imagined fancies’ but exercises resistance in the form of unresisting accommodation.<sup>28</sup>

With Brecht’s “kynical irony” there is an impossible merging of sadism and masochism, a creaturely radar type who shamelessly exposes itself in its very “accommodation” to the codes of a situation, the better to extract its own enjoyment and insight. One laughs *at* the stumbling of this fractured ego, split between the seeming security of its attitude or mask and the dirtying and disarming of its body, but one also laughs *with* it as it shares observations and insights about the increasingly broken “clockwork” surrounding it.



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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 532.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 441.

**Figure 2: Chaplin's most iconic image, from *Modern Times***

While Chaplin remains merely parenthetical here, his Tramp was in fact a very real presence not only in Brecht's composition and direction of *Mann ist Mann*—he was one of the crucial figures of Weimar Germany and its endlessly fascinating modernity. This dissertation exists within the eccentric space of Sloterdijk's parentheses, removing his simile to look at the influence and impact of films anticipating *Modern Times* (1936) on Germans who did not easily fit the dichotomous matrix outlined above. Arguing not against the existence or precedent of this matrix, but rather its all-consuming scope I seek to demonstrate a third term to the either/or of radar type or creature, armored ego or feminine flood, proto-fascist sadist or masochistic victim. Bypassing these possibilities only by fully embracing them, slapstick cinema offered an excluded middle, submitting its put-upon heroes to various traumas, shames and shocks not merely for the purposes of farcical derision or negative identification, but to find in this submission capacities for resistance, enjoyment and new ways of knowing, feeling and being within modernity. Artists like Brecht learned from slapstick that this modernity was simultaneously chance and threat, hypostatizing neither into an extreme, myth or destiny but rather playing one off or with the other, finding, in a consistently dialectical fashion, chances in threats and threats in chances. There was no single "archetype" of laughter in this era and rather than a set of limited extremes, there was a continuum that included, to recall James Agee's famous essay on slapstick, titters, yowls, belly-laughs and boffos of many kinds.<sup>29</sup> This is perhaps most clear in the sequence referenced by Sloterdijk from *Modern Times*. Chaplin's Tramp, neurasthenically repeats the same gestures over and over again on an assembly line to the point of shooting down that line, caught up in the gears of a machine much like film strip flying through a projector. Linking the

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<sup>29</sup> James Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, edited by Sragow, (New York: Library of America, 2005), p. 19.

automation of the factory to that of the cinema, Chaplin's image is so iconic precisely because of its Brechtian ambiguity, on the one hand, the comic, absurd delight it suggests with the Tramp's smile (along with Chaplin's fanciful scoring) as he keeps repeating this motion even in this most impossible of situations and on the other, the absolute horror of this smile, a worker whose very body is not only automated and de-humanized, but who seems to derive a perverse and unconscious pleasure in this very de-humanization. Speaking more broadly, this image is iconic because it crystallizes slapstick's essential feature—the grotesque reduction of the human body into a kind of object, a reduction that, in contrast to a film like *Metropolis*, was treated with comic playfulness and savage absurdity.

It should not surprise us then that Brecht's most famous character, Mackie Messer, wore a bowler, a token of Chaplin's influence on the epic playwright that has remained with him from *The Three Penny Opera*'s original production right up to this very day. As I argue in my first chapter, Brecht made the often abstract and ironic "cynical reason" itself appear in the form of the comic, illuminating *Gestus*, so that this reason became the target of his assault; in Brecht's words, his plays "were called corrosive [zersetzend] because they showed the general corrosion of morality and of old institutions."<sup>30</sup> And this is only one such instance of a dispersion of dichotomies. Theweleit's threatening flood appears throughout Buster Keaton's films, but the star's deadpan face suggested a robotic armoring far more comic, playful and open, one that satirically welcomed the possibilities of chaotic dissolution. One of Keaton's most creative German fans, the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, excoriated the shame-faced generation of young men analyzed by Lethen and in contrast developed a multi-medial, synaesthetic set of works—montages, fashion designs, film scripts, essays and dances—both shamelessly androgynous and

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<sup>30</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 17* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 944.

aggressively nonsensical. Expressionism's gothic obsession with the anxiety-inducing animation of repressed desires and unconscious automatism—figured cinematically in somnambulists, automatons, androids, homunculi and partial objects—founds its comic Other in American cartoon creatures, uncanny like their German cousins, but also funny and, like their role model Chaplin, observing at all times “alertly” in the midst of the vivified modernity both surrounding them and erupting in their very own person. Paul Leni and Guido Seeber turned to this American animation when making their *Rebus* series, interactive crossword films that used a cartoon cat, Theobald, as an audience surrogate and guide, one clearly influenced by the world's first cartoon star, Felix the Cat. Perhaps the most important emblem of the radar type, the much-analyzed white collar employee, had its American role model in Harold Lloyd, who embodied the optimistic yet ruthless energy of American business more emphatically than any other film actor. While these employees would eventually turn out in disproportionate number for the National Socialists, Lloyd's persona would be adopted by comedian Curt Bois, who not only won a contest to star as the “German Harold Lloyd” in a series of slapstick shorts, but also mixed the latter's American verve with the transgressive energies of cabaret and Jewish joking. Audiences and artists found plenty of time for laughter, amusement and play and not merely as a distracting escape from contemporary pressures, but rather as a way of engaging such pressure productively, critically recasting the modern world into a slapstick playground beyond the imposed destinies of catastrophe and exploitation. Utopia, in this era, was not simply desired out of a desperate lack; it was concretely lived in the present by artists who adopted slapstick's energies, gags and images for their own crucial interventions and experiments.

### **III. Saving Rosa**



Skipping school and its lessons on Charlemagne for a neighborhood cinema and Buster Keaton, David Schwartz watches the Great Stone-face drag an unconscious woman up the ladder of a boat at sea. One of the minor characters in Jason Lutes' graphic novels about the final years of the Weimar Republic, *Berlin: City of Stones* (2000) and *Berlin: City of Smoke* (2008), David is the son of an assimilated German-Jewish family.<sup>31</sup> Unbeknownst to his family he skips school once a week to sell copies of the German Communist Party's *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, afterwards spending his earnings at the movies. Returning home from Keaton's film—one assumes it is *The Navigator* (1924)—David ignores his homework on Charlemagne once more, this time turning to someone closer to home: a picture of Rosa Luxemburg. Having learned about Luxemburg's life as co-founder of the KPD as well as her tragic end in the waters of a Berlin canal, David falls asleep, his dreams mingle movies with Marxism, American slapstick with Weimar trauma: in place of Keaton's unconscious bathing-suit clad companion it is Luxemburg who is being dragged out of the waters and instead of Keaton it is David who plays the stoic hero. David's dream work is, via Lutes' repeated paneling of the film within the dream within the comic, a restorative reversal of one of the founding events of the Weimar Republic, a travel back in time assisted by the most fantastical of time machines, the cinema. Having been shown the watery grave where Luxemburg, along with Karl Liebknecht, were thrown after their assassination by the Freikorps, David uses the wish-image of Keaton's comedy to drag her from the water, saving Germany and thereby achieving assimilation after suffering constant bullying for being a left-leaning Jew. David Schwartz's other great hero, his role model in waking life, is also American, Harry Houdini. David will later recount Houdini's trip to Germany in 1901, envious of the escape artist having embarrassed German authorities suspicious of his astounding

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<sup>31</sup> Jason Lutes, *Berlin: City of Stones* (Toronto: Drawn & Quarterly, 2000) and *Berlin: City of Smoke* (Toronto: Drawn & Quarterly, 2008).

claims. A clever reference on Lutes' part, since it was Houdini himself who purportedly gave Keaton the name "Buster," David's interest here comes from his much stronger desire to disappear, to escape the conflicts of his family, persecution from his peers and the increasingly violent politics at play on the streets of Berlin.



**Figure 3: David Schwartz uses Buster Keaton as a wish-image to save Germany**

David's mixture of nightmarish German reality and redemptive American dream is a perfect distillation of the way slapstick has been understood both in its Weimar reception as well as in the broader terms of what David Bordwell has called "the modernity thesis."<sup>32</sup> Regarding the former, scholars like Sabine Hake, Sherwin Simmons, Beeke Sell Tower and Thomas Saunders have focused especially on the response of leftist, often German-Jewish intellectuals and artists, who projected on to American slapstick a host of redemptive virtues: the politicizing power of cinema's democratic, mass art, a means of uniting working classes with intellectual ones in a shared suspicion of both bourgeoisie and aristocracy, the liberating and subversive power of laughter and an alternative in both gag-laden form and trampish content to Germany's

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<sup>32</sup> See David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Charles Keil, "To Here from Modernity': Style, Historiography, and Transitional Cinema," *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, ed. Keil and Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

stultifying, hierarchical and often humorless aesthetic traditions.<sup>33</sup> More broadly consistent with the most optimistic variants of *Amerikanismus* the figures analyzed by these scholars all turned to slapstick because of the lack it exposed in German culture and especially in German cinema of the time. Such celebration reached its most nuanced form in the writings of Weimar's most influential thinkers of mass culture: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. It is here where modernity intervenes with scholars like Miriam Hansen, Tom Gunning, Mary Anne Doane, Merrill Schleier, Michael North and Rob King all turning to the speculations of this unholy trio to understand slapstick's relationship to that term's "thesis," broadly construed as a dialectic between the order, rationalization and technologization promoted by the industrial labor and commodities of global capitalism and, on the other, contingent and material shocks, sensations and attractions produced by the excesses and deficiencies of this ordering, ephemeral and distracting moments that slapstick's "fun factory" especially delighted in manufacturing.<sup>34</sup> Kracauer has provided an oft-quoted motto for understanding slapstick's modernity, which comes in a review not of that other unholy trinity—Chaplin, Keaton or Lloyd—but rather of the lesser known Bobby Vernon: "One must hand it to the Americans: they have created a form in

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<sup>33</sup> Sabine Hake, "Chaplin Reception in Weimar Germany," *New German Critique* 51 (Autumn 1990), pp. 87-111; Sherwin Simmons, "Chaplin Smiles on the Wall: Berlin Dada and Wish-Images of Popular Culture," *New German Critique* 84 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 3-34; Beeke Seele Tower, *Envisioning America: Prints, Drawings, and Photographs by George Grosz and His Contemporaries, 1915-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Thomas Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> Miriam Hansen, "Of Ducks and Mice: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92:1 (Winter 1993), pp. 27-61; Hansen, "America, Paris, The Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity," *Cinema and the Invention of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 362-402; Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004), pp. 3-45; Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999), pp. 306-343; Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Tom Gunning, "Modernity and Cinema: A Culture of Shocks and Flows," *Cinema and Modernity*, ed. Pomerance (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Gunning, "Chaplin and Modernity," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8:3 (August 2010), pp. 237-245; Merrill Schleier, *Skyscraper Cinema: Architecture and Gender in American Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Michael North, *Machine Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2009); Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Contingency, Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

their slapstick films that acts as a counterweight against their reality: if they discipline this world in an often unbearable way, in film they dismantle this self-made order quite forcefully.”<sup>35</sup> Those scholars who have discussed Germany’s specific response to slapstick have focused primarily on intellectuals like Kracauer, understanding this praise as a utopian projection rooted in the extremist dynamics of the Weimar Republic. While Kracauer and Benjamin praised slapstick they shared the melancholy of their colleague at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Joseph Roth, and it was precisely because of their apocalyptic fixation on past traumas and future catastrophes that they cherished the redemptive capacities of slapstick. In a curious twist, these figures of the twenties and thirties have been deployed to understand slapstick in its nascent form at the turn of the century, both in the cinema of attractions as well as during transitional periods when the slapstick feature developed, itself symptomatic in its tug of war between plot and gag of the dialectic at the heart of this “thesis.” The “modernity” of early cinema and the nineteenth century visual cultures and technologies informing its invention and reception in the United States and Europe was, it seems, of Weimar stock, applied both retroactively and transnationally without owning up to this rather daring leap. As a result, the notion of “American” culture taken up in Kracauer’s statement is heavily over-determined by how “America” itself was understood and constructed within the Weimar context. Its scholarly application betrays something of a feedback loop, the particular features of Weimar *Amerikanismus* being directly applied to America itself without understanding the how and why of these features’ identification and interpretation. Before we understand slapstick’s status as American “counterweight,” as distracting shock to the modernity of urban space or industrial rationalization, we have to understand first what “American” means,

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<sup>35</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Kleine Schriftzen zum Film 1921-1927* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), p. 199. Miriam Hansen’s translation of this phrase in “America, Paris, The Alps” has been re-cited by Rob King in his *Fun Factory* (20), Merrill Schleier in her *Skyscraper Cinema* (35) as well as in Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), p. 302.

bridging the canonical insights of Kracauer with his many diverse peers among German intellectuals, the avant-garde, journalists, reporters and, not least, filmmakers.

It is especially owing to Hansen's groundbreaking re-reading of Kracauer's Weimar texts, not to mention her focus on early drafts of his later *Theory of Film*, that scholars have developed this understanding of slapstick as the other side of *Amerikanismus*, that distracting bit of comic chaos thrown into the assembly line or skyscraper office. Yet it is important too to situate Kracauer's claim vis-à-vis his other famous post-Weimar text, *From Caligari to Hitler*, where the celebration of slapstick is in part secured via a frustration with the deeply unfunny German film contemporaneous to slapstick's silver age in the twenties.<sup>36</sup> Bemoaning the German incapacity "of producing a popular film comedian," he describes the essence of slapstick as dealing with "the contingencies of life" whereas his former countrymen revel in an ideology that "tends to discredit the notion of luck in favor of that of fate.... Theirs is an emotional humor which tries to reconcile mankind to its tragic plight and to make one not only laugh at the oddities of life but also realize through that laughter how fateful it is. Such dispositions were of course incompatible with the attitudes underlying the performances of a Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd."<sup>37</sup> Ironically enough, "fate" is very the basis for scholarly corrections of Kracauer's infamous claim in that book, namely, that the films of the Weimar period, especially the famous expressionist works of the early twenties, disclose Germany's Fascist destiny, cinematic tea leaves for future horrors.<sup>38</sup> Kracauer's point is echoed in the other great "first" text on Weimar cinema, Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen*.<sup>39</sup> Dismissive of her fellow exile's psycho-historical

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<sup>36</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

<sup>38</sup> Barry Salt, "From Caligari to Who?" *Sight and Sound* 48:2 (Spring 1979), pp. 119-123.

<sup>39</sup> Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

account, Eisner nonetheless agrees with his observation concerning the lack of comedian-centered German films: “It also seems significant that the best German directors limited themselves to tragic films. Their comedies for the cinema never escape the charge of vulgarity...”<sup>40</sup> Although the exceptional figure of a comic master like Ernst Lubitsch would seem to contradict both Kracauer and Eisner neither was appreciative of the Berliner’s humor with the latter designating both his German and American films as cynical and fatalistic.

Kracauer and Eisner’s later accounts are confirmed by then-contemporary descriptions of German humorlessness in the face of American slapstick, which exposed all too clearly the seeming lack of a comparable comic star of their native cinema. More importantly, the implicit split between the tragic visions of Weimar cinema’s most analyzed genres—expressionist horror, historical epic, chamber drama, street film and science fiction—and the ironic and cynical mode of a filmmaker like Lubitsch repeats the dichotomy charted by Theweleit, Lethen and Sloterdijk. That dichotomy has been evoked in the two most important accounts of Weimar cinema published in the last decade, both of which broadly echo those oppositions of the traumatic and decadent, tragic and cynical, nightmare and daydream: Thomas Elsaesser’s *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* and Anton Kaes’ *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*.<sup>41</sup> Elsaesser explicitly departs from his discovery of Sloterdijk’s *Critique*, following that text in order to undermine the seriousness and fatalism of Kracauer and Eisner’s classic studies and thus emphasizing that “even [Weimar cinema’s] tragic moments are not without tongue-in-cheek, sign of a culture finally unable to take itself altogether too seriously.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 310.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema*, p. 14.

In contrast to Elsaesser's emphasis on the psychoanalytic play of vision and masquerade—hence the title's reference to the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary—Kaes turns to underlying social, political and military “wounds” dissimulated by this play, re-reading the most canonical Weimar films through the traumas of war and industrialization. Like Kracauer before them and in line with other contemporary scholars, both Elsaesser and Kaes have isolated here and in other texts, the importance of American slapstick as an outlet for “utopian as well as critical impulses” beyond the extremes of an ironic play of ornamental surfaces and the brute Real of trauma.<sup>43</sup> Kaes, in a phrase that recalls David Schwartz's dream of a slapstick hero saving Rosa Luxembourg, describes “American mass culture” as “offer[ing] a substitute revolution” one that reconciled a dilapidated Germany with the antagonistic features of a modernity that was in its good features and bad always American.<sup>44</sup> Both echo the approach taken by Hansen, Hake and others who understand slapstick in terms largely redemptive, its reception defined by intellectual wishful thinking, fantasy projection and an almost adolescent hero worship. Endlessly refracted within this intellectual hall of mirrors, the images of slapstick's play with machines, city streets, social tensions and the very forms of cinematic representation either resolve the polarizing antagonisms that eventually tore the Republic apart or else revel in them all the more traumatically. For every utopia-minded fan of Chaplin & Co. there was the diametrically opposing view of those like Weimar cinema's great sadist Fritz Lang, who would describe German audience's love for Chaplin in terms of “the potential for making things ridiculous and

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<sup>43</sup> Especially relevant, among these authors' many important texts on Weimar cinema, are Kaes' “Modernity and its Discontents: Notes on Alterity in Weimar Cinema,” *Qui Parle* 5 (Spring/Summer 1992), pp. 135-142; Kaes, “Mass Culture and Modernity: Notes Towards a Social History of Early American and German Cinema,” *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History*, edited by Trommler and McVeigh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. pp. 317-331; Elsaesser, “Film History and Visual Pleasure,” *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*, ed. Mellencamp and Rosen (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), pp. 47-84.

<sup>44</sup> Kaes, “Modernity and its Discontents,” p. 325.

for castigating our weaknesses.”<sup>45</sup> Echoing Lang’s take Lethen also appeals to slapstick to explain the automated quality of “cold conduct,” linking slapstick to the Dadaism of Walter Serner and the poetry of Brecht.<sup>46</sup>

Lang’s final Weimar film, *M*, could be easily read as the cinematic culmination of Germany’s antagonisms, with its “outsider” star Peter Lorre playing, in an Expressionist fashion, the twitchy embodiment of the *Kreatur*, a serial killer overwhelmed by the shaming judgment of the film’s characters and cold, alienating setting. Yet *M* was released the very same week as Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931) and according to Brecht’s colleague, the playwright Marieluise Fleißer, Lorre had much in common with Chaplin’s Tramp.<sup>47</sup> This was not a mere projection or interpretation as Lorre had, only a few months prior, played a Brechtian version of the Tramp in a landmark production of *Mann ist Mann*, further earning comparisons with Chaplin as well as Keaton in the press.<sup>48</sup> In the meantime between *Mann* and *M*, Chaplin had himself visited Berlin to much acclaim and controversy, meeting dignitaries and movie stars while also provoking intense political debate and discussion among all political parties, ranging from Communist Youth to whom he sent his greetings to National Socialists who, at Goebbel’s request, protested outside his hotel.<sup>49</sup> Keaton, too, would visit Berlin, and his films were similarly enjoyed by both Brecht and Fleißer, with the latter praising the star not merely as a shame-faced automaton, but as a fashionable gentleman.<sup>50</sup> *City Lights* was one of Chaplin’s most praised films, but it would also inspire important references in Brecht’s landmark text on politics and art in the age of

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<sup>45</sup> Fritz Lang, “The Artistic Composition of the Film Drama,” *German Essays on Film*, ed. McCormick and Guenther-Pal (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 117.

<sup>47</sup> Marieluise Fleißer, *Briefwechsel 1925-1974* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001), p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> Herbert Ihering, “Buster Keaton auf Deutsch,” *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht: Vier Jahrzehnte Theater und Film, Band II 1924-1929* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1959).

<sup>49</sup> Wolfgang Gersch, *Chaplin in Berlin. Illustrierte Miniatur nach Berliner Zeitungen von 1931* (Berlin: Argon, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> Marieluise Fleißer, “Ein Porträt Buster Keatons,” *Berliner Börsen-Courier* 569 (1927).



commodity capitalism, “The Three Penny Lawsuit,” and its plot would transform into the allegory of one of his most important plays of the thirties, *Herr Puntilla und sein Knecht Matti* [Mr. Puntilla and his Servant Matti]. While Lorre’s killer in *M* has been converted into the very icon of the decadence and doom of the Weimar Republic, a harbinger of both Jewish victim and Fascist psychotic, he circulated in a complex network of texts, images and concepts, linking filmmakers, artists and journalists along lines explicitly and implicitly drawn through slapstick cinema. Even Mickey Mouse has a cameo in *M* in the form of a display of dolls at a bakery.

As the case of Brecht’s re-writing of *City Lights*’ central fable suggests, it is precisely the middle ground between outsider and insider that slapstick cinema exposed, a ground upon which artists like Brecht re-functioned that cinema for the sake of a utopia less projected or dreamed and more concretely lived. While Brecht is the primary concern of my first chapter, the Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann is the focus of the third and it was Hausmann, responding to the utopian writings of Ernst Bloch, who reveals the stakes of this exceptional take to his friend, philosopher Salomo Friedlaender, “I must know how [Bloch] lived the utopia, otherwise he is an aesthete. [Walter] Serner’s [Dada manifesto] ‘Last Relaxation’ is deeper than any ‘spirit’ of utopia. And dance is power.”<sup>51</sup> Moving beyond aesthetics into the realms of the synaesthetic, especially in his famous Chaplin-citing dance performances, Hausmann distinguishes the turf of my research from that of Hansen, Hake and others. Hausmann, like Brecht, referenced Chaplin and Keaton not out of a frustration or fear with the present nor for the sake of fantastical escape, but because he thought utopia could be lived in the here and now: it could be read in manifestos, watched on movies screens and danced on stages. It is thus not a question of activity versus passivity, intellectual genuflection versus artistic project because slapstick’s citation across

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<sup>51</sup> Raoul Hausmann, *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele. Raoul Hausmann in Berlin 1900 – 1933* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1998), p. 148-149.

media becomes novel, creative and powerful precisely when it proliferates across someone's career, as the example of Brecht's repeated yet always innovative appeal to Chaplin suggests. Benjamin and Kracauer's projective claims are best served in light of the experiments of their friends, peers and forerunners. Sigmund Freud's argument in his 1919 essay on the uncanny runs aground with the exceptional example of the grotesque humor of American Mark Twain, whose texts were often read by German critics as a forerunner to slapstick film. Writing in 1911 Georg Lukacs would celebrate the fantastical nature of cinema's transformation of reality by pointing to the example of Edwin S. Porter's *Dream of a Rare-bit Fiend* (1906), itself an adaptation of a Winsor McCay comic. Friedländer would describe his thought as "a synthesis of Kant and Chaplin" while it has been said by Stanley Cavell that Martin Heidegger, the great philosophical opponent of *Amerikanismus*, could best be understood by linking his 1927 opus, *Being and Time* to the physical incapacities of Buster Keaton.<sup>52</sup> Heidegger's most famous student Hannah Arendt claimed Chaplin's Tramp as Jewish, the very emblem of the stateless and "suspect" refugee.<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, who would befriend Arendt during their exile in Paris, would instead see in the Tramp the petit-bourgeois mannerisms and broken masculinity of Hitler, a division between Tramp and dictator that Chaplin himself would later adopt for *The Great Dictator* (1940). Even Joseph Roth would, despite his immunity to Lloyd and suspicion of Chaplin, praise the brutal satire of family honor in Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923).<sup>54</sup> Less a discursive reflection and more an interlocking of text and image, body and animation, the Weimar encounter with slapstick is here

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Lisbeth Exner, "Mynona: A Grotesque Humorist," *Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870-1940*, ed. Kort (Munich: Prestel, 2004); Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film," *Cavell on Film*, ed. Rothman (Albany: SUNY Press), pp. 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah," *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, edited by Gottlieb (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 69-90. See also Liliane Weissberg, *Hannah Arendt, Charlie Chaplin und die verborgene jüdische Tradition* (Graz: Leykam Verlag, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> For Roth's critique of Chaplin see *Werke: Vierter Band*, edited by Kesten (Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1991), pp. 165-166.

understood through both its intellectual syntheses with figures ranging from Kant to Benjamin as well as through synasthetic powers merging the anarchic laughter of audiences to the exuberant language of critics. Operating something like the anarchic desiring-machines and radical tools that Gilles Deleuze found in the Dadaism of Keaton and Surrealism of Chaplin, *Weimar Slapstick* is animated by energetic conjunctions and impossible connections. Moving across nations as much as it moves across languages, the dissertation surrounds its central dyads (Chaplin-Brecht, Felix-Theobald, Keaton-Hausmann and Lloyd-Bois) with a chaotic apparatus of other circulating names and concepts, the many “ands” between a mechanical, innervating sputtering that, with each German “stammering” of an American gag, insists on the creativity of understanding, the space of a hyphen simultaneously marking repetition and difference, re-functioning and mimesis.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to the pernicious, monolithic conjunction of recent memorials to Weimar culture, here there are several “ands” instead of one.

#### **IV. Eccentrics and Grotesques**

*“I used the vacation period for painting, taking pleasure in being a poor correspondent, something I might indulge myself in completely if I were able to be a pure artist, which is to say an eccentric. What a prospect!” — Oskar Schlemmer (1928).*

A highly specific, cross-cultural iteration of Peter Gay’s “outsider as insider,” it is the figure of the eccentric that best defines slapstick’s heroes along with their uncanny Weimar doppelgängers, whether it be Brecht’s Galy Gay, Hausmann the deadpan dancer, Bois’s “German Harold Lloyd,” or the Felix-inspired hero of Leni and Seeber’s “Rebus” films, Theobald. The eccentric is not a hero to be valorized nor vermin to be extinguished, but rather occupies an ambiguous place within a polarized field that is illuminated, made visible, feelable and thinkable in diverse ways. In fact it is precisely the eccentric’s capacity to elicit

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<sup>55</sup> On the centrality of “and” in Deleuze’s thought see Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, translated by Tomlinson and Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 58.

contradictory affects, desires and interpretations across this field that explains its special point of place. While the term has its origins in the Greek *ekkentros*, meaning “out of [ek] center [kentron],” it had something of a renaissance in the nineteenth century and above all in industrializing England, where “eccentric” named all those comic figures out of step literally or figuratively with the march of progress.<sup>56</sup> Fighting against that march, John Stuart Mill would in his *On Liberty* criticize the loss of individuality among “crowds” and “masses,” claiming that “In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric.”<sup>57</sup> Charles Baudelaire would develop a similar argument in the same decade, his specific version of the eccentric—the dandy—appearing, like “the setting sun,” against “the rising tide of democracy, which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level.”<sup>58</sup>

In the next century, ever more standardizing, the eccentric would return with a vengeance, in a merging of the newest arts with the anachronistic tramps and dandyish deadpans of slapstick. The curious paradox of Chaplin’s world-wide success is the eccentric temporality of his character, on the one hand praised as the very icon of the modern while on the other demonstrating a comic unwillingness to go along with the present, whether in his fastidious habits, his class-merging costume or in his playful response to the physical demands and psychological requirements of labor. At once the icon of the masses as well as stubborn outsider, the Tramp was the very model for a new aesthetics developed by one of the many avant-gardes

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<sup>56</sup> The canonical literary document here is Edith Sitwell’s *English Eccentrics* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1980). For the term’s French appropriation see Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Utilitarianism* (New York: Bantam, 2008), p. 86.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Dandy,” *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art & Artists*, translated by Charvet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 422.

fermenting after World War I: the Soviet Union's FEKS, the Factory of the Eccentric Actor.<sup>59</sup> Equating "Americanisation of the theatre" with "ECCentriSM," FEKS' manifesto called for an eccentricization across the arts, privileging the technology of cinema and the humor of the circus as its guiding lights and like so many avant-gardes before and after it, hailed Chaplin as a kindred spirit: "The actor—mechanised movement, not buskins but roller-skates, not a mask but a nose on fire. Acting—not movement but a wiggle, not mimicry but a grimace, not speech but shouts. *We prefer Charlie's arse to Eleonora Duse's hands.*"<sup>60</sup>

Chaplin put on skates for the two-reeler *The Rink* (1916), which was the very first of his Tramp films to play in Germany after the long embargo on American films during the war, a film released the same year, 1921, FEKS published their manifesto. The term "eccentric" had already been used by German critics before the war, for example in Walter Serner's 1913 essay "Cinema and the Desire to Watch," where "the despaired raggedness of an American eccentric and his furious dives through open windows" is only one of many crass pleasures offered up to cinematic voyeurism, what Serner calls "the eye's desire."<sup>61</sup> Among Germans, "eccentric" was a term of art that, as in its English variants, bordered on the comic, absurd or peculiar. An exhaustive reading of the archive of journalistic and intellectual coverage of American film, coverage written and published on a nearly daily basis, reveals it to be a term used most often to describe slapstick comedians like Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd as well as cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse. Both an adjective to describe a strange kind of behavior as well as a noun to enact that behavior's personification and embodiment, "eccentric" expressed the same kind of anachronism as in prior eras. Here Benjamin is especially relevant, writing in his "Artwork"

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<sup>59</sup> "Eccentrism," *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, edited by Taylor and Christie (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59.

<sup>61</sup> The essay is anthologized in *German Essays on Film*, p. 19.

essay about the power of American slapstick and cartoons to “trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies” in “psychotic” play free of the social constraints and civilizational repression diagnosed earlier by both Mill and Benjamin’s great obsession, Baudelaire.<sup>62</sup> Chaplin and Mickey had their “forerunner” in “the figure of the eccentric. He was the first to inhabit the new fields of action opened up by film...” Inspired by the re-invention of the term by FEKS after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1928, Benjamin would elsewhere link the eccentric to something he called “negative expressionism”: “Eccentrics. Clown and natural peoples—sublation [Aufhebung] of inner impulses and of the body-center [Leibzentrum].... Dislocation of shame. Expression of true feeling: of despair, displacement. Consequent discovery of deep expressive capacity: the man remains seated as the chair on which he sits is pulled out from under him....”<sup>63</sup> Benjamin’s later claim about slapstick and Disney can only be understood in light of this relay of influence running from Chaplin’s films to FEKS to Berlin to the multiple locations in exile where the “Artwork” essay was written and re-written. Dislocating and displacing the shame associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit* this is an expressionism that never wallows in anxiety or dread, but rather finds a primitive enjoyment paradoxically associated with the modern gags of slapstick. Indeed, the single example of this never developed fragment, the gesture of a man still sitting despite his chair being pulled away, was the most famous gag of Buster Keaton’s comedian father, one of the many such gags developed within slapstick’s pre-history in vaudeville, knockabout and music hall.

As the fragment on “negative expressionism” indicates, eccentricity implies an intersection of the corporeal and the social, the affective and the political. Being eccentric means

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<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility: Second Version,” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* ed. Jennings et al (Cambridge: Belknap, 2008), p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften VI* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 132.

occupying an uncanny relationship to the center of the body, whether it be body politic or grotesque body of drives and symptoms. Chaplin's corpus moves out of step with both social norms as well as behavioral ones, indeed shows the intimate link between the two and he does this only because of what the poet and critic Claire Goll called "his eccentric, mathematically construed movements, the psychological ones and the bodily ones."<sup>64</sup> By being at once mathematical and eccentric comedians like Chaplin refuted Sloterdijk's claim about the Weimar subject's "ceas[ing] to expose themselves as eccentrics to the attention and mockery of others." The social anthropology of Helmut Plessner, perhaps the foundational theory behind Lethen's *Cool Conduct*, privileged eccentricity as the essential state of humanity, an inherent artificiality and distance from the natural compensated by a "second nature" of rules and codes. While Lethen privileges the shaming farce that comes with violating these rules and exposing one's self stripped of this second nature, its other the "tragic hero" of cool conduct, he ignores a crucial feature Plessner developed in his theory in the late thirties in a text entitled *Laughing and Crying*.<sup>65</sup> There Plessner focuses on the most intimate form of eccentricity, that between mind and body, with laughter being both a bodily response of "disorganization" in the face of nonsense, ambivalence or meaninglessness and at the same time being an assertion of the eccentric nature of his being, "to be able to deal with something at the point where nothing further can be done."<sup>66</sup> Laughter cannot be confined to mere *Schadenfreude*, but, in a sense, links laughter and laughed-at as unified by a shared division, a common cause of eccentricity. There are, in Plessner's account, two sides to laughter, both the anarchic disruption produced and

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<sup>64</sup> Claire Goll, "American Cinema," *German Essays on Film*, p. 51.

<sup>65</sup> Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 66. Helmut Plessner, *Laughing and Crying*, translated by Churchill and Grene (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). See also Bernard Prusak, "The Science of Laughter: Helmut Plessner's *Laughing and Crying* revisited," *Continental Philosophy Review* 38 (2006), pp. 41-69.

<sup>66</sup> Plessner, *Laughing and Crying*, p. 142.

signified by bodies, but also the assertion of a capacity to think through this anarchy at the moment in which thought itself seems most difficult. Throughout this dissertation, these two sides of laughter will be constantly at work, both the de-stabilizing side and the more scientific, with the two playing off each other to endlessly productive effect. One can only think when one is on one's feet, feet always on the verge of slipping on a banana peel. While Plessner would, as Lethen emphasizes, be greatly influenced by the political theology of Carl Schmitt (and vice versa), figures like Chaplin or Keaton suggest a state of eccentricity as opposed to a state of exception, one in which hard and fast distinctions between friend and enemy, sovereign and subject blur and destabilize and no more so than during eruptive moments of laughter. Schmitt's recent resurgence among scholars, aided in no small part by the work of Giorgio Agamben, has emphasized such distinctions at the service of their collapse through a melancholic critique of sovereign authority as an exceptional, extra-legal space that is, at the same time, the law's singular domain.<sup>67</sup> While Agamben collapses such distinctions via sovereignty's victim-object, exemplified by Roman law's *homo sacer* and the *Musselmann* of the concentration camp, the figure of the eccentric suggests an alternative account for thinking the relationship between norm and outsider, sovereign and subject. The eccentric relates to the law through both overwhelming, literalist obedience as well as transgressive violation and in so doing suggests a host of liberating modes of excepting one's self from law, often revealing the law's own obscene, eccentric underside, the grotesque cops that Chaplin would call a pre-requisite for his comedy.<sup>68</sup> The world of slapstick is not one of biopolitical saturation, but one of endless eccentricity, in which the

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<sup>67</sup> See especially Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, translated by Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> According to Chaplin, "All I need to make a comedy is a park, a policeman and a pretty girl." See Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), p.159. For an account of jokes as installing a comic version of the state of exception see Paolo Virno, *Multitude between Innovation and Negation*, translated by Bertolotti et al (New York: Semiotext(te), 2008), pp. 67-167.



slapstick hero's victory is less an acceptance by those different from him or herself, but rather the triumph of eccentric difference over the forces of sameness.

Benjamin had first appealed to primitive modes of expression in his early neo-Kantian writings. Another neo-Kantian, Ernst Marcus would at the same time publish a landmark text, *The Problem of Eccentric Feeling and its Solution*, arguing that the sense of sight could not be understood purely on visual terms, but could only function in eccentric relation to the body's auto-affection as well as its haptic sensation of the world.<sup>69</sup> Marcus would influence Benjamin's friend Salomo Friedländer as well as Raoul Hausmann, who took the concept of "eccentric feeling" and ran with it even further, isolating beyond the human body a whole range of sensational media including the cinema, cabaret and marionettes. In Hausmann's various works, one finds living exempla of this synaesthetic translation, especially in two never-realized film scripts that bear the obvious traces of slapstick's combination of physical grace and dehumanization. Reversing Bergson's well-known account of laughter, Hausmann's Dadaist humor celebrates mechanical encrustation as a way of unleashing sensations across and between all kinds of objects and rhythms. Cinema was a model lesson in this synesthesia, a far cry from Walter Serner's early dismissal of "American eccentrics" and the ocular-centrism of cinematic pleasure. An eccentric not only experiences this world synaesthetically, but, with the aid of cinema and its own arsenal of effects, unsettles surrounding mise-en-scene and spectator, who itself becomes eccentricized.

There is another crucial element of eccentricism at stake here: the relationship between Hollywood and Berlin, between the United States of America and *Amerikanismus*. Miriam Hansen has, using the example of Kracauer's writings on slapstick, elaborated the concept of

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<sup>69</sup> Ernst Marcus, *Das Problem der exzentrischen Empfindung und seine Lösung* (Berlin: Der Sturm, 1918).

“vernacular modernism” to ask, on the subject of a link between American cinema in the twenties and the many global sites of its reception, “why and how an aesthetic idiom developed in one country could achieve transnational and global currency.”<sup>70</sup> Challenging the classicist model offered by Bordwell and others, Hansen seeks to “understand the material, sensory conditions under which American mass culture, including Hollywood, was received and could have functioned as a powerful matrix for modernity's liberatory impulses--its moments of abundance, play, and radical possibility, its glimpses of collectivity and gender equality.”<sup>71</sup> She emphasizes the capacity for the classical model of cinema to be fractured by both “lower” genres like slapstick as well as its displacement via international distribution, marketing, alteration, reception and criticism.

If *Weimar Slapstick* is an extension or example of vernacular modernism it also forces us to re-think that concept, pushing it beyond Hansen’s formulation of an “at once modernist and vernacular reflexivity.”<sup>72</sup> First, questions need to be asked beyond the realms of film production or spectatorship because in the Weimar context, as in any other, a markedly American genre like slapstick entered into ceaseless dialogue and exchange with other discourses, aesthetics and industries. This is a question of history as much as it is one of method, with the importance of a comparative, interdisciplinary approach that tracks slapstick’s movements in the most eccentric of German and German-speaking locations: architecture, journalism, philosophy, art, music etc. Although the questions asked by Hansen will be specifically addressed in my final chapter on the German film industry’s attempt to compete with slapstick in the case of Curt Bois, it will also require looking beyond that industry to the many sites in which a polymath like Bois circulated:

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<sup>70</sup> Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism.” *Modernism/Modernity* 6:2 (April 1999), p. 60.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.

cabarets, revues, salons, avant-gardist theaters and even stage shows preceding films like *City Lights* or *Safety Last* (1923). Buster Keaton was celebrated in a song by Friedrich Hollaender, “My Sisters Loves that Buster,” whose title was revised, in turn, by a cheeky critic as “Henri Bergson Loves that Buster.”<sup>73</sup> What does it mean to speak of slapstick as a song and above all a jazz-inflected song, one premiered by none other than Curt Bois’s sister, Ilse? Slapstick here merges with another essential facet of *Amerikanismus*, jazz, and this connection was even more directly made at the movies themselves, where first run premieres of the great slapstick features at Berlin’s many film palaces were only the ultimate part of a whole evening’s entertainment, including “eccentric” dancers, comic skits, musical fantasias and jazz-band accompaniment. While scholar Joseph Garnarcz has downplayed the significance of slapstick for German filmgoers, he forgets that the vast majority of short-films supporting the feature were American and that most of those were slapstick and cartoon comedies offering an array of beloved stars: Fatty Arbuckle, Larry Semon, Max Linder, Snub Pollard, Felix the Cat, the Inkwell Imps and many others.<sup>74</sup> German critics complained about the lack of a native cinema of the *Beiprogramm* [supporting program] and producers responded by turning directly to Americans, whether it be the American director of Bois’s never-completed “German Harold Lloyd” shorts, Bud Pollard, or the adoption of cartoon characters by Paul Leni and Guido Seeber for their *Rebus* shorts. American dominance in the short extended to the related form of the advertisement, whether that included promotional strategies like distributing Harold Lloyd’s glasses, holding Chaplin-imitation contests or sophisticated marquees displaying Buster Keaton’s deadpan, his eyes

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<sup>73</sup> Lutz Weltman, *Die Literatur* 1 (1930).

<sup>74</sup> Joseph Garnarcz, “‘Films that are applauded all over the world’: Questioning Chaplin’s Popularity in Weimar Germany,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8:3 (August 2010), pp. 285-296. See also his “Hollywood in Germany: The Role of American Films in Germany, 1925-1990,” *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*, edited by n Ellwood and Kroes (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), pp. 122-35.

animated by flickering lights. Benjamin noticed the continuity between the shocking experience of film and that of the advertisement, writing in his *One Way Street* "...just as the film does not present furniture and facades in completed forms for critical inspection, their insistent, jerky nearness alone being sensational, the genuine advertisement hurls things at us with the tempo of a good film. Thereby 'matter-of-factness' is finally dispatched, and in the face of the huge images spread across the walls of houses...sentimentality is restored to health and liberated in American style."<sup>75</sup> In contrast with Roth's resistance to such images, Benjamin revels in the distraction produced by jerks and shocks of both advertisement and film.

Distraction (*Zerstreuung*) is a crucial yet ambiguous concept of spectatorship circulating in landmark texts by Benjamin, Kracauer and Brecht, but there is one other potential element in the term's connotation of scattered attention and displaced identity: the distraction afforded by the joke. One of the great readers of Benjamin's concept of *Zerstreuung* Samuel Weber has elsewhere written of Freud's seminal account of jokes that "meaning only operates wittily inasmuch as it functions to distract and immobilize the inhibitory force of critical reason."<sup>76</sup> In effect, jokes and humor can only function if there is a distracting element, a way of avoiding the energy of intellectual or "critical" awareness so that the viewer is overwhelmed by the economic, machine-like efficiency of a joke's short-circuit, its "automatic process," to use Freud's term.<sup>77</sup> Yet in contrast to the eventual triumph of distraction as one of the most pernicious effects of an American culture industry intent on precisely this suspension of reason, the highly automated processes at work in slapstick's gags suggest a more dialectical relationship between our

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<sup>75</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by Bullock and Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 476.

<sup>76</sup> Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 132. For Weber's analysis of *Zerstreuung* in Benjamin see his "Mass Mediaurus; or, Art Aura, and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin," *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* edited by Ferris (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 27-49.

<sup>77</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), p. 188.

libidinal cathexis (*Besetzung*, literally “occupation”) in bypassing explanations and reasons, an investment that pays off in eruptive laughter, and our subsequent interest in understanding this automation’s shocking effect and underlying structure. Plessner’s emphasis on the relationship between laughter and thought is anticipated by Freud’s theory of jokes, where hearing a great joke cannot help but provoke in the listener an interest in understanding the joke and then, in a kind of repetition compulsion, in re-telling it over and over. This suggests how and why slapstick was the vehicle for Brecht, Benjamin and Kracauer’s interest in distraction as bringing together anarchic release from rational orders and simultaneously casting those orders in a new light, showing their contingency and arbitrariness through the very inevitability of the gag. As Kracauer would state, distraction “is meaningful only as improvisation, as a reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world.”<sup>78</sup> The paradox of slapstick is that it is most meaningful when it is most meaningless, nonsensically scattering temporal expectation or spatial order. This spectatorial distraction is perhaps most clearly evident in German critics’ reviews of slapstick features, where narrative arc or allegorical meaning were distracted by gags, which provoked in critics an obsession with both audience laughter and in understanding the intricacy and spectacle of chases, explosions and pratfalls.

The phenomena I call “Weimar Slapstick” is most visible in marginal genres and ephemeral moments between media and this is in part because slapstick itself was beloved not because of the totality or trajectory of its narrative, but because of small, explosive moments, divorced in the eyes of critics and artists from narrative or obvious or intentional thematic meaning. The best resource for understanding the responses of German audiences—film critics writing in newspapers, magazines and journals—suggests that very few spectators cared about

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<sup>78</sup> Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 327.

whether Chaplin would survive, Keaton get the girl or Lloyd achieve success, but instead became obsessed with the astounding nature of gags as well as the response of asking how these gags were accomplished and carried out. Recalling Hansen's double emphasis on the sensational yet reflexive quality of vernacular modernism, this obsession with the contingent moment was perhaps best revealed in the incredible descriptions of laughter heard at various Berlin movie theaters, which emphasized both the physical, explosive nature of that laughter as well as its collective echo, which sounded much like the natural disasters and sputtering machines on screen. Laughter could be an opportunity to revel in corporeal excess as much as it might point thinking in new, unforeseen directions.

There is still the question of what defines "American style." It is a mistake to posit this "style" against monolithic national cultures, in the manner of a unidirectional, un-reciprocal movement, from Hollywood to Berlin. Pushing the concept of vernacular modernism further it is important to recall the words of one of Hansen's interlocutors, Victoria De Grazia: "In its plasticity, the silent film was practically anational, its turn-of-the-century producers tossed and turned by the wild traffic crisscrossing both continents and penetrating the rest of the globe."<sup>79</sup> While Hollywood had clear advantages in winning its global appeal, one must highlight that in the case of a genre like slapstick it was often returning the favor, exporting to a nation like Germany a kind of comedy itself influenced by precisely this "crisscrossing." Germans, to this day still the largest ethnic import among Americans, played an important role in developing what Albert McLean called the "new humor" of forms like vaudeville, which contributed immeasurably to slapstick's cinematic development.<sup>80</sup> Whether it be "Dutch" comedians like Ford Sterling, Keystone's great star before Chaplin, the success of nineteenth century German or

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<sup>79</sup> de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, p. 289.

<sup>80</sup> Albert McClean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 106-137.

Viennese stage comedies like *Old Heidelberg* (one of Harold Lloyd's earliest roles on stage and Lubitsch's perpetual resource for his American films) or the well-known qualities of German-Jewish humor, German-speaking immigrants brought with them a rich comic culture influenced by forms and venues as diverse as the circus, cabaret and fairground. The irony of Weimar critics bemoaning German humorlessness in comparison with American slapstick, a complaint later ratified by the dismissals of authorities like Kracauer or Eisner, becomes all the more clear when slapstick's pre-history is examined. The archetype of the humorless German was a common trope in vaudeville theater and it should not be too surprising that Groucho Marx's mustachioed persona began as the German member of his brothers' multi-ethnic routines (Chico the Italian and Harpo Irish)—the Brothers grew up, after all, speaking the *Plattdeutsch* of Alsace-Lorraine.<sup>81</sup> Or that the creator of Felix the Cat was a man named Otto Messmer. If American culture was defined by its democratic mixture of ethnicities, the case of "Weimar Slapstick" suggests yet another feedback loop, where German audiences encountered the history of their own humor in uncanny form. A whole range of German comic figures and types were summoned to describe these explicitly American eccentrics: Schlemihl, Hanswurst, Struwelpeter, Simplicissimus and many others. If slapstick and its related terms of gag and business were untranslatable they, along with their heroes, were nonetheless transformed via their vernacular interpretation.

Nothing suggests this more than the German term for "slapstick" itself, *Groteskfilm*. Slapstick, like the related terms of "gag" or "business," is a uniquely untranslatable term, both in its alliterative punch as well as in its meaning and origin: two wooden planks hinged together to

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<sup>81</sup> On immigrant forms of popular culture in the context of New York City, see Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), especially pp. 57-94.

create a smacking sound to imply the violence of a fall or blow, a tool used by comics and clowns on stage for centuries. Grotesque has a far more complex history, but in the Weimar context it took on unique dimensions, with the modern grotesque best captured by Thomas Mann in a 1928 essay, a preface to a translation of Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent*:

...the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragic-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style—to the extent, indeed, that today that is the only guise in which the sublime may appear. For, if I may say so, the grotesque is the genuine anti-bourgeois style...<sup>82</sup>

Less straightforward than it would seem, Mann encompasses all modern art under the indistinction of dramatic categories handed down from antiquity, naming this merging of the comic and tragic “grotesque.” Yet the grotesque is only the means to an end, to another older aesthetic, that of the sublime. Finally, Mann intimates a link between this trajectory and resistance to the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, perhaps both as a class as well as in the aesthetic norms inherited from the nineteenth century. All this within the context of a preface for a novel by a sea-faring Pole writing within “Anglo-Saxondom” and subsequently translated into German. Yet it is precisely this cosmopolitan concatenation of styles, histories and aesthetics that defines the modern grotesque, its bringing together willy-nilly of disjunctive and disjointed forms and images. As Gregor Wedekind explains, “the grotesque holds the key to one of the most explosive problems of Western civilization: As a concept it holds fast to a single reality despite an increasing tendency to acknowledge diverse ethnic, cultural, and political spheres while breaking down categorical definitions.”<sup>83</sup> As Mann's own fumbling with the grotesque reveals, the context of the Weimar Republic and its particularly “modern art” revealed in the grotesque's capacity for montage. America itself was the most emblematic sign of this perverse regurgitation of things.

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas Mann, *Past Masters* (New York: Martin Secker, 1933), p. 240-241.

<sup>83</sup> Gregor Wedekind, “The Reality of the Grotesque: Paul Klee, Hugo Ball, and Carl Einstein,” *Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870-1940*, p. 43.



Perhaps the most celebrated architect of the Weimar years, Erich Mendelsohn, toured the great cities and factories of the United States in 1924, later publishing his photographs and expressionist-tinged captions in a 1926 monograph entitled *Amerika*.<sup>84</sup> Fighting against the “romantic prejudice” for this nation’s “altered, intensified dimensions of vital energy, space relationships and traffic,” Mendelsohn divides his observations into separate categories, with the penultimate section devoted to “The Grotesque,” containing blurred images of Times Square at both night and day and pathetic parks dwarfed by skyscrapers.<sup>85</sup> Representative of an entire genre of Germans reporting on American culture and industry, Mendelsohn’s language underscores, like Kracauer, the extreme polarity of this new nation’s modernity, the possibility of forming “a new reality, a new world, a new faith” as well as the all too present “gigantic nonsense” symptomatic of both the “exaggerated” and an “insanity” that “depriv[e] the American of any scale of comparison.”<sup>86</sup> To name slapstick and cartoon films *Groteskfilme* thus bridges diffuse, even contradictory legacies and concepts and this is especially fitting given the grotesque’s exaggerative mingling of the disjunctive or opposed. If the grotesque was defined by both its ridiculous scale and insane mixture of the incomparable, then what better word could describe America itself or its funhouse mirror, slapstick?

Beyond the eccentricity of star or of sensation there is also the eccentricity of mass culture in the advent of an advancing, ever circulating global capitalism. Although his reference

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<sup>84</sup> Erich Mendelsohn, *Amerika* (New York: Dover, 1993). The two canonical twentieth century accounts of the grotesque both echo Mendelsohn and Mann’s modern take: Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) and Wolfgang Kayser’s *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, translated by Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). While both are ostensibly concerned with the much larger history of the grotesque in Western arts each suggest all too relevant formulations, Bakhtin in his introduction’s reference to the “realist grotesque” (46) of Mann and Brecht and Kayser in his conclusion’s discussion of “a ‘technical’ grotesque in which the instruments are demonically destructive and overpower their makers” (183).

<sup>85</sup> Mendelsohn, *Amerika*, p. ix.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p. x.

point is the contemporary speed of globalization William Connolly's essay, "Eccentric Flows and Cosmopolitan Cultures," is here especially relevant.<sup>87</sup> Criticizing a "concentric image of culture" developed by Kant and inherited and applied by political scientists like Samuel Huntington, Connolly is suspicious of the unquestioned links this model establishes between individual, family and nation, an expanding and retracting circle that covers over the world consistently, with the United States operating as the most important "core state" within the wider circle of Western civilization.<sup>88</sup> By contrast, Connolly suggests focusing on the "numerous eccentric connections that exceed" the enclosures of the nation and the civilizational, especially when that nation is the United States. To do so,

is to appreciate how...concentric circles of political culture are complicated and compromised by numerous crosscutting allegiances, connections, and modes of collaboration. It is to lift the experience of eccentric culture above the automatic connotation of isolation, perversity, and marginalization that itself reveals the extent to which the concentric image prevails, doing so to identify eccentric flows of flight, compassion, connection, allegiance, identification, legitimacy, responsiveness, and responsibility that exceed the concentric image of how political culture does and must function.<sup>89</sup>

This eccentric image need not remain restricted to political culture since that culture is itself traversed by connections and interruptions from a host of realms. Although the examples privileged in this dissertation seem marginal to much of what we think Weimar culture to have been, Connolly's call to shift away from a center-margin distinction troubles the very stability of dichotomies at work in so much scholarship on that culture. In each chapter of this dissertation, a German-American pairing becomes the locus for tracing connections linking supposedly perverse or exceptional moments, suggesting an image of a network rather than that of a perfect circle. That this network was built by reference to the voracious expanse of the American culture industry in the form of cinema does not confirm the civilizational project of Huntington, but

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<sup>87</sup> William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 176-202.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 186.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 186.

rather suggests the ways that industry, despite its increasing rationalization, was open to diversion and distraction from its concentric desires. Indeed, one of the virtues of Hansen and de Grazia's accounts is an emphasis on that industry's own agonistic composition, one at play most visibly in its products, in this case the gags and deformations of comic shorts and features, which were offered to diverse audiences at home and abroad. To use the Deleuzian parlance dear to Connolly, every territorialization, every expansion of the circle, is open to endless de-territorializations and re-territorializations, eccentric flows that re-emerge in the most startling of shapes and forms. In the humanities, the triumph of the transnational as a concept for thinking beyond and between nations can be well served by Connolly's model, especially as it infects and displaces the essential terms of the concentric model: body, subject and nation.<sup>90</sup>

The Weimar Republic provides, in many ways, both the worst and the most ideal instance for applying this eccentric model. On the one hand, its atomized political body resolved itself with the most violently consolidated concentric nation-state in modern history. How can one speak of upsetting the distinction between center and margin when that distinction returned with such a disastrous vengeance in 1933 and afterwards? Yet it is precisely because the authority and legacy of a German nation was so unsettled, most famously during the years of the Republic, that this return itself became necessary. The post-modern preoccupation with nation as narration, as imagination (Anderson), dissemination (Bhabha) or impersonation (Elsaesser) is demonstrated even in this the most naturalizing of nation-state narratives, a narrative that Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe call "The Nazi myth."<sup>91</sup> Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe share Sloterdijk's

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<sup>90</sup> See *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Durovicova and Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>91</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006); Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 139-170); Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema*, p. 437; Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Nazi Myth," *Critical Inquiry* 16:2 (Winter 1990), pp. 291-312.

suspicion of teleological explanations of how and why Nazism appeared and instead privilege the necessity of that myth through the traumatically contingent formations of German identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Against this myth, which consolidated the German nation through the racial destinies of a *Volk*, the eccentric cannot but help appear as marginal, as precisely the “outsider.” Thus, on the other hand, those who were fortunate enough to escape discrimination, imprisonment or extermination lived on as exiles and the most famous after-life of the Weimar era was its survival in the form of writers, artists scientists, philosophers, architects and many others who lived extra-territorially, exiled from the place they considered their home and never fully welcome or comfortable in those worlds—London, Moscow, Tel Aviv, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles—that welcomed them happily or otherwise. In the specific context of film, these after-lives have been oft discussed, especially in the context of Hollywood, where genres like film noir, horror and melodrama were deeply marked by the past experiences of directors, actors, writers, set designers and technicians who had innovated these and other genres in Germany.<sup>92</sup> Connolly’s fear of a too tight distinction between center and margin, between national and transnational, is consequently realized in this contrast between the Fascist dilution of the Third Reich and the global dispersion of outsider exiles.

The problem with this view is that it ignores the ways that the cultures, and especially the cinemas, of both the Weimar and Nazi eras were themselves already extra-territorial. The complex and far from antagonistic relationship between Hollywood and Goebbels’ film industry has already been much analyzed, but it is also worth troubling the implied unity of German

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<sup>92</sup> See Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: Refugee Artists and Intellectuals from the 1930s to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Ehrhard Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

culture as it would impact Hollywood after 1933.<sup>93</sup> Not only would such impact precede that year in the case of early émigrées Lubitsch, Murnau, Dietrich, Jannings and many others, but Weimar culture was itself defined precisely by its cosmopolitan nature, by its integration of American mass culture with developing, innovative intellectual and artistic movements and discourses. As Patrice Petro has recently argued, one of the important “legacies of Weimar cinema” was precisely its “international” character, Berlin’s place as “a node within a network of global cities.... Via this network, images, performers, and personnel traveled across temporal and cultural boundaries to emerge as part of a new ensemble.”<sup>94</sup> Petro rightly asks the question of what defined the German context by which this node was itself situated, but comes up with the typical answer of Sloterdijk’s cynicism, applied to the neglected case of gender and its more famous depiction by exile filmmakers like Wilder and actors like Dietrich. As I have argued, cynicism was itself developed and critiqued directly out of American genres like slapstick and its seeming dominance among left-leaning artists and critics was more often than not questioned, made eccentric, precisely through this refraction. The status of exile was not a one-way-street of German artists infusing Hollywood with sexual angst or morbid doom, but effectively continuing the exchange that had given helped give rise to slapstick in the first place, extending and expanding the circuit initiated by immigration in the nineteenth century. Thus, all of the forthcoming chapters move beyond the Weimar context, linking the German reception of American culture to the American reception of German artists themselves in part Americanized by their interest in slapstick. Brecht befriended Chaplin, inviting the latter to the premiere of his

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<sup>93</sup> See Lutz Koepnick, *The Dark Mirror: German Cinema between Hitler and Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Carsten Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel: Walt Disney und Deutschland* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992); Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Aftermath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>94</sup> Patrice Petro, “Legacies of Weimar Cinema,” *Cinema and Modernity*, p. 240.

play, *Galileo*, while going so far as to influence his hero, laughing longest and loudest at a test screening for the bitter, pseudo-Brechtian satire, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). Brecht's sometime friend and sometime enemy, Adorno would be imitated by Chaplin at a party in Malibu. Curt Bois shared the screen with Buster Keaton, both of them reduced to comic supporting actors in a film (*A Loveable Cheat* (1949)) by another German-Jewish exile, Richard Oswald. Already before 1933 Paul Leni would infuse the first horror films for Universal with a perverse humor perhaps suggested by his admiration for the grotesque cartoons he had adopted for his *Rebus* films, which he would re-edit for American release. And Petro's preferred examples, Dietrich and Wilder, likewise played a role in this Hollywood chapter of *Weimar Slapstick*: when the former first arrived in Hollywood it was Chaplin who she wanted to meet first and Wilder would later cast Keaton as one of the "waxworks" in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Later in that film, faded star Norma Desmond puts on a show for her much younger lover, dressing up as Chaplin only to unintentionally transform, after some bad news, into the Tramp's doppelganger, a Hitler-evoking dictator. One of the defining features of the eccentric was precisely this ambiguity, the outsider as insider or insider as outsider, so that no position or identity, whether it be in exile or at home, in Third Reich or Weimar Republic, maintain its concentric stability in space or time. Norma is, after all, one of the greatest figures of exile in the history of cinema.



**Figure 4: Norma Desmond turns from Tramp to Dictator in an angry flash**

National Socialism, for its part, refused to allow Chaplin's *Modern Times* to appear on German screens. Chaplin would, however, appear as a "Jew" in the notorious *Hassfilm* [hate-film], *The Eternal Jew* (1940) along with one of his German-Jewish imitators, Curt Bois. Although the slapstick of the teens and twenties transitioned in both Germany and the United States into a variety of forms and genres within sound comedy, the German relationship to humor took an especially rancid turn. Aside from the benign, toothless and often insidious comedies of Heinz Rühmann and others, there was the official word of Goebbels, which came down hard on anarchic or subversive forms of humor at venues like the cabaret. In a public tête-à-tête with Berlin's *Kabarett der Komiker* [Cabaret of Comics] in 1939, Goebbels published an article in *Der Völkischer Beobachter* that asked the question, "Do We Actually Still Have Humor?" He answered the question in the affirmative, but with a tone and logic that was absolutely self-negating: "this nation has humor; but it follows the clear principle, learned from the Prussian army, that the only person who has a right to mock, to complain, or even to curse once in a while, is someone who is marching in step."<sup>1</sup> Any humor that has as its role model the Prussian army, that allows mockery only among those already "in step," cannot be considered properly humorous. Or as one of Weimar Germany's greatest writers for the cabaret, Kurt Tucholsky, put it only six months before his suicide, "The best definition of humor: 'Humor is when one nevertheless [trotzdem] laughs.' If that is the case, then I have lost it."<sup>2</sup> Those, like Rühmann, who executed Goebbels' right, granted by professional and often personal proximity to party officials, were the true masters of cynical reason, practicing a deliberately toothless deviation from the norm that was not only installed by that norm, but implicitly supportive of it.

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<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 248.

<sup>96</sup> Kurt Tucholsky, *Gesamtausgabe Texte und Briefe: Briefe 1935* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1997), p. 252.

Here the oft-criticized feature of Bakhtin's carnivalesque definition of the grotesque as reinforcing the status quo, as offering a kind of temporary release or escape, finds its most grotesque proof.<sup>3</sup>

Chaplin and Co. had offered a different model of humor in the twenties and for those who shared the star's assumed ethnic or political difference, the options were cruelly few: exile, silence or, as in the tragic plight of comic actor Kurt Gerron, death. Gerron had starred, with another great comedian, Siegfried Arno, in a series of slapstick shorts entitled *Beef and Steak*, directly inspired by the popular *Dick und Doof* [Fat and Stupid] series, as they were known in German, of Laurel and Hardy. Both were German-Jewish and both comic actors who specialized in physical and verbal wit on stage and screen, appearing in some of Weimar cinema's best remembered films as well as in lesser known, but still brilliant comedies. While Arno escaped the Nazis, becoming a comic bit player in films like Preston Sturges *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), Gerron stayed with the hope of still finding work in the film industry or in Berlin's many theaters. When war set in, he ran a cabaret in the concentration camp at Theresienstadt and was forced to direct a propaganda film designed to show to the world the supposedly humane conditions of the camps. The film was never finished and Gerron was, like most of the inmates at Theresienstadt, murdered in Auschwitz.

The footage Gerron shot survived as a document of Nazi deceit, appearing most recently in W.G. Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*, where an image of the eponymous character's mother is sought on a videocassette copy of the film, repeatedly screened in a film archive.<sup>4</sup> Like Gerron, his mother dies in Auschwitz, but the young Austerlitz successfully escapes and in a telling detail his final moment in Prague features a surprising cameo, recounted by his former nanny: "Vera also

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<sup>97</sup> See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

<sup>98</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2011), p. 173-174.



remembered the twelve-year-old girl with the bandoneon to whose care they had entrusted me, a Charlie Chaplin comic bought at the last minute, the fluttering of white handkerchiefs...”<sup>5</sup> A historical bookend to the image of David Schwartz saving Rosa Luxembourg, this image of a young boy escaping genocide while clutching a comic of Chaplin, widely reported to be Jewish by both fans and foes, links slapstick to the concluding trauma of the Weimar Republic’s collapse.<sup>6</sup> Between these two traumas, the one a missed revolution dreamed of and the other an all too real catastrophe escaped, there were appeals to slapstick that eschew melancholy or fantasy, engaging modernity otherwise. In contrast with the overwhelming melancholy of Sebald’s text, not to mention scholarly fixations on the twentieth century as a never-ending trauma which we must ceaselessly work through, here slapstick’s stars will function not as angels of history, but rather as object lessons for encountering modernity playfully rather than fearfully, with curiosity rather than fatalism.

## V. Conclusion

“What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.” – Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*.

Benjamin’s *Denkbild* concludes the already cited entry from *One Way Street* on the “American style” of the advertisement. Something of a motto for this experimental montage-text, its emphasis on a fragmentary experience based not on communication but the very medium of fragmentation, I take it also as a motto for *Weimar Slapstick*. I do so not only because of its obvious relation to *Amerikanismus*, and especially to that term’s more celebrated associations, but primarily because of Benjamin’s dual emphasis on reflection and sensation. Once again indicating that *Amerikanismus*’s status as a German projection is not the conclusion to a

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 173-4.

<sup>100</sup> See Arendt’s “The Jew as Pariah” as well as Joseph Halachmi, “And He is the Seed of the Jews,” *Griffithiana: Journal of Film History* 73/74 (2004), pp. 165-175.

discussion of this phenomenon, but rather its starting point, what makes an advertisement interesting as a kind of experience is not what it says or what it sells, but rather how it shifts beyond intentions or origins. How the very excesses used to communicate and commodify, in this case the conjoined features of animation, vibrant color and neon texture, spill out into the urban world to be reflected in new and surprising ways, in grotesque distortions and eccentric shapes. Indeed the advertisement is itself already the very distillation of this principle of excess since it is by its very nature not the original object being sold, but rather that object's both promise and copy, its deferral and simultaneously its desire. A displacement of both time and space, a scattering of sensation across media and an intrinsically capitalist spectacle, the movement from Benjamin's question to his answer, from "moving red neon sign" to "fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt," the very content of this passage, what it "says," only emerges after this dialectical image forms in the reader's distracted mind. And what is this content? The reason advertisement is "superior" to criticism. Benjamin's language seeks to harness this superiority, to infuse his own criticism, concerned as it is with the capacity to reason, with the "American style" of the advertisement, a style that is nothing more than the ease by which it acts as media for linking matter, sensation and mind. This a perfect instance of a *Denkbild*, a "thought-image," which does not furnish thought with images supplied ready-made like evidence, but rather produces thought itself, criticism achieved only after passing through the crucible of what Benjamin later called "the one hundred percent image space."<sup>7</sup>

It is not coincidental that Benjamin would soon develop modes of criticism in dialogue with the "image space" of American comic cinema, from Chaplin, Mickey Mouse and Laurel and Hardy. Nor that he, above all Weimar figures, will appear as a cameo throughout this

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<sup>101</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1930* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 217.

dissertation, as a friend of Brecht, a fellow member of the avant-garde *G* group with Hausmann, a fan of Disney and as a commentator on Curt Bois's generation of white-collar workers. The lack of an origin and subsequent capacity for translation detected in the American advertisement would itself be translated in the later "Artwork" essay as the famous lack of aura in film, the essay's primary examples bridging Soviets Eisenstein and Vertov with Hollywood comics Chaplin and Mickey. Although I follow the inspired analyses of these and other American references in Benjamin's thought by Hansen, Esther Leslie, Tom McCall and others, that thought will be less important as a subject matter than as a method, a guiding principle for my own criticism.<sup>8</sup> Following Benjamin, I analyze slapstick as reflected, important for Weimar audiences and artists not because of the message of a film or some original intention rooted in the dynamics of American filmmaker or industry, but in the most ephemeral, shocking and "fiery" of moments. These sensational, corporeal or kinesthetic dimensions, of such interest among film theorists in the last decade, do not circulate hermetically in a closed circuit between screen and spectator, but drift and transmute endlessly: in songs, dances, designs, paintings, montages and, of course, advertisements. And as Benjamin intimates, it is the very movement between these forms, the conjunction produced by diverse interests in slapstick, that undermine that more pernicious "and" otherwise dominating much of what falls under the name of "Weimar culture." Recalling Herbert Bayer's *Kinogestaltung* and its own advertising logic, we are not so much interested in what a Harold Lloyd film "says," but how it transforms when cited, how it might be creatively or critically interpreted.

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<sup>102</sup> Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, (New York: Verso Books, 2004); Tom McCall, "'The Dynamite of a Tenth of a Second': Benjamin's Revolutionary Messianism in Silent Film Comedy," *Benjamin's Ghosts*, edited by Richter (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. pp. 74-94.

No one approach need be restricted to itself and throughout what follows I emphasize different ways of talking about slapstick. Since the fundamental terrain of these chapters is, like Benjamin's advertisement, reflected, the intention of filmmakers or of movie studios is translated by agreements between American companies and German distributors, whose publicity material adapted American techniques for German audiences in a variety of ways. And this translation is subsequently transformed by the citation or interpretation of writers and artists, everyday audiences or even other filmmakers. This emphasis on spatial eccentricity goes hand in hand with a temporal eccentricity, of looking at many of these inspiring slapstick works not only through contemporary scholarship or recent literature, but also through increasingly rich theoretical scholarship on the phenomenon on the comic as it touches on a variety of issues in critical and cultural theory, including legacies of Marxism, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. Both slapstick and Weimar culture themselves took part in the development of such legacies, forming the examples and approaches that lay the groundwork for many of my own methods and questions. In the spirit of Benjamin's model of criticism, especially in the Kantian sense which informs the citation above, I am interested above all in the *conditions* by which we think the culture of the Weimar Republic, the essential slapstick films of Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd and the historical interpenetration of the two. While this critique is developed out of an extensive archive of materials, the emphasis and tone are as refracted as the objects under investigation, objects that are by their very nature open to alteration and estrangement. The shift from slapstick to *Groteskfilm* is as fraught, as open to eccentricity, as the historical leap from the twenties and thirties to the present. If the very term "Weimar Slapstick" is to have any concrete meaning or significance then it is precisely as a way of re-thinking these conditions, of opening them up to alternative temporalities and transnational spacing.

As a rebuke to the *volkisch* logic of a question like the one posed by Goebbels Theodor Adorno asked a related question in the aftermath of World War II: “What is German?”<sup>9</sup> Although Adorno locates the catastrophe of Nazism within a specific intellectual and cultural history, he nonetheless insists, “It is uncertain whether there even is such a thing as the German person or a specifically German quality or anything analogous in other nations. The True and the Better in every people is much more likely that which does *not* adapt itself to the collective subject but, wherever possible, even resists it.”<sup>10</sup> Adorno has become infamous for his suspicions of American popular culture yet in this essay he decries German “arrogance toward America” as a way of effectuating adaptation to a collective, and most recently fascist, “subject.” In a sense, what is “true and better” among the figures here analyzed is the way American elements became the means to carry out this subversion in a moment prior to the diagnosis of culture industry, a diagnosis that would sentence much of Hollywood cinema in its classical age to the fixed categories of ideological indoctrination and simulacral deception. In a fragment from Adorno’s collection of *Denkbilder, Minima Moralia*, he gives a name to the figure that refuses such adaptation: “For the course of the world is distressed [verstört]. Whoever cautiously adapts to it, thereby makes oneself a participant in the madness, while the eccentric alone would stand fast and hold back folly [Aberwitz].”<sup>11</sup> For Adorno’s generation, slapstick taught that this command was founded on folly itself, that standing fast could take the form of an absolute refusal as much as it might be an overzealous adaptation, one that overwhelmed the existing order with unintended effect and cheeky mischief. An eccentric moves uneasily yet freely between

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<sup>103</sup> Theodor Adorno, “On the Question: ‘What is German?’” translated by Levin, *New German Critique* 36 (Autumn 1985).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>105</sup> Adorno, *Minima and Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by Jephcott (New York: Verso Books, 1989), p. 200.

seemingly cohesive and fated ideologies and identities and is thereby in a good position to undermine their presumed solidity or necessity, to open up experience to distraction and shock. If the Weimar legacy still touches us today then it will be measured by how much this eccentricity allows us to play with a world still very much “distressed.”

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LUMPENPROLETARIAN GESTUS, OR, BRECHT RE-FUNCTIONS CHAPLIN

#### I. Introduction

*"Today is the time of the little people. One looks like the other.... In Germany only politicians from the bar-stool come forward. One must be beloved in order to waltz through the bars otherwise one comes to nothing. But those who can are mindless."* — Walter Rathenau, as recounted by Count Harry Kessler in his diary (1919).

During his European victory lap in 1921 Charlie Chaplin arrived in Berlin amid the most peculiar of circumstances: he was completely invisible to the city's residents. The Tramp's rise to global stardom was timed with the escalation of war and the concurrent German embargo on the vast majority of foreign films. While German word spread about Chaplin's popularity within avant-garde circles and among journalists reporting from abroad after the war's conclusion, his films did not appear with any regularity or notice until 1922, only a few months after the star arrived by train in Berlin. As he remarked in his frank account published the following year, *My Trip Abroad*, "They don't know me here. I have never been heard of. It interests me and I believe I resent it just a bit."<sup>1</sup> Chaplin's experience of the city was, nevertheless, quite typical of his travels in Europe, his activities including a few nights at the theater, a nightclub encounter with the flirtatious star of Lubitsch's *Madame Dubarry* (1919), Pola Negri, and a visit to the slums in Berlin's *Scheunenviertel* [Barn Quarter]. Speaking of the latter, Chaplin remarks "What a picture could be made here!" and drinking beer on the Ackerstrasse, notorious for its seedy squalor, he encounters a few of the characters who inhabited this impoverished world: "My friend paid the check quickly with small change and hustled me out, telling me of the hard faces and criminal

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An earlier version of this chapter was published as "Brecht, Chaplin and the Comic Inheritance of Marxism," *The Brecht Yearbook* 35 (2010), pp. 3-22.

<sup>106</sup> Charlie Chaplin, *My Trip Abroad* (New York: Harper, 1922), pp. 113-123.

types who were watching. He's probably right, but I love those poor, humble people.”<sup>2</sup> Later the unrecognized star drives past “many cripples with embittered, sullen looks on their faces... These sights you will find on every side in Berlin.”<sup>3</sup>

Chaplin was not alone among Berlin’s visitors and residents in showing a fascination with this peculiar cast of characters. Indeed such “sights,” mixing the “humble” and the “hard,” the “criminal” and the “cripple,” were one of the great obsessions of German culture during the Weimar era, from the traumas of the post-war, post-revolutionary period of inflation to the desperation of the Republic’s final years. Infamously subsumed under the label “degenerate” within National Socialist discourses on art, this type was visually exposed with all its ambiguous abjection among Dadaists, Expressionists and feuilleton caricaturists. It found its literary expression in Franz Biberkopf, the ex-inmate hero of Döblin’s montage novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, but might also be read about in the plays of Arnolt Bronnen, the cynical reportage of Erich Kästner or the sentimental drawings and stories of Heinrich Zille. Zille’s stories, in turn, contributed to the film genre of the *Zillefilm*, yet these films were not alone in turning to marginal, fringe and criminal figures among the urban masses, embodied by actors well disposed to portray the most eccentric types among the Weimar underclass: Peter Lorre, Max Schreck, Fritz Rasp, Siggi Arno, Alexander Granach and Reinhold Schünzel among others.<sup>4</sup> Echoing Chaplin’s filmic interest in capturing the “sights” of Berlin’s slums, painters, writers, actors and filmmakers found among Germany’s most degenerate citizens endless aesthetic opportunities for empathy and critique, fascination and fear.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> It is here worth mentioning Schünzel’s performance in and direction of the film *Das Mädchen von Ackerstrasse* (1919), which gives some (melodramatic) sense of the world Chaplin encountered during his trip.



Few artists plumbed the depths of Germany's most eccentric "little people" as complexly as Bertolt Brecht. Indeed Brecht's continual interest in these diminutive yet disgusting figures, existing simultaneously at the center and margin of a nation consumed by war, rationalization and economic instability, was nourished under the sign of Chaplin himself and above all, by the star's desire—revealed in his Berlin visit—to capture trampish figures through the most technological of means: the distancing, doubling gaze of the camera. Despite Brecht's primary labors as an artist in this period and after—playwright, dramaturge, poet and theorist—already in 1923 he revealed the importance of Chaplin and of his particular cinematic art for the development of epic theater. His only credit as a film director, Brecht collaborated that year with two crucial figures in his career, co-director Erich Engel and Bavarian clown Karl Valentin, on the slapstick short *Mysteries of a Barbershop* (1923), the film's title and primary setting already a clue to its slapstick inspiration.<sup>5</sup> The lanky, ridiculously thin Valentin lives and works in a barbershop plastered with cliché American phrases ("My house is my castle"), his first customer of the day a Chaplin look-alike, waddling in with a derby and a riding crop in place of cane. Turning around this tramp reveals herself as Liesl Karlstadt, Valentin's stage partner in the teens and twenties. Instead of Chaplin's tiny mustache, Karlstadt's face is clean-shaven—he (or she—the gender of the character is unclear) has a gigantic wart, which Valentin rips off with a pair of pliers and then eats. Pleased with the results, this tramp stands up and, instead of taking the derby out of Valentin's right hand, takes a plate held in his left and puts it on, only to immediately realize the foolish mistake while inspecting his or her self in the mirror. Although the short

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<sup>5</sup> See Denis Calandra, "Karl Valentin and Bertolt Brecht," *The Drama Review*, 18:1 (1974), pp. 86-98; William McDowell, *Brecht's Laughter: Humor in the Work of Bertolt Brecht and the Clown-Theater of Karl Valentin* (Dissertation, 1994). Later in *Mysteries*, Valentin deals with a trio of grotesque customers who likewise recall the rough and tumble world of American slapstick and most grotesque among them is none other than Max Schreck who a year earlier had played a different kind of grotesque as Orlok in Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).

moves on to other grotesque escapades, this gag of gestural confusion and mirrored correction points to a contemporary statement of Brecht's, linking these two great clowns, the Bavarian and the Londoner: "It is impossible to grasp how much Karl Valentin differs from the great Charlie, with whom he has more in common than an almost complete abandonment of mime and cheap psychological tricks."<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1: Valentin and Karlstadt in *Mysteries of a Barbershop***

In this chapter I argue that there is in fact much more "in common" between Brecht's epic theater and Chaplin's slapstick cinema, more in common than that between the star and any of his adulating fans from around the world, from mass audiences to modernist artists. This was a commonality nourished by influence, the influence of Chaplin's films on nearly every aspect of Brecht's theatrical labor. Chaplin was not momentarily celebrated at one point in Brecht's career, but was, as many Brecht scholars have noted, a continual reference, source of influence and teacher from the early twenties right up to his very last texts.<sup>7</sup> With each major turn in Brecht's

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<sup>6</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "Karl Valentin," *Das Programm: Blätter der Münchener Kammerspiele* (Munich: Verlag der Münchener Kammerspiele, 1922), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> See Joel Schechter, "Brecht's clowns: *Man is Man* and after," *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, edited by Thomson and Sacks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 90-100; Karsten Witte, "Brecht und der Film. Das zu Sehende Jedermann sichtbar machen," *Text und Kritik*, edited by Arnold (Stuttgart: Boorberg Verlag,

thinking and career there comes, almost like clockwork, a reference to Chaplin. This was an influence initiated in 1921 with Brecht's first exposure to the Tramp character and continued right on past the end of the Weimar Republic up until the point in which the student, during his Hollywood exile, influenced the teacher, encouraging the star's first turn away from slapstick in the corrosive satire *Monsieur Verdoux*. Watching that film with his friend and collaborator, composer Hanns Eisler, along with a gaggle of Hollywood suits, the two Marxists were the loudest laughers in the room. Reporting this and other encounters with the star Eisler would claim that Chaplin was not only Brecht's greatest teacher, similar to the role Schönberg played for Eisler; he was also one of the star's most expert spectators.<sup>8</sup> These lessons paid dividends across Brecht's life, right up to his very last text, posted on a bulletin board at the Berliner Ensemble in 1956, instructing his actors to offer English audiences "a pure pantomime, a kind of silent film on the stage" infected "with quiet strength, with our own fun."<sup>9</sup> After Brecht's death, Chaplin would send a telegram to the East German government's minister of culture, "shocked and grieved" by the loss of "my friend... whose genius [sic] in the theater was universally recognized."<sup>10</sup>

The final phrase in Chaplin's telegram also reveals how much separated the two men in their art and politics. While they shared much in their respective biographies—both being,

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2006); Wolfgang Gersch, *Film bei Brecht: Bertolt Brechts praktische und theoretische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Film* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> "Brecht's attitude [Haltung] to Chaplin was certainly different from my attitude to Schoenberg. Since Brecht was not the personal student of Chaplin and Chaplin didn't support Brecht when he was a young man. But they had something of this relationship. Brecht consciously took the attitude of a respectful spectator of a great theatrical genius.... And as Chaplin recounted many stories I have seldom seen so attentive and affectionate a spectator. Brecht was simply the best laugher.... Brecht was a complete Chaplin connoisseur [Kenner], thus one of the best Chaplin connoisseurs." See "Brecht und Chaplin," *Charlie Chaplin: Eine Ikone der Moderne*, edited by Kimmich (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 46-7.

<sup>9</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by Willet (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992), p. 283; Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 17*, p. 1296.

<sup>10</sup> Telegramm from Chaplin to Johannes R. Becher, Minister für Kultur Berlin (8/17/1956). Accessed at the Brecht Archive, *Akademie der Künste*, Berlin.

among other roles, autodidacts, philanderers, amateur musicians and Swiss exiles fleeing American anti-communism—the Chaplin who most interested Brecht was a Tramp stripped of all “psychological tricks,” of sentiment, happy endings or empathy. This was the Tramp at his rudest, most anarchic, a Tramp that resonated in its disruptive behavior with the cripples and criminals Chaplin himself encountered during his invisible sojourn in Berlin in 1922. By this time Chaplin’s films were already trying to “appea[l],” in Miriam Hansen’s words, “to a wider audience and romanticized the tramp persona in terms of individual psychology and human sympathy.”<sup>11</sup> Such appeal was antithetical to epic theater as it gestated over the course of the Weimar years and rather than understanding his recurrent appeals to Chaplin as an issue of influence, it is better articulated through Brecht’s own concept of *Umfunktionierung*, or re-functioning, where spectators become producers of knowledge and critique. Interpreting the Tramp required Brecht’s own spectatorial production with the playwright re-appropriating the former, divorcing him from pat narrative arcs, emotional appeals or naïve humanisms, simultaneously stripping him of all this excess baggage while deploying proclaimed epic elements within the estranging context of poems and plays, diary entries and programmatic essays.

As I will argue, Brecht’s *Umfunktionierung* of Chaplin consisted of two essentially related elements, both of which we have already detected in Chaplin’s account of his Berlin visit as well as Brecht’s appropriative commentary and citation in a work like *Mysteries*. With the Tramp’s comedy, his excessive imitations, his mechanical acting and vulgar appearance, Brecht found a template for new modes of anti-psychological performance and spectatorship, a uniquely cinematic template that privileged the playful testing of various postures and attitudes, visible

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<sup>11</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 76.

only when gestures broke down, shocking character, actor and spectator. This slapstick version of psycho-technics responded to the rhythms of an increasingly regimented, industrialized and rationalized social order, one that cinema was tied to both as a global industry and by virtue of the montage inherent to its vision. Yet it is only insofar as Brecht's Chaplinesque protagonists moved quite literally out of step with that rhythm, when their gestural disarray and corporeal chaos threw a wrench (or as Chaplin later iconically had it, themselves) into the gears of social-industrial machinery, that a nonsensical contingency implicitly at work in the political could be revealed. An unstated, material and hilariously meaningless means, Brecht's termed this contingency *Gestus*.

The formal requirements of *Gestus* produced a thematic, narrative and corporeal concern with the dregs, outcasts and eccentrics of the social order, those drifting between and across classes and parties, groups and identities. The Tramp's disjunctive mixture of the ostentatious dandy and the impoverished, opportunistic outcast, a disjuncture manifest in his antagonistic costume, habits and settings, would be echoed across Brecht's oeuvre, where petty criminals make the best bankers, bumbling packers are montaged into soldiers and servants become their drunken master's best friend. As this last example from *Mr. Puntilla and His Servant Matti* makes clear, such characters, gags and narrative elements of Chaplin's films would be oft adopted and subsequently re-functioned by Brecht in some of his best-known plays. It is the very movement between these positions, between obedience and transgression, belonging and rebellion, revolution and regression, that Brecht, following Chaplin, sought to make visible, screening this movement in a montage of estranged routines, broken habits and natural attitudes made comically unnatural. With this *Umfunktionierung* Brecht linked two of the great strands of influence on his epic theater, on the one hand his beloved *Amerikanismus*, the playful energy of

slapstick, boxing, jazz and the gangster film, and on the other, the Marxism that would increasingly interest him from the late twenties onward and in which he was a “permanent inventor.”<sup>12</sup> If the Tramp was, in Karsten Witte’s words, a baby born “between Marx and Darwin” then we might say that Brecht was born between Marx and Chaplin, engaging and re-functioning both at the point of their intersection.<sup>13</sup> This point has a name, one that haunted Marx in his own political writings and which likewise obsessed Marxist critics throughout the twentieth century and especially in the fascist aftermath of the Weimar Republic. That name is lumpenproletariat.

If the lumpenproletariat in Marx, and above all in his famously funny account of farce and history, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, is defined by its parasitic relationship to both proletariat and bourgeoisie, then we can revise the previous statement that it is “at work in the political”: what makes this figure so crucial is how unproductive and useless it is for the revolutionary purpose of Marx’s dialectics. It is precisely this lack of labor that provokes Marx’s angry humor in the *Brumaire* and above all reveals that what was an impasse in the teleology of his developing science becomes, for his Chaplin-obsessed student Brecht, the very means for making the political comically visible. The lumpenproletariat and its problematic returned with a vengeance during the Weimar Republic and, in particular, during its tragicomic conclusion, when one of the “little people” noticed by Walter Rathenau became all too “beloved” by his peers. As Chaplin and Brecht turned to the topic of fascism and its diminutive, mustachioed dictator in the thirties and forties, the “point” or, better said, the pointlessness of the

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<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, “Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity,” *Critical Essays on Bertolt Brecht*, edited by Mews (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989), p. 246. On Brecht and *Amerikanismus* see Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht’s America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981) and James Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America*, (London: Methuen, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Karsten Witte, “Darwins Baby,” *Im Kino: Texte vom Sehen und Hören* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1985), p. 87.

lumpenproletariat, became increasingly important for both men when fighting fascism on screen and stage in Hollywood, befriending each other among a circle of exiled friends in common. The essential ambiguity of the lumpenproletariat becomes most clear in this link between the Tramp and the dictator—a link detected well before *The Great Dictator* (1940) during Chaplin’s Weimar reception—and if the latter sought the people’s love and admiration then the former achieved through his Brechtian re-functioning an entirely different attention. In contrast to the endlessly exchangeable and undifferentiated mass of “little people,” Brecht perverted such people, turned them eccentric, valueless and unproductive so that they could not be exchanged. Invisible and despised within most political discourses, Brecht found in these eccentrics neither heroes nor villains, but rather ambiguous eccentrics whose very degradation and contingent floating revealed the absent center of both body politic and political body, a lumpenproletarian *Gestus* where these two bodies most visibly overlapped. Whether it be Chaplin’s desire to film the “sights” of slums and cripples or Brecht’s telling use of a mirror in the opening sight gag of *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, the camera’s vision is doubled on both sides of the screen, refracted for spectator and actor, both of whom are shockingly confronted by themselves and the inherently political nature of their embodiment. Situating Brecht’s re-functioning of Chaplin within the historical aftermath of the Weimar Republic and the theoretical legacies of Marxism I will articulate a slapstick-infused epic theater as nothing other than *an operational aesthetic of the political*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The term “operational aesthetic” was coined by Neil Harris in his *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) and subsequently applied to machine obsessed slapstick comedies by Tom Gunning in his “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy,” *Classical Hollywood Comedy* edited by Karnick and Jenkins (Routledge, New York, 1995). Gunning suggests that this aesthetic had its apogee in the machine gags of Buster Keaton and indeed Chaplin, for the most part, rarely succumbed to the intricate or monumental machines so present in the former’s comedies. Yet, as I argue, the same fascination with how machines work, especially in making this knowledge available precisely when these

## II. Celebrating Chaplin

*“As a child, he was not so fond of Chaplin’s films; it was later that, without losing sight of the muddled and solacing ideology of the character, he found a kind of delight in this art at once so popular (in both senses) and so intricate; it was a composite art, looping together several tastes, several languages. Such artists provoke a complete kind of joy, for they afford the image of a culture that is at once differential and collective: plural. This image then functions as the third term, the subversive term of the opposition in which we are imprisoned: mass culture or high culture.”*  
— Roland Barthes.

Let’s return to the exceptional image of Chaplin unseen in Berlin. In only a few years, with the subsequent release of both the earliest and latest of his Tramp comedies Chaplin would become one of the most celebrated and discussed figures in Weimar Germany. If one opened a newspaper, attended a gallery or went to the movies it was all too probable that one would find that iconic, easily imitated image of the bowler-hat wearing, cane twirling and floppy-shoe shuffling vagrant. Chaplin’s Tramp was taken up as a cipher for understanding the power of cinema’s sight and its accompanying mass culture to express, occlude or alter the effects of capitalism, a power with which film, and above all American film and above all the Tramp, were uniquely equipped, at least in the eyes of interested German parties. Indeed soon after Chaplin’s unheralded visit the Tramp would not only become one of the most popular draws among German movie-goers—he would also become, as elsewhere, the most discussed figure associated with the cinema. Even before his arrival on German screens, Chaplin was celebrated by the Dadaists and proclaimed an official member of their Berlin chapter while being given tribute in the poetry of Yvan Goll and the essays of Goll’s wife Claire.<sup>15</sup> That tribute would explode among critics and journalists as Chaplin’s films from both past and present had their premiere at Berlin’s most spectacular movie-houses as well as in neighborhood cinemas like those depicted

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machines break down or dysfunction, is on display in Chaplin, but it is a world of socio-economic relations and causality rather than one of literal machines.

<sup>15</sup> See *Der Dada* 3 (April, 1920); Ivan Goll, “The Chaplinade: A Film Poem,” translated by Wensinger, *The Massachusetts Review* 6:3 (Spring-Summer, 1965), pp. pp. 497-514; Claire Goll, “American Cinema,” *German Essays on Film*, p. 51.



in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), where urban movie-going is represented by a boisterous audience crammed beneath a screen whose lower half clearly shows Chaplin's ratty shoes and stately cane. *My Trip Abroad* would be quickly translated into German as *Hallo Europa* and the embarrassing account of Chaplin's inconspicuous Berlin visit would be re-published in trade papers and publicity for each new Chaplin feature of the period: *The Kid* (1921), *A Woman of Paris* (1923), *The Gold Rush* (1925), *The Circus* (1928) and *City Lights* (1931). Chaplin's endless marriage difficulties were a constant feature of movie press gossip and many monographs would be devoted to Chaplin, both lousy biographies and sophisticated appraisals like those by *Die Weltbühne*'s Hans Siemsen, which featured a preface written by the star himself.<sup>16</sup> Nearly every notable critic would weigh in on Chaplin, from the appreciations of philosophers and critics Siegfried Kracauer, Bela Balazs, Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Karl Kraus, Carl Einstein and Walter Benjamin to insightful celebrations by feuilletonists and publicists like Erich Kästner, Alfred Polgar, Herbert Ihering, Willy Haas, Kurt Pinthus, Rudolf Kurtz and Kurt Tucholsky, who reported from Denmark on the one film kept off German screens, the Kaiser-spoofing *Shoulders Arms* (1918).<sup>17</sup> He would have a cameo in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* where a drunken Franz Biberkopf sees Chaplin "whisp[er] north-eastern German."<sup>18</sup> For many, Chaplin's success proved that film had finally joined the ranks of the other arts, putting a seeming end to the *Kinodebatte* [Cinema Debate] on film's potential cultural or

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Siemsen, *Charlie Chaplin* (Berlin: Feuer Verlag, 1924).

<sup>17</sup> See Siegfried Kracauer, *Kleine Schriften zum Film 1928-1933* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 28, 32-35, 41 and *Kleine Schriften zum Film 1921-1927*, pp. 269-270 and 421; Bela Balazs, *Schriften II*, edited by Diederichs (Munich: Hanser, 1985), pp. 215-216; Balazs, "Chaplin, or the American Simpleton," *October* 115 (Winter 2006), p. 53; Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah," *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, edited by Gottlieb (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 69-90; Theodor Adorno, "Chaplin Times Two," *The Essential Chaplin*, edited by Schickel (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2006), p. 270-271; Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel* (5/1931); Carl Einstein, "The Bankruptcy of German Film," *German Essays on Film*, p. 58; Erich Kästner, *Gemischte Gefühle: Literarische Publizistik aus der 'Neuen Leipziger Zeitung' 1923-1933, Band I* (Zürich: Atrium Verlag, 1989), p. 379-381; Alfred Polgar, *Kleine Schriften Band 2: Kreislauf*, edited by Reich-Ranicki (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004), p. 379-382, 392-397, 405; Kurt Tucholsky, "Chaplin in Copenhagen," *Die Weltbühne* (6/7/1927).

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Munich: DTV, 2006).

aesthetic contributions to German *Bildung*.<sup>19</sup> Some found in this art the very embodiment of youthful, modern American culture, while others saw him as a relative of German comic types like that of the “Nebbich,” “Schlemihl,” “Schildbürger,” or “Eulenspiegel,” and still others saw the Tramp as an international, even universal figure, capable of eliciting empathy among all peoples. Regardless of where one stood on this point, nearly all bemoaned the lack of a German equivalent in film comedy. Attempting to compensate for this lack there was for every German comic film actor a corresponding claim for a “German Chaplin” and the most successful among them, strangely enough a Russian named Arcady Boytler, would even stage this desire within the very plot of his slapstick short, *Boytler contra Chaplin* (1921), where his character tries to please a Chaplin-obsessed woman by adopting the star’s famous mask.<sup>20</sup> As in the United States, this “Chaplinitis” sparked a craze for mimicking that great mimic, the Tramp, with children’s contests held at cinemas as well as a prosecution by United Artists against a German copycat who, like many before him, lifted several Chaplin routines wholesale.<sup>21</sup> Not least was Chaplin taken up in political debates, consistently denounced by the National Socialists as Jewish while debated among the left as either socialist hero or Hollywood sell out, his comedies praised for their humane celebration of the poor and comic take-down of the rich or otherwise derided for

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<sup>19</sup> *Kino-Debatte. Literatur und Film 1909-1929*, edited by Anton Kaes (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978); See also Kaes, "The Debate about Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-1929)," translated by Levin, *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987), pp. 7-33; Sabine Hake, *The Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany, 1907-1933* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> For reference to Boytler as the “German Chaplin” see *Neue Illustrierter Film Woche* 7 (1924), p. 109. Boytler’s career is worthy of its own study: Moving from Moscow to Berlin to Mexico, the actor starred in Eisenstein’s *Strike*, the Chaplin series in Berlin and subsequently became a path-breaking filmmaker in South America. Although only one of his Boytler films survives (*Boytler im Lunapark* (1922)), the censor titles for *Boytler contra Chaplin* reveal the film’s concern with Chaplin imitation. I thank Paul Dobyrdon for sharing this material with me.

<sup>21</sup> See *Lichtbild-Bühne* 209 (2/9/1926). On Chaplin imitation and its relationship to the Tramp’s mimetic faculty, see Jennifer Bean, “The Art of Imitation: The Originality of Charlie Chaplin and Other Moving-Making Myths,” *Slapstick Cinema*, edited by King and Paulus (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 236-261.

refusing to take a concrete position on the communist question, the poverty of the Tramp inherently overwhelmed by the ostentatious wealth of the nouveau riche star.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 2: Cinema itself is represented by Chaplin in Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City***

Beyond the presence and politics of his films Chaplin himself would unwittingly play a role in these debates with his triumphant return to Berlin in 1931, which was a part of his second European tour. Although Chaplin would, in his autobiography, leave out the details of his central European travels his time in Berlin and Vienna were, for many, highly memorable. Indeed, the first words he ever recorded for sound cinema were “Guten Tag,” captured in Vienna for a newsreel on the star’s European trip. Like his *Kid* co-star Jackie Coogan seven years before him, Chaplin was greeted with a massive, near riotous crowd as he arrived by train in Berlin. He met movie stars Hans Albers and Marlene Dietrich, talked economics with Albert Einstein and enjoyed an affair with the cabaret dancer and film actress La Jana. In Vienna, he was to meet

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<sup>22</sup> According to Erich Fromm’s survey of working and white collar classes, Chaplin was a favorite especially among the former. See Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). But he was also criticized in leftist newspapers like *Vorwärts*, with columnists claiming “This kind of comedy succeeds foremost because it in no way demands that the audience think.” Quoted in Bruce Murray, *Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 34.

with Sigmund Freud, but due to the latter's sickness, this potentially momentous happening never took place. There were protests outside the Adlon by socialists enraged by Chaplin's constant police protection as well as a counter-protest of Nazis organized by Joseph Goebbels. Unemployed film workers demanded and eventually received his audience and later in Vienna a Tramp lookalike waited outside the star's hotel, looking for his big break. Chaplin visited Berlin's depression-era slums, attended working class theaters and was given a tour of the city's prisons. He got into trouble after a conversation with delegates from the Communist Party of Germany when Chaplin sent his best wishes to the nation's Communist youth, a widely reported statement for which the star would have to apologize, admitting his basic ignorance of German politics and of politics more generally. He claimed—despite all evidence to the contrary both on screen and off—to be nothing more than an entertainer. As to why Chaplin left this action-packed visit largely out of his memoirs one can only speculate, but it is clear that the many controversies it provoked had as much to do with the specific popularity of the Tramp or the notoriety of Chaplin's celebrity as they did with the political tinderbox that was Weimar Berlin in the early thirties.<sup>23</sup>

Chaplin was not the only slapstick star to visit Berlin in this period—his two primary competitors Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd also came to the city, but neither came at all close to the level of scrutiny and controversy provoked by their more popular rival. This was not simply because of Chaplin's celebrity, but because of the specific resonances his Tramp comedies had with the situation of depression-era, pre-fascist Germany. Despite the many intriguing responses the Tramp provoked in the United States, England, France or many other

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<sup>23</sup> For accounts of Chaplin's two Berlin trips see David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (New York: McGraw & Hill, 1985), 287-289 and 429-431; Kenneth Lynn, *Charlie Chaplin and his Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 262-263, 347-348.

nations, there is indeed something uniquely revealing about his German reception. While this is already clear from the example of Chaplin's actual reception during his visit it becomes even clearer when one turns to the abundant scholarship on this topic. Wolfgang Gersch published a monograph on Chaplin's week in Berlin, gathering together articles and caricatures from liberal, socialist, fascist, communist and trade presses.<sup>24</sup> Preceding Gersch were two collections of German writings on Chaplin, with the vast majority selections from writings of the Weimar era and its aftermath.<sup>25</sup> Film scholars have followed suit. Miriam Hansen has developed sophisticated readings of the role Chaplin played in the redemptive, messianic philosophies of Kracauer and Benjamin while Thomas Saunders has isolated a similarly redemptive streak among other left-liberal critics, "reflect[ing] the grasping after straws of a generation convinced by war of the death of God and humankind's inhumanity to itself. Chaplin symbolized the possibility of meaning in a world which had lost its sense of direction."<sup>26</sup> Like Saunders and the "wishful thinking" discussed in his historical account, Sabine Hake focuses on the projective nature of Chaplin's German reception, yet she re-reads the Tramp films in light of such "thinking," with the Tramp able "to satisfy seemingly contradictory desires: for images of the self and the other; for an emancipatory mass culture and a thriving film art; and for a cinema of laughter and revolutionary politics. Thus the German Chaplin existed above all as a function of discourse."<sup>27</sup> This "German Chaplin" likewise appears in the art historical writings of Sherwin Simmons and Beeke Sell Tower, with Chaplin functioning as a Blochian "wish image" of avant-gardes hoping to shatter bourgeois precepts of art and life through the merging of class politics

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<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Gersch, *Chaplin in Berlin. Illustrierte Miniatur nach Berliner Zeitungen von 1931*.

<sup>25</sup> *Charlie Chaplin: Eine Ikone der Moderne*, edited by Kimmich (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003) and *Zeitgenosse Chaplin*, edited by Kreimeier (Oberbaum Verlag, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Miriam Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture," *New German Critique* 54 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 47-76; Thomas Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany*, p. online.

<sup>27</sup> Sabine Hake, "Chaplin Reception in Weimar Germany," p. 110.

and anarchic disruption which they saw in the vulgar art of cinema and rude behavior of the Tramp.<sup>28</sup> And slapstick scholars have followed the claims of Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno and Arendt in developing formal and historicist readings of Chaplin's comedy, his Weimar reception seemingly crucial to critically receiving and understanding the Tramp as such.<sup>29</sup> Joseph Garnarcz has tempered this enthusiasm, using box office reports, trade press surveys and other extant records to prove that Chaplin was far less popular than scholars might assume, never reaching the crucial segment of the German middle class, instead appealing primarily to urban workers and intellectuals.<sup>30</sup> Despite Garnarcz's suspicions of the "discourse analyses" offered up by Hake et al, his approach is entirely continuous with the projective, redemptive and ultimately *utopian* understanding of Chaplin's image and persona highlighted in all of these accounts. As I argued in the "Introduction," this dream-like utopia was only desired by virtue of the dystopia all too present on the streets of their Republic, a dystopia that has long defined a certain dichotomous understanding of Weimar's modernity as caught between the extremes of "contradictory" political, economic and existential desires, an understanding retroactively validated by the rise of the Third Reich.

While I cannot disagree with the existence of such contradictions nor of the desperate utopianism of those who feared (or alternatively, desired) their fascist resolution, it is worth pointing out the strange omission, in all these accounts, of Chaplin's most intriguing German fan: Brecht. Indeed only a month before Chaplin's momentous second visit to Berlin the playwright would stage a refurbished version of his play, *Mann ist Mann* [Man equals Man],

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<sup>28</sup> Beeke Seele Tower, *Envisioning America: Prints, Drawings, and Photographs by George Grosz and His Contemporaries, 1915-1933*; Sherwin Simmons, "Chaplin Smiles on the Wall: Berlin Dada and Wish-Images of Popular Culture."

<sup>29</sup> Michael North, *Machine Age Comedy*; Rob King, *The Fun Factory*; see also the essays collected in *Slapstick Comedy*.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Garnarcz, "'Films that are applauded all over the world,'" pp. 285-296.

which, in its plot, performance and casting of Peter Lorre in the central role of packer, Galy Gay, bears the influence of Chaplin more visibly than any other work of German art in the period, a fact pointed out not only by Brecht scholars, but by Brecht's own most intimate contemporaries.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to its 1926 premiere the 1931 production represented the full flowering of epic technique in league with the sharpest of political critique, the montage at the heart of its parable—"This evening a man will be montaged [ummontiert] like a car / without losing anything in the process"—communicated by the marionette-like movements of Lorre and the proto-fascist monstrosity of the soldiers who "montage" him, convert him from incompetent packer to blood-thirsty soldier.<sup>32</sup>

This omission is all the more curious given Brecht's crucial status among those very same Weimar critics and theorists cited by scholars intent on understanding both "German Chaplin" and the Tramp more generally. Within the discipline of film studies, Brecht was approached through both the writings of his friend Benjamin (in tandem with the related reflections of the Frankfurt School) as well as in the French structuralism and post-structuralism that saw in epic theater a precursor to their own interest in textual politics, de-naturalization and mapping a new relationship between Marxism and aesthetics. As Brechtian forms hardened, by overuse and over-reference, into cliché maxims of "political modernism" the complexity of, say, Brecht's engagement with a figure like Chaplin was largely ignored or forgotten.<sup>33</sup> This is especially ironic because Chaplin himself was refurbished in an almost identical manner in the

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<sup>31</sup> See Schechter, p. 75-76 and Ihering, *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht: Vier Jahrzehnte Theater und Film, Band II*, p. 307.

<sup>32</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Mann ist Mann* (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Miriam Hansen states that much film theory and avant-garde practice of the seventies and eighties was due to "the revival or belated reception of the 1920s and 1930s leftist avant-garde, notably Bertolt Brecht," a revival that too easily separates modernism from popular forms of entertainment contemporaneous to it. See her "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," p. 65. See also David Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

same era and often by the very same figures that turned, sometimes in the same breath, to Brecht. If the Tramp comedies were best understood, at the time of their initial release, in light of the dynamic yet doomed modernity of Weimar Germany then their re-release might best be approached through a “French Chaplin,” articulated in a constellation of references linking Roland Barthes, Emmanuel Levinas, Edgar Morin, Henri Lefebvre, Louis Althusser, Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Ranciere and Alain Badiou.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the most sophisticated of these thinkers with regard to Brecht, Barthes points us in the right direction for understanding the singularity of Brecht’s re-functioning of what he calls “Chaplin-Man,” an intersection of Tramps German and French and methods formal-theoretical and historicist. In his mythology “The Poor and the Proletariat” Barthes locates a political continuity between this “Chaplin-Man” and “Brecht’s idea” of “always taking Man on the eve of Revolution, that is to say, alone, still blind, on the point of having his eyes opened to the revolutionary light by the ‘natural’ excess of his wretchedness.”<sup>35</sup> These eyes are opened only when the audience sees the Tramp *not* seeing his own state of abjection, for instance, sitting in bed in a jail cell while acting the part of the comfortable “petit-bourgeois” (*Modern Times*). For Barthes this disjuncture “represents the most efficient form of revolution in the realm of art” not because it transforms the ignorant poor man into a class-conscious proletariat, but rather because of a gesturally excessive “anarchy,” one that might produce for its spectators “a knowledge of

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<sup>34</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, translated by Bergo (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 65; Levinas, *Entre Nous*, translated by Smith (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 12; Edgar Morin, *Stars*, translated by Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 89-98; Louis Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht,” *For Marx*, translated by Brewster (New York: Verso, 2005), p. 129-152; Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, translated by (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 76; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 108; Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, translated by Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 173-181 and *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, translated by Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 192; Jacques Ranciere, “The Gay Science of Bertolt Brecht,” *The Politics of Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011) p. 99-127; Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) p. 39-47; Badiou, “Cinema as a Democratic Emblem,” *Parrhesia* 6 (2009), p. 2; Badiou, “A Manifesto of Affirmationist Art,” *Polemics* (New York: Verso, 2012), p. 141.

<sup>35</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Lavers (New York: Noonday, 1972), 39-40.



political causes and an insistence on a collective strategy,” the content of this “knowledge” the audience’s very own blindness. What is it about Chaplin that suggests or produces this insistence? While one could easily point, as many have done, to some vague utopian or critical element at stake in his transgressions and pratfalls, this misses an essential element to the Tramp, especially the vulgar, violent Tramp manifested in Brecht’s particular interest in slapstick. Barthes was certainly unaware of Brecht’s life-long relationship with Chaplin, not to mention their friendship in Los Angeles, but his insight in “The Proletarian and the Poor” unwittingly hints at the exceptional nature of this relationship, especially vis-à-vis the utopian projections of his Weimar peers as well as the broader understanding among scholars of the place of Chaplin’s cinema within modernity. In fact, we will be much more able to understand the “contradictory desires” elicited by the “German Chaplin” only by attending to those epic elements heralded and re-purposed by Brecht, where contradiction and antagonism become the very objects produced by and for audiences. What Barthes calls the “ambiguity” of Chaplin’s “poor man” will be taken much further, beyond Barthes’ insistence on the nature of the Tramp as constantly in vulgar material need and thus always on the invisible brink of a radical politicization. Making this brink visible clarifies how close revolution is to regression, politicization to its anaesthetizing other, the poor to the petit-bourgeois, the tramp to the dictator. In Chaplin’s corporeal anarchy, linked not, as Barthes claims, to base need, but rather to a ceaseless desire to transgress law and bypass labor, Brecht found the most flexible parts and moments of political identity. Rather than projecting in Chaplin a playful fantasy or fleeting utopianism, Brecht put the Tramp to work by converting his pratfalls, gags and stumbles into the very means for producing knowledge of social hierarchies, focusing on those hierarchies’ points of exclusion as well as those places most laughably weak and capable of reorientation. Understanding the formal, gestural and uniquely

cinematic element of this labor will be the focus of the next section while its paradoxically lazy content—the figure and theoretical pre-history of the lumpenproletariat—will follow thereafter.

### III. From Utopia to *Gestus*...

*“The Three Penny Opera can still fulfill the same function in capitalist countries today so long as people understand how to provide entertainment and, at the same time, bite instead of mere cosy absurdity.”* – Bertolt Brecht.

1942, Santa Monica: A late evening shared between two men who were neither friends nor colleagues, whose careers and thought endlessly clashed—Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno. Writing in his *Arbeitsjournal*, Brecht describes the meeting in a way that crystallizes this clash while also finding between the epic playwright and Frankfurt School philosopher a rare common ground.<sup>36</sup> Describing a “conversation with wiesengrund-adorno, jumpy [in English] because of the curfew, about the speciality of theater vis-à-vis film,” the two exiles agree on the technical limitations of film, its fixed, single and continuous perspective necessarily recording a world “resultant, un-free and inalterable.”<sup>37</sup> Brecht and Adorno recognize an exception to this seeming rule: “chaplin [sic] stylizes so that themes appear historicized and after some time can still be appreciated [goutierbar].”<sup>38</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the two exiles, hardly like-minded, would agree both on the limitations of film as a critical art and on the importance of Chaplin’s using film exceptionally to show events as historical, which is to say, as alterable, less a fixed result and more an opportunity for the audience “to change the performance of the artist.”<sup>39</sup> This agreement was shaped by both men’s Weimar-honed appreciation for Chaplin’s films, but was even more strongly confirmed when they directly experienced the star’s talents in person. Adorno would later describe one particular run-in with Chaplin that is all too telling in explaining how and why Chaplin’s use of cinema produced for the spectator a free, alterable

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<sup>36</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal 1938-1955* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1977), p. 247.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

world. Writing twenty-five years later, Adorno describes an episode at a party in Malibu in which he was reaching out to absent-mindedly shake hands with someone when he suddenly found himself uncannily gripping metal—he was shaking the hook-hands of Harold Russell, the war veteran and handless star of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946)!<sup>40</sup> On hand, Chaplin witnessed Adorno’s changing face as the latter awkwardly struggled to convert shock into polite pleasantries and immediately played the whole scene back for everyone’s amusement.

Brecht too would witness Chaplin’s imitations at other parties, writing once again in his *Arbeitsjournal*, “CHAPLIN [sic] masterfully copies a Chopin film with [Paul] muni. A certain play with the handkerchief, practiced by muni, was practiced by chaplin, he says, already as an eight-year old: he acted then as an unhappy old timer in vaudeville...”<sup>41</sup> Unlike Adorno, Brecht would get to know Chaplin quite well as he was part of a circle of Weimar exiles centered around Salka and Berthold Viertel, two of the star’s closest friends in the forties. While Adorno was unfortunate victim to Chaplin’s imitations, Chaplin was himself subject to the mimicries of Brecht and Hanns Eisler, who “spent evenings recalling to Chaplin certain details from his films, over which we all laughed like crazy.”<sup>42</sup> One imagines that such re-telling relied far less on verbal description and more on gestural repetition of the Tramp’s trademark walk or some of his most famous routines, especially those “jokes” that, in Eisler’s words, had “social bite [Schärfe]” or “social significance.”<sup>43</sup> This is hardly surprising given Brecht’s own propensities for transforming dramaturgy, spectatorship and Marxism into gestural performances, whether it be

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<sup>40</sup> Adorno, “Chaplin Times Two,” p. 270.

<sup>41</sup> Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, p. 398.

<sup>42</sup> *Chaplin: Eine Ikone der Moderne*, p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrating Galileo to Charles Laughton or discussing the withering away of the state with Walter Benjamin.<sup>44</sup>

It is the nature of this “significance” that shows how close Adorno and Brecht were in their appreciation of Chaplin as well as what fundamentally separates the way each formalized this appreciation. Adorno’s reading of his encounter with Chaplin, taken to be symptomatic of the latter’s redemptive combination of “cruelty” and “mimetic ability,” emphasized “the utopia of an existence that would be free of the burden of being-one’s-self.”<sup>45</sup> While reflective of philosophical projects written at the same time as this reminiscence, especially his unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*, there is a through line from Adorno’s Weimar friendship with Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer to his conversation with Brecht in California to this later appraisal.<sup>46</sup> While Adorno located in Chaplin’s “mimetic ability” an emphatically *negative* refusal of identity, reason or causality, a negation that would correspond, like the lost world of childhood, to the most evanescent, even impossible of utopias, Brecht adamantly refused such longing. After all, his most famous maxim, recorded in conversation with Benjamin in Denmark, published in debate with Lukács and exclaimed by Walter Huston in Fritz Lang’s *Hangmen Also Die* (1943), was “Take your cue not from the good old things, but from the bad new ones.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the problem is once again how to make things appear “historicized,” to show how the present bad is subject to change, contingent and thus arbitrary, this in contrast to melancholic

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<sup>44</sup> See Brecht’s poem, “Letter to the Actor Charles Laughton”: “Again and again I turned actor, demonstrating / A Character’s gestures and tone of voice, and you / Turned writer,” Brecht, *Poems: 1913-1956*, translated by Willet and Mannheim (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 405. See also Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938*, edited by Eiland and Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002): “‘The state must vanish.’ Who says this? The state.’ (By this, he can mean only the Soviet Union.) Brecht, looking cunning and shifty, steps in front of the armchair I’m sitting in and, pretending to be ‘the state,’ says, with a sideways leer at an imaginary client: ‘I know — I’m supposed to vanish’ (336).

<sup>45</sup> Adorno, “Chaplin Times Two,” p. 271.

<sup>46</sup> On this point see Bean’s “The Art of Imitation,” *Slapstick Cinema*, 236-261.

<sup>47</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Against Lukács,” *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 69; Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 3*, p. 340.

fixation of an ideal past that might fleetingly redeem the present or offer some escape from its all too convincing and overwhelming necessity. And this is fundamentally tied, as Brecht wrote of this maxim, to “developing” “techniques” that enter into the life of the “masses,” “arous[ing] a sense of outrage at inhuman conditions by many methods—by direct description (emotional or objective), by narrative and parable, by jokes, by over- and under-emphasis.”<sup>48</sup> While Adorno’s essay all too tellingly shows the signs of the utopian projection virtually invented in Chaplin’s Weimar reception, Brecht re-functioned projection into production, developing those epic “methods” out of Chaplin’s uniquely cinematic mode of screening gestures politically, breaking imitations down to laughably reveal the contingency that simultaneously drives and disrupts political behaviors and attitudes.

Writing only four years later, but still stuck in Hollywood, Brecht gives us a starting point for approaching these methods in his poem, “Ein Film des Komikers Chaplin.”<sup>49</sup> A scene for scene re-telling of Chaplin’s Keystone short, *The Face on the Bar-room Floor* (1914), Brecht’s poem is a kind of bookend along with that film’s inspiration, the tragic, self-serious poem of the same name written by American Hugh Antoine D’Arcy in 1887. Changing the location from an unnamed American city to Paris, Brecht’s poem can only be read in light of a diary entry written nearly twenty-five years earlier, recording the playwright’s first encounter with Charlie Chaplin, a time when the cinema and above all Hollywood cinema promised more than simply deception and profit. Writing in his diary in 1921, Brecht describes seeing Chaplin’s

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<sup>48</sup> Brecht, “Against Lukács,” p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* 8 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), pp. 870-871.

film, titled in German *Alkohol und Liebe*, as a transformative experience, validated by his uncanny recollection on display in “Ein Film.”<sup>50</sup> Two texts, one a poem written in the midst of World War II, the other a diary entry written just after the end of World War I, describe the “completely simple” narrative of this twelve-minute film. The key word that links the diary and the poem is “erschütternd”: in the former, Brecht calls the film “das [Erschütterndste] of anything I have ever seen in cinema, and quite simple.... But it is the [Erschütterndste] of what there is, it is a very pure art,” while in the latter Brecht recounts the story in verse:

In ein Bistro des Boulevard Saint Michel  
 Kam an einem regnerischen Herbstabend ein junger  
 Maler  
 Trank vier, fünf jener grünen Schnäpse und berichtete  
 Den gelangweilten Billardspielern von einem erschütternden  
 Wiedersehn  
 Mit einer einmaligen Geliebten einem zarten Wesen  
 Nunmehr Gattin eines wohlhabenden Fleischhauers.<sup>51</sup>

One could translate *erschütternd* alternatively as moving (as John Willet does), distressing or, most accurately in this case and with a distinct physical emphasis, *shocking*. On the one hand, we have Brecht’s experience of the film, one that shocks him more than any other film and on the other, we have Chaplin’s own experience in the film, broken by an encounter with a past love, a shock that leaves him reduced to a tramp, distracting an audience of “bored pool players.” Indeed, alcohol would be the initial path for Chaplin to slapstick with the Karno Players, his first successful role a drunken lout breaking up a stage performance and which he would resurrect for the Essanay short, *A Night at the Show* (1915). The film’s doubling of its audience within its own narrative structure was of utmost importance, as Brecht noted in 1921: “Children and grown-ups laugh at the poor man, and he knows it: this nonstop laughter in the auditorium is an integral part

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<sup>50</sup> Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 15* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 60-1. See also *Bertolt Brecht Diaries 1920-1922*, translated by Willet (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), p. 140-141.

<sup>51</sup> “In a bistro of the boulevard Saint Michel / came on a rainy fall evening a young / Painter / drank four, five of these green schnapps and told / the bored pool players of a shocking / reunion / with a one-time lover a tender being / now the spouse of a prosperous butcher.”

of the film, which is itself deadly earnest and of quite alarming objectivity and sadness. The film owes (part of) its effectiveness to the brutality of its audience.”<sup>52</sup> Just as the film stages its own audience so too does it stage its story, with Brecht remarking on how the film hinges on the Tramp’s desperate, drunk “need to communicate,” whether in genteel flashback, drunken stumbling or with crude chalk drawings of his beloved on the floor. The story of a story being told before an audience beholding itself, Chaplin, in Brecht’s historically bifurcated descriptions, holds both elements together through the shock of a body spastically caught between past and present, happiness and misery, wealth and poverty.



**Figure 3: Chaplin refusing to be thrown out of a saloon in *The Face on the Barroom Floor***

This echo of “erschütternd” is not incidental. Walter Benjamin would, in his analysis of Brecht’s *Mahogany Lieder*, place particular emphasis on this word, explaining, “It is worth pointing out that the word *Erschütterung* contains the word *schütter*. Wherever something collapses, rifts and gaps appear.... the poem contains numerous passages in which words

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<sup>52</sup> Brecht, *Diaries 1920-1922*, p. 141.

combine in a loose, unstable way to form the meaning. This contributes to its shocking effect.”<sup>53</sup> *Ein Film* duplicates this fractured form, with enjambling breaks around “Maler” and “Wiedersehn,” emphasizing these words’ narrative centrality while, at the same time, fissuring them loose from the poem’s already broken rhythm. Interrupting the poem’s continuity like a sudden cut in a film, this “cine-poem,” according to Jan Röhnert, “attempts to recreate the dynamic of the silent film comic through the dissolving, enjambed and skipping lines, which generate a rhythm of breathless haste.”<sup>54</sup> The essential rift is between “erschütternden” and “Wiedersehn,” a break that repeats the temporal collapse between the present tramp and his two encounters with the woman, between the “good old days” and the “bad new ones.” The decrepit men of both *Ein Film* and *Mahogany* are, like Chaplin’s drunken, failed, “trembling” painter, eccentrics through and through (Benjamin describes the “men of Mahogany” as “a band of eccentrics”), the world they inhabit “God’s cheap saloon.”<sup>55</sup> These men, their “reflexes...blunted by their existence in the society of today,” shock by virtue of their gestural distraction and dispersion, by once correct spasms erupting in the wrong place and time. Accustomed to the hell they inhabit, the threat of anything worse “has no more value than a publican’s threat to throw his customers out into the street,” and by coincidence Chaplin’s Tramp only saves himself from this threat by literally kicking all the other customers out onto the sidewalk first.<sup>56</sup>

When Brecht, at the behest of Kurt Weil, converted these songs into an opera in 1930, these eccentrics were given the profession of lumberjacks from Alaska, an origin indebted to *The Gold Rush*. Indeed, in *Mahogany* Brecht would directly re-function one of that film’s most

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Eiland and Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap 2003), p. 224.

<sup>54</sup> Jan Röhnert, *Springende Gedanken und Flackernde Bilder: Lyrik im Zeitalter der Kinematographie* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007), p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4*, p. 222.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



famous sequences when one of these eccentrics, now a nouveau riche speculator quite similar to Chaplin's newly rich "lone prospector," dies from eating too much, including his own hat. Brecht would praise *The Gold Rush* in terms largely identical to those of his conversation with Adorno, writing "I do not hold the view that what this film achieves cannot be done today in the theatre because it is incapable of it. Rather I believe that it cannot be done anywhere—in the theatre, in vaudeville, in the cinema—without Charlie Chaplin. This artist is a document that today already works by means of the power of historical events."<sup>57</sup> While Brecht admits that the miraculous coincidences that drive the plot of this film could not be achieved on the stage he does not view Chaplin's talents as restricted alone to the medium of the film and as his later poem already indicates, there is an intense intermediality at stake in his writing, indicated more broadly by Brecht's interest in bringing together contemporary media like that of film, statistics, radio, newspapers and airplanes as well as a host of folk or foreign theatrical traditions: Bavarian cabaret, Chinese dramaturgy, English Romanticism, French Symbolism etc.

Roswitha Mueller has written convincingly of Brecht's emphasis on "the interrelatedness and interdependence of all forms of artistic production" and this is most clear in the most famous and still misunderstood of epic concepts, that of the *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation or estrangement effect].<sup>58</sup> How and when Brecht developed this concept is still not entirely clear, but it is widely agreed that his trip to Moscow in the mid-thirties and his first exposure to Chinese acting were above all decisive in the concept's formulation.<sup>59</sup> Yet here too *The Gold Rush* shows its importance in Brecht's developing thought, with a short but telling fragment entitled "V-Effects in Chaplin" noting a series of examples drawn from that film. In this same

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<sup>57</sup> Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht on Film & Radio*, translated and edited by Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Roswitha Mueller, *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Brooker, "Key Words in Brecht's Theory and Practice of Theatre," *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, pp.

period Chaplin would appear yet again as the paragon of epic acting, which was “the kind the Chinese have been using for thousands of years: among modern actors Chaplin is one of its masters....”<sup>60</sup> On the other side of the Brecht-Chaplin spectrum, the star’s sole reference to Brecht in his *My Autobiography* suggests that Brecht never lost sight of this connection to Chinese dramaturgy (as he understood it): “I showed [Brecht] the script of *Monsieur Verdoux*, which he thumbed through. His only comment: ‘Oh, you write a script Chinese fashion.’”<sup>61</sup> Clearly this was high praise from the Augsburgers, whether the confused Chaplin understood it as such or not.

More important than this “Chinese fashion” was the Soviet context of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, especially Brecht’s friendship with Sergei Tretyakov and the larger theoretical influence of Russian formalism on the latter, above all the theory of *ostranenie* or “making strange” developed by Viktor Shklovsky.<sup>62</sup> Shklovsky himself wrote one of the great Soviet texts on Chaplin, published only a year before Brecht’s diary entry on *The Face on the Bar-room Floor*.<sup>63</sup> Praising Chaplin’s ability to mimic any profession Shklovsky calls Chaplin “the most cinematic of actors” but this hinges on what Shklovsky understands the cinema to formally entail, how it represents reality, something he can only intimate a few paragraphs later: “I cannot at the moment define the essence of the comic nature of Chaplin’s movement but perhaps it lies in the fact that it is mechanical. You can divide Chaplin’s acting into a series of

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<sup>60</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 68.

<sup>61</sup> Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, p. 432.

<sup>62</sup> On this point see Brooker’s “Key Words” as well as Stanley Mitchell, “From Shklovsky to Brecht” and Ben Brewster’s reply to Mitchell in *Screen* 15:2 (1974). Briefly put, the most commonly articulated distinction between Shklovsky and Brecht is the explicitly political nature of the latter’s interest in estrangement as opposed to the formalism of the latter. I think this distinction is a dead end since the whole point of a technique like estrangement is to develop aesthetic forms that can engage and intervene within concrete, contingent and always historical circumstances. Whether Brecht knew all the particulars about *ostranenie* or cared about them seems largely irrelevant to the texts and plays he developed in this era.

<sup>63</sup> Viktor Schlovski, “Literature and Cinema,” *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema*, edited by Taylor and Christie (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 98-99. See also Eisenstein’s “Charlie the Kid,” *Film Essays and a Lecture*, translated by Leyda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 108-39.

passages, each passage usually ending with a full stop, a pose.”<sup>64</sup> Three years later Shklovsky would elaborate on what he had earlier called the “purely cinematic essence of all the constructions in Chaplin’s films” in a collection of essays on the latter’s films written and published during his exile in Berlin, where Chaplin was finally available on screen. There, Shklovsky revealed the first signs of influence of Henri Bergson, whose vitalism would become hugely important in the development of Russian Formalism.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps one of the first writers to bring together Bergson’s 1900 text, *Laughter*, and the mechanical movements of slapstick comedians, Shklovsky elsewhere followed the philosopher in his understanding of “cinematic essence,” that famous “cinematographical mechanism of thought” elaborated in 1907’s *Creative Evolution* and which brought the technological vision of film in touch with a larger debate about the changing nature of time within modernity.<sup>66</sup>

Like Shklovsky, Brecht occupies a unique position within this debate, which touched on artistic, philosophical and technological events and movements throughout Europe and the United States. In contrast to the vitalist’s celebration of becoming, continuity and the qualitatively creative, best achieved by supposedly non-cinematic arts of poetry, dance or music, Brecht lay firmly on the side of discontinuity and while he isolated, like Shklovsky, particular essential qualities to formal, aesthetic and technical modes of representation, these qualities were citable, their objects and images capable of an intermedial *Umfunktionierung*. Showing films beneath the theater’s proscenium was one approach, but Brecht also felt that “cinematic essence” could be integrated into the gestures of the actor, the spacing of a scene or the structuring of a narrative. Chaplin was not only the most alienating, the most “Chinese” of actors, he was also

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.

<sup>65</sup> James Curtis, “Bergson and Russian Formalism,” *Comparative Literature* 28:2 (Spring, 1976), pp. 109-121.

<sup>66</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Mitchell (London: MacMillan, 1922), p. 287.

the most cinematic, if with this term we understand it as Brecht—like Bergson, Shklovsky and, most importantly, his friend Benjamin—did:

[Film] is essentially static and must be treated like a series of tableaux. Its effect must arise from the clear interruptions, which would otherwise just be common errors. The tableaux must be so composed that they can be taken in at a single glance like a sheet of paper, but yet they must withstand separation into details so that every detail corresponds in the larger scheme with the center....<sup>67</sup>

In the same text Brecht explains that this vision is not intrinsically tied to the cinematic apparatus as such: “the filmic perspective existed on this continent before the cinema itself.”<sup>68</sup> As we have already seen in his later discussion with Adorno, Brecht was often suspicious of the slick photographic nature of cinematic representation but his primary interest in film was in the underlying *montage* that broke up that representation. *Erschütterung*, *Verfremdung*, discontinuity and interruption: all these terms refer to both the underlying principle of this montage as well as its most cherished effect within epic theater.

Chaplin’s corpus offered Brecht the most instructive instance of this montage and with his Tramp once again showing the way Brecht added yet another term to this list: *Gestus*. This term meant more than mere physical gesture and was specifically rooted in the intense regimentation and quantification of bodily movement, attitude and posture associated, in Germany, with Taylorization in the teens and Fordism in the twenties. More broadly symptomatic of the crisis in temporality earlier diagnosed by Bergson, this “mechanization of the human body” reveals, in Mary Anne Doane’s words, a “rationalized time...in complicity with notions of the inevitability of a technologically induced historical progress.”<sup>69</sup> As Doane argues, resistance to this rationalization of time through space, of quality through quantity, came in the form of an “emphasis upon the contingent, chance and the ephemeral,” with one of her

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<sup>67</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, p. 7.

paramount examples the thought of Walter Benjamin and above all his emphasis on the “Chockerlebnis,” the experience of shock that he isolated as fundamental to modernity and specifically within that experience’s cinematic modalities.<sup>70</sup> Curiously absent from Doane’s appeal to Benjamin is Chaplin, who suggests a more complicated relationship between contingency and rationalization than that offered in her otherwise outstanding account. Benjamin’s fundamental question about Chaplin is precisely the same one asked by Shklovsky and it was formulated in precisely the same year—1935—in which Brecht himself developed the theory of *Verfremdung* after his visit to Moscow. A fragmentary byproduct of the first version of his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility,” Benjamin echoes Brecht’s definition of film not to mention the Soviet theories of montage developed in the twenties: “The formula in which the dialectical structure of film—film considered in its technological dimension—finds expression run as follows. Discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence. A theory of film would need to take account of both these facts. First of all, with regard to continuity, it cannot be overlooked that the assembly line, which plays such a fundamental role in the process of production, is in a sense represented by the filmstrip in the process of consumption.”<sup>71</sup> How then to expose this dialectic between the continuity of a sequence and the discontinuity underlying that sequence’s composition, its montage of images? For Benjamin as with the first Soviet film theorists, it all starts with the body of the actor who is made to labor within film’s “assembly line,” who works as a gestural bridge among elements within each frame—other figures or the *mise-en-scène*—as well as

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, p. 340.

between frames, linking them together.<sup>72</sup> Discontinuity has only been properly revealed by one film artist:

Chaplin's [*Gestus*] is not really that of an actor. He could not have made an impact on the stage. His unique significance lies in the fact that, in his work, the human being is integrated into the film image by way of his gestures—that is, his bodily and mental posture. The innovation of Chaplin's gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement. Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat—always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions. Now, what is it about this behavior that is distinctively comic?<sup>73</sup>

To answer this question beyond the most obvious Bergsonian retort, we must turn to Brecht since it is *Gestus* that is his invention and which his friend borrowed to understand the shared concerns of both epic theater and Chaplin's slapstick, an understanding that Benjamin himself never articulated together.

During the final two years of the Weimar Republic both Brecht and Benjamin became fascinated by psychotechnics, the science of testing, managing and improving employee efficiency within the increasingly regimented realms of both factory and office. With its interest in the distant, often filmed observation of different physical routines, postures and habits Brecht found a resemblance with the kind of acting he sought for his non-Aristotelian, epic theater and consequently a kind of spectatorship that would necessitate from that acting. The two were essentially linked and this above all because psychotechnics converted the actor, its test subject, into a spectator alienated from its most normal, natural gestures. The concept of *Gestus*, however, took this alienation further because it focused on alienating attitudes or habits that might show, in Brigid Doherty's words, "the embeddedness of a particular gestic element of

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<sup>72</sup> See Mikhail Yampolsky, "Kuleshov's Experiments and the New Anthropology of the Actor," *Silent Cinema* ed. Abel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 45-67.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 3*, p. 94.

speech or posture in a complex of social relations and processes.”<sup>74</sup> Doherty’s detailed account of this concept’s development, especially in relation to psychotechnics, is only the most recent of texts devoted to *Gestus*, which has been isolated as perhaps the most important technique invented within the epic theater. With Benjamin as the very first to unpack it, Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, Rainer Nägele, Roswitha Mueller and Doherty have followed this lead, isolating *Gestus* as the dialectical hinge between the way characters speak, move and position themselves within a play and some larger social question, dynamic or phenomenon.<sup>75</sup> Social attitudes (*Haltungen*) are expressed by linguistic, physical or even musical gestures, discrete units of expression aimed at representing a larger (and enforced) societal meaning or sense. Such gestures only receive such sense after they have entered the social field and once this field is stripped away, then all that is left is a pure gesture, which is nothing more than a kind of nonsense, a meaningless and absurd leftover. Epic theater should be an apparatus for producing sense as nonsense and nonsense as sense, performing gestures that are socially inscribed with a particular function and taking away that function, staining them with their own meaningless, material makeup. *Gestus* is the minimal unit of that production upon which the social fabric is based, but, when cut out of that fabric, reveals itself as an empty posture, a nonsensical pose. It is not that a character’s *Gestus* points, as in agit-prop or even social realist theater, to this “complex,” but that it reveals, by virtue of its appearance, to be itself political, a synecdoche by

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<sup>74</sup> Brigid Doherty, “Test and *Gestus* in Brecht and Benjamin,” *MLN* 115 (April 2000), p. 457.

<sup>75</sup> See Mueller, p. 71; Barthes, *Image Music Text*, translated by Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 73-74; Rainer Nägele, *Reading After Freud* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 120; Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 140-163; Rainer Nägele, “Trembling Contours: Kierkegaard-Benjamin-Brecht,” *Walter Benjamin and History*, edited by Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 110-116; Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 89-129.

which, in Barthes' words, "a whole social situation can be read."<sup>76</sup> *Gestus* is the thus the very form by which epic theater, and above all epic acting, produces political consciousness.

Missing from all these accounts is the essentially comic nature of *Gestus*, one suggested perhaps most clearly in the landmark texts on acting Brecht developed in the wake of his 1931 production of *Mann ist Mann* with Peter Lorre, the *locus classicus* for understanding epic performance. While Brecht refers to the example of Lorre's Galy Gay showing fear by painting his face white—an oft used example that Brecht learned from his other comic teacher, Karl Valentin—it is once again Chaplin who shows the way *Gestus* allows situations to be read or grasped, which is only by virtue of interruptions, shocks and discontinuities, the very "poses" or "tableaux" that Brecht defined as essential to cinema's montage and which Benjamin defined as the very law of Chaplin's "series of minute innervations." According to Brecht, the "epic actor" must "show his character's coherence despite, or rather by means of, interruptions and jumps. Since everything depends on the development, on the flow, the various phases must be able to be clearly seen, and therefore separated; and yet this must not be achieved mechanically."<sup>77</sup> This "yet" betrays a seeming contradiction at the heart of *Gestus*: how does one show the clear change between a character's poses without doing so mechanically? Chaplin suggests an answer: "As against the dramatic actor, who has his character established from the first and simply exposes it to the inclemencies of the world and the tragedy, the epic actor lets his character grow before the spectator's eyes out of the way in which he behaves.... Completely different economies are needed by the epic actor and the dramatic. (The actor Chaplin, incidentally, would in many ways come closer to the epic than to the dramatic theatre's requirements.)"<sup>78</sup> Writing in 1935 about the

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<sup>76</sup> Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 73-74.

<sup>77</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.



period that produced this essay, Brecht would fully reveal the influence of Chaplin on his development of *Gestus*: “The gestic way of playing owes much to the silent film, elements of which were taken in by the dramatic art. Chaplin, the early clown, did not have the tradition of the theater and tackled the construction of human behavior innovatively.”<sup>79</sup>

Brecht’s two references to Chaplin here suggest the dependency *Gestus* has, in its production and effects, on a comedy inherent to the “dialectical” structure of cinema. If Chaplin’s films in this period are famously rudimentary in both their editing and cinematography, with the near constant deployment of a frontal, theatrical view, then the “elements” of film here can only refer to the way cinema’s form erupts in the very movements of his body. It suffices to take as an example one of Chaplin’s first Tramp gags, recounted (somewhat apocryphally) in his autobiography:

In all comedy business an attitude is most important, but it is not always easy to find an attitude. However, in the hotel lobby I felt I was an impostor posing as one of the guests, but in reality I was a tramp just wanting a little shelter. I entered and stumbled over the foot of a lady. I turned and raised my hat apologetically, then turned and stumbled over a cuspidor, then turned and raised my hat to the cuspidor. Behind the camera they began to laugh.<sup>80</sup>

The joke lies in the Tramp’s attitude or what Brecht referred to as a *Haltung*. Chaplin is showing—not playing—a character and does so by highlighting the character’s acting, its desire to present the proper form of conduct. Laughter first arises when Chaplin stumbles and second, with his urge to behave as expected, when he performs the same gesture for the cuspidor that he did for the lady. The Tramp is distracted, especially when concentrating on one task, which overshadows all other preoccupations. The Tramp’s attitude of self-sufficiency is also what produces both his stumble and his improvisational recovery, the ostentatious bow. Each attempt

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<sup>79</sup> Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 15*, p. 238.

<sup>80</sup> Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, p. 25-6. According to Harry Geduld, Chaplin erred in his account of the Tramp’s origin-film. See his *Chapliniana Volume I: The Keystone Films* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 25-6.

to fit in a given social field not only fails, but such commitment to the normal is the very condition for his abnormal effects. One could compile an almost endless list of the objects, peoples and spaces that form part of this conspiracy against the Tramp, but it is important to remember that not only is the world always undermining him, but it also offers opportunities for ridiculous alterations, the most famous emblem of which is the dance of the bread-rolls in *The Gold Rush*, the Tramp's smile a sign of his happy play with an innervated world. If the Tramp is a master of destructive improvisation, treating each present moment differently, what happens when he tries to maintain some commitment to temporal continuity, movement across the present from before to after? Such repetition is in full effect in the example of the Tramp's second hat tip, his presumption that a second stumble would correspond to the same situation. Whereas previously the world's sameness and rigidity provoked only the most playful response here it is the Tramp who repeats, just when the world expects him to separate one moment, task or space from another. Once the Tramp performs the wrong gesture at the right time or the right gesture at the wrong time he successfully interrupts the gestural unity of that environment. It is only when a habit is interrupted that it is actually made visible as discrete because it now exists against the backdrop of its separation from its proper context, its network of organized, unified and continuous meaning. Habits can only be made visible once they are cited and in turn once such imitation is interrupted, alienated and shocked. As Benjamin put it, "the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in acting, the more gestures result."<sup>81</sup>

*Mann ist Mann* is a good case in point. The play's premise is simple: a diminutive, Irish packer living in colonial India, Galy Gay, is recruited by a group of thieving English soldiers to replace one of their lost comrades. After a series of comic adventures—*Mann* was one of

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<sup>81</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4*, p. 304

Brecht's few works to be explicitly labeled a *Lustspiel*—Gay is fully transformed into an efficient and obedient soldier, mowing down rebels with a machine gun at play's end. In the play's most famous moment, Brecht lays bare his intentions: "Mr. Bertolt Brecht maintains: Man is man. / And that is something that anyone can maintain. / But Mr. Bertolt Brecht then also proves / That one can do much with any person."<sup>82</sup> How best to show this lesson? Brecht filmed both Peter Lorre and Carola Neher in order to break down their performances and habits frame by frame. Film has an ability to alienate acting subjects, forcing them to watch themselves as objects of a camera, film crew or audience: "To give life to the persons, who are introduced purely according to their functions, the cinema simply uses available types who encounter specific situations and assume in them particular attitudes. All motivation from within a character is excluded; the person's inner life never provides the principal cause of action and seldom its principal result; the person is seen from the outside."<sup>83</sup> Yet reducing the subject through these repeated shocks is precisely the lesson Brecht draws from Chaplin's corporeal montage as well as the latter's very means of transmitting this lesson—film. Film alienated actors from themselves, breaking down their gestures into minute, discontinuous and "jerky" tableaux, what Benjamin famously called an optical unconscious of secret habits and unknown ticks. Yet the "innervation" achieved with the shock of each gestural rupture was doubled over by film's mass art, a point stressed, in relation to Benjamin, by Miriam Hansen, but likewise insisted on by Brecht who made an identical claim, equally inspired by the insights of Freud.<sup>84</sup>

Brechtian appropriation of popular forms like the silent film suggest a tactical interest in

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<sup>82</sup> Brecht, *Mann ist Mann*, p. 44.

<sup>83</sup> Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, p. 162.

<sup>84</sup> See "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street." In his essay on opera, Brecht writes "In our present society the old opera cannot be just 'wished away'. Its illusions have an important social function. The drug is irreplaceable; it cannot be done without." He then quotes Freud in a footnote, remarking "Such drugs are sometimes responsible for the wastage of great stores of energy which might have been applied to bettering the human lot" (*Brecht on Theatre*, p. 41).

harnessing collective forms of desire. Chaplin's example was no doubt inspiring since it represented "a document that today already works by means of the power of historical events," such power dependent on film's very status as a historical agent, a new force beyond traditional aesthetic forms, cutting across classes, cultures and nations, both a capitalist miracle machine as well as an assault on the rigid sensorium of traditional dramaturgy.

In contrast to Bergson's Manichean dismissal of "cinematographic thinking," the dismissal that he theorized as the root of laughter, Brecht found in the mechanical the very possibility for things to be otherwise. Alienating the most natural, unquestioned activities means exaggerating them to the point of their separation from a natural context. In Brecht's fragment on *Verfremdungseffekte* in *The Gold Rush* we find a paramount example of this de-contextualization. He writes: "Eating the boot (with proper table manners, removing the nail like a chicken bone, the index finger pointing outward)."<sup>85</sup> In this well-known scene Chaplin is faced with another restrictive situation—locked in a cabin during a blizzard with nothing to eat he boils his shoes and serves them out on his plate. As if he eating a chicken, he cuts off the rubber portion of his boot and then removes the nails one by one, treating them as bones. He delicately cuts up each piece of rubber before he eats it. Here we have the perfect emblem of Chaplin's humor, his attempt to imitate the proper habits of a gentleman, yet doing so absurdly in a remote cabin while eating a boiled boot, existing on the furthest reaches of survival. The failure of repetition is what produces his playful gestures of eating and it is in this very disjuncture between the habitual and the exceptional that gesture discontinuously erupts. For Brecht, this produces a *Verfremdungseffekt* because it estranges a routine habit, eating a meal, from its proper context and by doing so highlights both the ridiculousness of the gesture as well as the social

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<sup>85</sup> Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, p. 10.

conventions that arbitrarily inform the habit. The habit is interrupted and the quotation of bourgeois norms, imitation by an estranged and estranging outsider now in the most outside of spaces, makes visible for Brecht the “proper table manners” that are nothing more than the meaningless gears of social machinery—Chaplin has “taken a common, recurrent, universally-practised operation and tried to draw attention to it by illuminating its peculiarity.”<sup>86</sup>



**Figure 4: The lone prospector’s “proper table manners.”**

Brecht’s reference to being montaged like a car in the song from *Mann ist Mann* links the military-colonial context of the play to the similarly regimented division of labor famously associated with Ford. The psychotechnics intimated by Benjamin and practiced in Brecht’s screen tests of Lorre and Neher suggests once again the underlying cinematic terrain of *Gestus*. Bergson’s primary example of “cinematographic thinking” was none other than “a series of snapshots of [a] passing regiment.”<sup>87</sup> One of Bergson’s intellectual interlocutors, William James, likewise turned to the example of the military to explain the psychology of habit, one that could easily fit the section on caricature from the former’s *Laughter*: “There is a story...of a practical

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<sup>86</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 145.

<sup>87</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 322.

joker, who, seeing a discharged veteran carrying home his dinner, suddenly called out ‘Attention!’ whereupon the man instantly brought his hands down, and lost his mutton and potatoes in the gutter.”<sup>88</sup> Here we have a wonderful instance of *Gestus*, with an automatic gesture comically de-contextualized from its natural habitat. Beyond his interest in psychotechnics and Fordism, Brecht also turned to James’ psychologist heirs, finding in the behaviorism of Watson a model of a scientific spectatorship that might combat the empathetic, introspection at the heart of Aristotelian dramaturgy. Rather than shying away from this objectification, Brecht found in the psychology of capitalist labor and commodification a dialectical path for revolution and this most usefully in the case of American slapstick: “As soon as the human being appears as an object, the causal connections become decisive. Similarly the great American comedies depict the human being as an object and could have an audience entirely made up of reflexologists.... [Behaviorism’s] limits are those that correspond to its function in capitalism (the reflexes are biological; only in certain films of Chaplin are they already social).”<sup>89</sup> The paradox of epic theater is that this causality will only become visible when it breaks down, when cause and effect become disjointed, the necessity between the two shockingly superfluous.

Brecht’s longing for “an audience entirely made up of reflexologists” may have been wishful but he did his best to make sure his actors already acted in this manner, dividing themselves between slapstick object and curious, playful subject. Like the film actor alienated by the camera’s gaze, famously documented in Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay, the actor is split between his or her habituated attitude and his or her playfully watching such habits trip by. In this they likewise followed Chaplin, who, according to the star’s friend Ivor Montagu, “speaking

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Doherty, “Test and Gestus,” p. 469.

<sup>89</sup> Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, p. 171.

of films in which he himself plays as well as directs, identifies with the director, not the actor.”<sup>90</sup>

The content of a character’s dialogue or behavior, what it means or refers to, is less important than the tone or attitude, a lesson indicated by Brecht’s own directorial habits—when rehearsing dialogue, he would replace the text with nonsense, focusing on the gestic form of dialogue. The epic actor is distracted, performing as if it has been through the motion too many times. The worse the actor does in connecting the ego to the intended action, the more visible the gesture’s context and construction. The more automatic a gesture, the more historical it will appear. These tics, in turn, demand a certain kind of audience. Spectator and actor cannot be separated since both perform the same functions in epic theater: “The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on.”<sup>91</sup> This is why Brecht would consistently use the term *Haltung* to refer to both the actor’s *Gestus* as well as the attitude of the audience. Like the epic actor seeing itself through a camera lens, the spectator splits itself between distraction and instinct, playfulness and habit. Brecht already detected this gap in his first encounter with the Tramp, writing in his 1921 diary entry, “Chaplin’s face is always impassive, as though waxed over, a single expressive twitch rips it apart, very simple, strong, worried.”<sup>92</sup> It is a testament to Chaplin’s epic acting that he could apply “the law of the cinematic image sequence” not merely to his jittery legs, twirling cane or rough derby, but to the “minute innervations” of a facial tic, an unconscious grimace.

In *Mann ist Mann* a single *Gestus* like that of Chaplin’s “twitch” becomes the very basis for the play’s fable and its more fundamental lesson, what Brecht called its “Grundgestus,” which was nothing more than ceaseless, fluctuating change, a movement from packer to soldier

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<sup>90</sup> Ivor Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood* (London: International Publishers, 1969), p. 90.

<sup>91</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 92-93.

<sup>92</sup> Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht Diaries 1920-1922*, p. 141.

that can only be clarified when that movement encounters obstacles, interruptions and stumbles. Or in the parlance of slapstick: gags. This suggests the essential relationship between *Gestus* and Brecht's approach to narrative in plays starting with *Mann ist Mann*, but continuing through many of his mature work of the thirties and forties. Starting with the actor as its basis and model, the structure of a play operates according to the "montage principle" of discontinuous scenes, separate tableaux that are linked precisely where they differ. Like the attitude of a character, its reduction to object and elevation to social type, the scene is focused less on building an emotionally cathartic plot arc and more on the threading together of discrete, diagnostic and instructive episodes. For Brecht such episodes are best expressed in the narrative form of the parable: "The main subject of the drama must be relationships between one man and another as they exist today...I show them in parables: if you act this way the following will happen, but if you act like that then the opposite will take place."<sup>93</sup> Likewise, the gagged structure of Chaplin's films, usually centered around a simple fable-like plot, are less concerned with the *Whys* of different relationships, but the *Hows*, the method and form of social linkages: if a tramp befriends a rich man, adopts an urchin or works in a factory, then the following X, Y or Z take place according to the accepted (and inevitably disrupted) norms of each given situation. The *Why*, the politically dubious reason that motivates these links, comes after this testing: once a practice is denaturalized and defamiliarized, its construction made comically understood, questions immediately follow. Why does one person act this way and not another? Who told them to do so? What is obscured by such actions?

Several Brecht pieces appropriate such diagnostic fable-forms from Chaplin's films. The most obvious example is *Mr. Puntilla and his Servant Matti*, which Brecht developed during his

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<sup>93</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 67.



exile in Sweden in the late thirties. The play's central conceit mixes the narrative of *City Lights* with the traditions of the *Volksstück*, the former containing, in Brecht's words, "elements of epic art."<sup>94</sup> The episodic alternation between drunkenness and sobriety provides the grounds for a production of contradictory social *Gestus*—a shift in behavior on the part of Puntilla produces anarchic disjunctures in Matti as well as in a host of other figures. Even the much later *Caucasian Chalk Circle*'s basic plot bears obvious similarities to 1922's *The Kid*, Grusha, like the Tramp, inadvertently left in charge of a small child who she must raise. Brecht himself admitted to this influence, the play having taken "certain elements of the old American theater, which excelled in the burlesque and the show," and which "recalled the films of the outstanding Chaplin."<sup>95</sup> Chaplin's fables, parables and gags provided Brecht with a host of narrative forms. Proof positive of this comes from Bernard Reich, who recalls sitting in a movie theater with the playwright, watching *The Immigrant*: "The phenomenon of Chaplin agitated him, taking a completely simple, almost silly fable and illuminating through its fundamental aspects, which very much concerned us and over which we agonized [uns den Kopf zerbrechen]...Brecht observed the spaciousness of the work, which seized him [an sich riß] and produced [aufnahme] a countless number of associations in life and art."<sup>96</sup> Reich's particular phrasing in describing Brecht's reaction suggests the two central stakes of *Gestus* as Brecht developed them in light of Chaplin's cinema. On the one hand, we have the effect of Chaplin's fables, which seize [an sich reißen] the spectator only by virtue of the tear [riß] they induce in both performance and plot. Yet this shock, which one feels as if it is breaking over one's head, also leads the spectator to produce associations within the aesthetic realm of the film as well as the social realm of "life"

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<sup>94</sup> Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, p. 38.

<sup>95</sup> Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* 27 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 1204.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted by Gersch, *Film bei Brecht*, p. 163.

reflected therein. This moment of observing Brecht observing reveals more clearly than any other instance of the playwright's references to Chaplin in the twenties and thirties his particular *Umfunktionierung* of the Tramp comedies, converting the shocks induced by his *Gestus* into the production of knowledge linking art and life, performance and politics. Chaplin's *Gestus* becomes, in Brecht's epic theater, the filmic form for making contingency visible, testable and re-producible, a form that had a fundamental impact on the playwright's theories of performance, spectatorship and narrative. How this form united with a class contradictory content and political critique will be the focus of the following section.

#### IV. Inheriting Marx's Comedy

*"The man who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall, unless he happened to be a philosopher, one who had acquired by habit a power of rapid self-division and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomena of his own ego. But such cases are rare."* Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter."

Written at roughly the same time as Brecht's first recorded encounter with Chaplin in his diary, Robert Musil writes in his own diary about a potential article entitled "The new Humor," his examples including "the [Lausbübereien] of Brecht."<sup>97</sup> What Musil detected in Brecht's various *Lausbuben* [rascal, scallywag] is nothing other than the humor of slapstick as it was re-functioned by the playwright. Indeed, not only was the term "Lausbub" commonly used to describe the heroes of American slapstick films, but the very notion of a "new Humor" originates in slapstick's pre-history.<sup>98</sup> Such humor brought forth a "new comic aesthetic," drawing "on ethnic, working-class traditions of humor" "emphasiz[ing] the compressed joke or gag as its

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Musil, *Tagebücher* (Hamburg: Rohwolt Verlag, 1983), p. 631. See also Reinhold Grimm, "Neuer Humor? Die Komödienproduktion zwischen 1918 und 1933," *Die deutsche Komödie im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, ed. Paulsen (Heidelberg: Lothar Stiehm Verlag, 1972).

<sup>98</sup> For instance, *Peck's Bad Boy*, with Jackie Coogan (Chaplin's co-star from *The Kid*) was translated as *Jackie, der Lausbub* while *A Self-Made Failure* became *Lausbuben in Amerika*.

basic structural unit.”<sup>99</sup> Slapstick “institutionalized” this New Humor, which was first found in American burlesque, vaudeville, knockabout violence, ethnic jokes and humor magazines. And if that humor was focused on “the reality of life”—urban chaos, industrial labor and socio-cultural antagonism—it did so primarily through the *Lausbub*.<sup>100</sup> Thus, for Brecht those forms and techniques associated with Chaplin’s art could only be expressed in a trampish content, with stories, figures and jokes drawn from the violent, vulgar and trampish milieu of slapstick cinema.

Writing about Chaplin’s relationship to this New Humor, scholars have used another term for this figure, one with essential political resonances for our analysis of Brecht’s Chaplin: “lumpenproletariat.”<sup>101</sup> No slapstick scholar has followed through on the connection of this term to another great comic artist, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*’s Marx. Likewise, no Brecht scholar has read the many lumpen characters of epic theater in relation to Marx’s text, this despite Brecht calling Marx “the single spectator for my plays”<sup>102</sup> quoting the *Brumaire* and taking “as a motto” a passage from the *Brumaire*-anticipating “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”: “The final phase of a world-historical form is its *comedy*.”<sup>103</sup> Walter Benjamin would state more emphatically “Marx, who was the first to try to bring back the relations between people from their debasement and obfuscation in capitalist economics into the light of criticism, became, in doing so, a teacher—almost a master—of satire. Brecht was his pupil.”<sup>104</sup> Following Benjamin’s claim, Peter Christian Giese has drawn attention to the connections between Marx’s notion of

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<sup>99</sup> King, *The Fun Factory*, p. 110. See Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 26-58; and Albert McClean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual*, p. 106-137.

<sup>100</sup> McClean, *American Vaudeville*, p. 109.

<sup>101</sup> King, *The Fun Factory*, p. 81, 95 and 98; Mark Winokur, *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 96.

<sup>102</sup> Brecht, *Werke* 25 p. 129.

<sup>103</sup> Kost, *Geschichte als Komödie: Zum Zusammenhang von Geschichtsbild und Komödienkonzeption bei Horvath, Frisch, Dürrenmatt, Brecht und Hacks* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann Verlag, 1994), p. 193; Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings*, edited by O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 61.

<sup>104</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3*, p. 9.

comedy and Brecht's writings, arguing that the latter's satire sought to make "visible" "the objective, existing comedy (i.e. the historical obsolescence and false liveliness) of bourgeois society."<sup>105</sup> Yet what Giese ignores is how this stagist view of comedy, dependent on the necessary succession of the proletariat over the false semblance of bourgeois society, is troubled by a third term: the mob of *Lausbuben* headed by Louis Bonaparte. Marx would even use the word "satire" to describe the effects of the Paris Commune on the authoritarian manipulations of that "monstrous gnome" Adolphe Thiers, although much more interesting is how Marx makes such satire apparent through the logic and rhetoric of his inadvertent dramaturgy, a dramaturgy re-staged by his "pupil" Brecht, who himself wrote a play about the commune in which Thiers played a central and especially grotesque role.<sup>106</sup> It is when stagism is disrupted that comedy erupts in Marx's textual performance and if this tramp must remain marginal in Marxist science, Brecht, following his other great teacher Chaplin, places the lumpenproletariat at the center of the narrative universe of his plays. Having analyzed the formal element of New Humor in epic theater, the gestic montage of gags, I now turn to its second element: a political interest in the comic tramp. Because epic theater's form and history have been the most analyzed aesthetic form among Marx's heir and critics in the twentieth century, I will not only situate Brecht's re-functioning of Chaplin vis-à-vis Marx's own comic texts, but also telescope from this encounter out to contemporary discussions among political theorists who have innovated within Marx's discourse and program. In this I am following the lead of Patrizia McBride who has linked

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<sup>105</sup> Peter Christian Giese, *Das 'Gesellschaftlich-Komische': Zu Komik und Komödie am Beispiel der Stücke und Bearbeitungen Brechts* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1974), p. 2. Terry Eagleton, one of the few other scholars to connect Brecht to the *Brumaire*, ends up making the same argument about Marxism and comedy: "The only reason for being a Marxist is to get to the point where you can stop being one. It is in that glib, feeble piece of wit that much of the Marxist project is surely summarized." See Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (New York: Verso, 1981), p. 160.

<sup>106</sup> Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*, ed. Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 166.

Brecht's "early aesthetics" during the Weimar era to a politicizing mode of performance that resists the comforting sureties of both vulgar Marxism and cynical moralism.<sup>107</sup>

We can say of Marx's humor that it is highly ambiguous since it seems to originate in a desire for its own cancellation. Marx's savage parody of Louis Bonaparte's farcical repetition is reliant on the promise of a world where parody would be unnecessary because "with the prevalence of entirely transparent relations, there would be nothing for parody to do..."<sup>108</sup> The goal of such humor would be the elimination of the antagonism (e.g. class struggle) that initiated its performance. Yet there is in this emergence an implicit recognition of the requirement for humor, its jokes, witticisms and barbs a means for producing and highlighting social antagonisms as opposed to clearing them away in some naïve hope for a victory of the proletariat. It is therefore not surprising that in those texts where Marx deals most specifically with the crisis points in his science his humor comes to the fore. The name of this crisis in the *Brumaire* is lumpenproletariat. Jeffrey Mehlman and Peter Stallybrass have drawn attention to the lumpenproletariat in Marxist theory, identifying it less through its historical features, and more through a heterogeneous assemblage within Marx's rhetoric.<sup>109</sup> This assemblage demonstrates its place as an element staining the dialectic between bourgeoisie and proletarian central to Marx's critique of the state. The lumpenproletariat cannot be isolated as rural or urban, rich or poor, because it is less a determined class and more a rhetorical nomination tying together disparate elements beyond the production-bound definitions imposed by Marxism, hence its very

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<sup>107</sup> Patrizia McBride "De-Moralizing Politics: Brecht's Early Aesthetics," *Deutsche Vierteljahrs Schrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 82:1 (2008), pp. 85-111.

<sup>108</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Reading Marx: The Case of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*," *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 283.

<sup>109</sup> See Peter Stallybrass, "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat," *Representations* 3 (Summer 1990), p. 69-95 and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx / Hugo / Balzac* (London: University of California Press, 1977), p. 12-41. Mehlman's analysis of the parasitic quality of the lumpenproletariat is especially relevant, as the term *Lausbub* includes the word louse.

status as criminal and beyond history: “From the aristocracy there were bankrupted roués of doubtful means and dubious provenance, from the bourgeoisie there were degenerate wastrels on the take, vagabonds, demobbed soldiers, discharged convicts, runaway galley slaves, swindlers and cheats, thugs, pickpockets, conjurers, card-sharps, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, day-labourers, organ grinders, scrap dealers, knife grinders, tinkers and beggars...”<sup>110</sup> Reversing the Hegelian dictum he claims to be following in the first, famous sentence of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, that “by repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency, becomes a real and ratified existence,” the problem of Bonaparte and the Society of 10<sup>th</sup> December, is their farcical contingency, their spectrality.<sup>111</sup> Marx’s satire of Bonaparte and his mob would seem to spring from “hostility toward ghosts...that sometimes fends off terror with a burst of laughter.”<sup>112</sup> Such laughter would be nothing more than a sign of anxiety in the face of a historical teleology now out of joint.

Beyond this anxious scorn, there is another kind of laughter, one which is insistent less on the stagist satire of bourgeois ideology and more interested in a spatially contingent configuration of roles, attitudes and gestures. Such humor is found most prominently in Marx’s constant use of chiasmus, which repeats phrases only to reverse their terms: “[The French bourgeoisie] defied the sword; now the sword rules over it. It destroyed the revolutionary press; now its own press is destroyed” and so on.<sup>113</sup> Bonaparte’s revolution repeats the empty phrases of his uncle without paying attention to how these gestures refer and relate over time. Chiasmus perfectly expresses this emptiness because it maintains the phrase while reversing the contents

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<sup>110</sup> Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*, p. 77-8.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted by Bruce Mazlish, “The Tragic Farce of Marx, Hegel, and Engels: A Note,” *History and Theory* 11.3 (1972), p. 335. This move has been well analyzed by both Derrida and Martin Harries. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) and “Homo Alludens: Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire,” *New German Critique* 66 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 35-64.

<sup>112</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 58

<sup>113</sup> Marx, *Later Political Writings*, p. 112.

within a given rhetorical arrangement. This chiasmic catalogue is preceded by an earlier list of “crying contradictions” but I would like to focus on what precedes that passage:

The proletarians are betrayed and dropped by the democratic party.... The democratic party, for its part, rides on the shoulders of the bourgeois republican party. The bourgeois republicans no sooner believes themselves set up than they shake off their burdensome friend and support themselves on the shoulders of the party of order. The party of order hunches its shoulders, allows the bourgeois republicans to topple off and heaves itself onto the shoulders of the armed forces. It fancies that it is still sitting on those shoulders when one fine morning it realizes that the shoulders have been transformed into bayonets. Each party kicks back at the one pressing from behind, and leans forward on the one pushing back. It is no wonder that in this ridiculous position each loses its balance, and after making the inevitable faces, each collapses in curious spasms.<sup>114</sup>

Marx’s stagist temporality has given way to spatial displacement. The social field is defined less by a guaranteed order of succession from one historical epoch to the next and more by a knockabout series of gestures and positions. This field is not defined by a dialectic between two groups, but rather involves multiple peoples and places across a farcical stage. It also explains Marx’s interest in chiasmus and why this passage directly leads to his longest list of contradictions since this rhetorical figure “indicates not only reversal and repetition but relationships of action and reaction, of cause and effect...”<sup>115</sup> Contradiction does not originate here in the violation of historical necessity, but in the constantly fraught negotiation of different identities over a time without continuous or necessary direction. Hence each group’s fixation on the pure present, moving from one alliance to the other with little regard for an obligatory past or expectant future. Future and past are not stages, but are rather discontinuous moments separated by the dispersal of the present. Here we witness the lumpenization of the social, each group obscenely jostling beyond its own given site, shifting from place to place only to fall on its ass, contradicting its expectations and desires. The lumpenproletariat is defined by its lack of a fixed place within the social hierarchy, as meaningless as those spasms on the faces of each party as

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52-53.

<sup>115</sup> See J.P. Riquelme, “*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Karl Marx as Symbolic Action*,” *History and Theory*, 19.1 (February 1980), p. 61.

they stumble over each other. Rather than reducing history to a terrifying ghost story, the lumpenproletariat here figures the political as an all too present, ridiculously arranged set of forces, positions and mechanisms. The time of politics is not hideously out of joint and in need of sarcastic correction, but is rather out of joint in essence, history's comedy not something to be wished away, but instead performed and made visible "so that mankind shall separate itself *happily* [mit Heiterkeit] from its past."<sup>116</sup>

At the other end of the political spectrum, Charles Baudelaire developed, four years after the *Brumaire*'s writing, an almost identical understanding of the comic, his primary example of English pantomime bearing an uncanny resemblance to Marx's slapstick scene: "They set about preparing for the great disasters and the tumultuous destiny which awaits them.... Then they turn to a game of leap-frog, and once their aptitude and their agility have been duly established, there follows a dazzling volley of kicks, punches and slaps which blaze and crash like a battery of artillery."<sup>117</sup> By submitting to a particular historical "destiny" Marx, like these clowns, not only engages historical mechanism, but also finds in these kicks, spasms and shocks a spectatorship that is at one with its performance and thus actively different from the blind repetition of the past. Marx also famously admired English comedy, specifically the comedies of Shakespeare, whose *Midsummer Night's Dream* receives a special point of place here: Bonaparte "assembles then thousand ragamuffins [Lumpenkerl] who were supposed to represent the people the way that Klaus Zettel [Nick Bottom] represented the lion."<sup>118</sup> Following Derrida, it is also likely that Marx's love for chiasmus originates in speech from *Timon of Athens*.<sup>119</sup> Perhaps more

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<sup>116</sup> Marx, *Early Political Writings*, p. 61.

<sup>117</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," *The Painter of Modern Life*, translated by Charvet (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), p. 162.

<sup>118</sup> Marx, *Later Political Writings*, p. 78.

<sup>119</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 51-53.



intriguingly, chiasmus is itself a kind of gag in language, a mechanical or formal repetition that, in its rush for temporal causality and consequence, trips over an altered content, its seeming necessity the very means by which contingency erupts. Marx and Baudelaire, diametrically opposed in their politics, share a love for rude mechanicals and comic actors of English origin. In this they allow us to return to Brecht and his particular love for the Englishman Chaplin and the “business” of his particular *Lausbub* and *Lumpenkerl*. Recalling the star’s use of that term in his *Autobiography*, Brecht would, like Baudelaire before him, lament at his own nation’s incapacities for physical comedy, never more exposed than in a certain linguistic failing: “There is in German no actual term for the pantomimic, which the English stage names business [in English] and which we for the most part insert half-heartedly and with embarrassment.”<sup>120</sup> One half of this “business” was the comic *Gestus*, but the other half was equally important and triangulates Brecht vis-à-vis his teachers, Marx and Chaplin: the political stake of the lumpenproletariat and above all its grotesque representative, from Hitler to Arturo Ui, Napoleon to Hynkel.

## V. The Marx Brothers

*“The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin till it has stripped off all superstition from the past. Previous revolutions required recollections of world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to realize its own content. There phrase transcended content, here content transcends phrase.”*—Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

*“In reality there is no difference between form and content, and what Marx said about form is valid here too: it is good only in so far as it is the form of the content.”* Brecht, *The Three Penny Lawsuit*.

A few scholars have drawn connections between *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and Brecht’s epic theater, most notably Martin Harries. But aside from ignoring Brecht’s own interest in and citation of Marx’s text, there is a far more striking omission in Harries’ essay: “One of Brecht’s

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<sup>120</sup> Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* 27, p. 1172.

theses in 'A Short Organum for the Theatre' has particular resonance here. Brecht writes of the actor: 'At no moment must he go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played. The verdict: 'he didn't act Lear, he was Lear' would be an annihilating blow to him.' For Marx, the verdict on Bonaparte - he didn't act Napoleon, he was Napoleon - is an annihilating blow."<sup>121</sup> This distinction is based on an earlier text from 1934, "Interview with an Exile," where a far more relevant example is deployed: "The actor doesn't have to be the man he portrays. He has to describe his character just as it would be described in a book. If Chaplin were to play Napoleon he wouldn't even look like him; he would show objectively and critically how Napoleon would behave in the various situations the author might put him in."<sup>122</sup> Similar to other references to Chaplin at this time (as well as to the oft-used example of an actor playing Napoleon), references linking the actor's technique as Brecht understood it to Chinese dramaturgy, *Verfremdung* and *Gestus*, this sentence is the closest link the playwright ever drew between Marx and Chaplin. Regarding the former, Brecht's particular example of Napoleon recalls the *Brumaire*, a text that he had read already in the early thirties, and specifically Harries' argument about the "annihilating blow" of becoming a character as opposed to playing one. As I have argued, it is the chiasmic gap between these two positions that Marx's text opens up, portraying Bonaparte as a bad actor, an epic re-casting produced by "contradictory tasks," in Marx's words, "the confused poking about to try to win over and then to humiliate now this, now that class, turning them all equally against himself; and his uncertainty in practice forms a highly comic contrast to the peremptory and categorical style of governmental decrees, a style obediently copied from the uncle."<sup>123</sup> Like Chaplin and the epic actor he inspired, Marx's text emphasizes that the more

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<sup>121</sup> Marx, *Late Political Writings*, p. 46.

<sup>122</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 67.

<sup>123</sup> Marx, *Later Political Writings*, p. 124.

automatic the imitation is, the more likely *Gestus* will erupt, especially in situations of confusion, humiliation and antagonism, all of which produce the comic contrast essential to that eruption's effect.

While Brecht shared Marx's interest in Shakespeare, hence the example from *King Lear*, the earlier text's hypothetical of Chaplin playing Napoleon was not so hypothetical. As was widely reported both in the United States and in Germany, Chaplin announced several times in the late twenties and early thirties his stated ambition of making a comic biopic about the French emperor.<sup>124</sup> Marx had already written a kind of screenplay for such a film in his *Brumaire*. Louis Bonaparte is, in the rhetorical acrobatics of Marx's text, nothing other than a tramp version of his uncle, like Chaplin's character a ridiculous imitation that undermines itself as much as it does the original model, an undermining suggested at the end of Marx's text where the nephew's chicanery causes the uncle's bust to comically "plunge to the ground."<sup>125</sup> The film Chaplin would make in place of his Napoleon project is even more relevant for our purposes: *The Great Dictator*, like the *Brumaire* before it, infects the grand and pompous actor with the absurd nothingness of *Gestus*, which Chaplin accomplishes by playing both the Jewish barber and the dictator, Hynkel. This split between the nothingness of the outsider and the ridiculous grotesquerie of dictator would be repeated in Brecht's approach to the dictator in *Schweik in the Second World War*, where a gigantic visage of Hitler is paired with the diminutive, Chaplinesque Schweik (himself oft linked to the Tramp by Weimar critics). Brecht did not romanticize the literal-minded Schweik, but rather showed, at the play's conclusion, the ease with which a tramp

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<sup>124</sup> *Die Lichtblick-Bühne* would report on Chaplin's various attempts in July 1926 and April 1933. See also the *Neue Berliner Zeitung* (10/19/1926). Very little has been written about Chaplin's *Napoleon* project, but there is a dossier of images and letters related to its planning on the Criterion Collection's DVD of *The Great Dictator*, assembled by Chaplin archivist Cecilia Cenciarelli.

<sup>125</sup> Marx, *Later Political Writings*, p. 127.

might submit to fascism. When Chaplin re-wrote his Weimar adaptation of *Schweik* in Hollywood he hoped that none other than Peter Lorre would play the title role.



Figures 5-6: “Charlie Chaplin plays dictators” and “Hallo, Charlie Chaplin!”

This polarity or transferability between victim and perpetrator, charlatan dictator and lumpen outcast becomes clear in two caricatures of Chaplin from the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*, in which Brecht himself occasionally published. These two images, one by the great caricaturist Karl Arnold, suggest that the script to *The Great Dictator* was written *avant la lettre* during the last desperate years of the Republic. The first image, drawn in response to the earliest reports of a Napoleon-centered film from Chaplin in 1926, shows the imagined comedy of such a film, with Chaplin in the top left panel playing the dictator in a setting not dissimilar to the recently released *The Gold Rush*, complete with bear. By this time Hitler was not yet the political force he would become in the early thirties, yet with the famous echo of the Tramp’s

mustache, Hitler's growing presence would suggest to many German writers some essential continuity between the two men. In 1932 Kurt Tucholsky would write for *Die Weltbühne* a satirical "school essay" comparing Hitler with Goethe, describing the former: "And suddenly the Führer came. He had a mustache like Chaplin, but not funny enough by half."<sup>126</sup> Although journalists around the world would increasingly make this comparison as Hitler grew in infamy, only German critics like Benjamin would go further than the mustache, arguing "Chaplin shows up the comedy of Hitler's gravity; when he acts the well-bred man, then we know how things stand with the Fuhrer. Chaplin has become the greatest comic because he has incorporated into himself the deepest fears of his contemporaries."<sup>127</sup> Such "fears" were double and in Arnold's image, inspired by Chaplin's visit to Berlin in 1931, we see the other side of the Tramp's German resonance: as victim of both political and economic violence. Arnold's series of increasingly brutal tableaux is introduced by an address to the visiting star: "If you look around Germany correctly you will find everywhere actors playing your role—in reality, without stage direction." These roles are depicted in the following six images of a tramp "dismantled," seeking work, hungry, "homeless," at the height of his abjection assaulted as a Jew by a Nazi foot soldier. Finally in prison Arnold does not offer a description, but the simple question of "Why?" It is unclear to whom this question is addressed, Chaplin or *Simplicissimus's* readers, but Arnold's polemical point remains clear: the Tramp may be a fanciful fiction in American cinema, but he is alive and not so well on the streets and sidewalks of Berlin.

The ambiguity of the lumpenproletariat, its simultaneous capacity for parasitic abjection and preposterous sovereignty, became the very means by which caricaturists for *Simplicissimus*, critics like Tucholsky and Benjamin and, most importantly, writers like Brecht understood and,

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<sup>126</sup> Kurt Tucholsky, "Hitler und Goethe," *Die Weltbühne* (5/17/1932).

<sup>127</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 3, p. 792.

in this last case, re-functioned the Tramp. This is a re-functioning that takes part in the Marxist inheritance that Brecht would claim in the early thirties, but it is an inheritance that, as Derrida argues, one must “sort out, critique, keep close by, and allow to come back.”<sup>128</sup> Central to this inheritance is the historico-conceptual figure of the lumpenproletariat. Stallybrass has charted out the history of this figure in the literature of the nineteenth century, arguing that the unrepresentability of the lumpen demanded its depiction, creating “strategies through which bourgeois spectators could depict, incorporate, or distance themselves from the outcasts of the city.”<sup>129</sup> More often than not such strategies demonized as much as they romanticized, and Marx’s own vicious rhetoric, his constant listing of the qualities of this non-group perfectly falls within this “aestheticization of the heterogeneous.”<sup>130</sup> Stallybrass quotes another example of such aestheticization, from the nineteenth century French writer Jules Janin: ““One day, I saw a man in rags, a terrible sight, coming into an inn in the rue Saint-Anne: his beard was long, his hair disordered, his whole body filthy. A moment later I saw him come out again well dressed, his chest laden with the crosses of two orders, an august figure, and he went off to dine with a judge. This sudden transformation frightened me, and I thought, trembling, that it was perhaps in this way that the two extremes meet’.”<sup>131</sup> This image allows us to link this mobile figure, never fixed as poor or rich, unproductive outcast or productive wealth-carrier, to an already familiar figure where such contradictory extremes do in fact meet—the tramp. Following Charles Musser, the tramp was already a nineteenth century anachronism by the time Chaplin converted it into at once a disgusting presence and a comic ne’er-do-well.<sup>132</sup> The same specular dynamic Janin

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<sup>128</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 109.

<sup>129</sup> Stallybrass, p. 75.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, p. 73.

<sup>132</sup> Charles Musser, “Work, Ideology, and Chaplin’s Tramp,” *Resisting Images*, ed. Sklar and Musser (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 62.

identifies in the lumpen is similarly in play with the tramp and this for reasons that are not at all coincidental: in nineteenth century United States, England and France—the three most developed industrial economies in the world—we find different names and faces for the same social phenomenon: a non-figure that is, in a sense, always anachronistic, moving below the progressive time of capitalism, appearing throughout the social ladder whenever things become unproductive, criminal, lazy and drunken. Most importantly, the Tramp seems to make the reality of the social itself flicker in some estranging way, undermining the firm distribution of roles, an effect already suggested in his very first appearance in the 1914 *Kid Auto Races*, where he, in his very interruptive presence, prevents a film crew from shooting a race. He is at once inside the social, potentially productive as worker, bourgeois or aristocrat, but is simultaneously outside it, interrupting the gestic arrangement of each of these roles. Its effects are nothing other than what we have seen in Chaplin's own performance: the exaggerative imitation of the normal, the distracted forgetting of past and future, a body bent this way and that by contradictory social demands and a playfulness that undermines the fixity of group identification and social representation. The Tramp's montage of contradictory classes is already apparent in his costume, whose origin Chaplin describes in his autobiography: "...on the way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large."<sup>133</sup> These disproportions in size, which reflect a body-space distorted beyond social recognition, suggest another set of contradictions. Chaplin's ensemble exists between poverty and wealth, with worn baggy pants, decrepit shoes, and penguin walk on the bottom half of his body, while the upper half has the tight, aristocratic coat and tie as well as bamboo cane and bowler hat. This last item

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<sup>133</sup> Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, p. 144.

offers something like a gestic synthesis of the Tramp's antagonistic fashion choices, its history as an item of fashion first of the aristocracy, then of the middle classes, and finally of the petit-bourgeoisie revealing a diffuse legacy.<sup>134</sup> The Tramp is social contradiction made manifest, identifiable neither with a single class position nor in any other recognizable social hierarchy. The slapstick scene of the various social groups in 1848 France tumbling over each other is premised on this very same dynamic and shares with Chaplin the same anti-hero, drawn from society's margins and now placed by these two Marx brothers at center stage.

If *Gestus* suggested a cinematic mode of performance, one based on the dialectical principle of montage, then the gestures of the lumpenproletariat entail another essential filmic quality imparted to epic theater. Recalling both Musser's historicist analysis of *Kid Auto Races* and Barthes' semiotic construction of "Chaplin-Man," Slavoj Žižek has suggested that "Chaplin's comic strategy consists in variations of this fundamental motif: the Tramp accidentally occupies a place which is not his own, which is not destined for him..."<sup>135</sup> While Chaplin's cinematographic approach was consistently simple even in to the sound era, offering a theatrical perspective that emphasized the performer (read: Chaplin) at the center of the frame, his conception of space within that frame was highly complex. In effect, the spectator's gaze was focused not simply on Chaplin's performance, but on the disjunction between its own vision and that of the other characters on screen, who either cannot see the Tramp or instead see him far too much, are shocked by his shocking presence within a genteel mise-en-scène. In Žižek's words, the Tramp acts as an "interposition" disturbing "'direct' communication between the gaze and its

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<sup>134</sup> For an analysis of the bowler and its various manifestations in twentieth century art, see Wollen, "Magritte and the Bowler hat," *Paris/Manhattan* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 128. For a more thorough analysis, with special emphasis on the Tramp-Mackie connection, see Fred Robinson, *The Man in the Bowler Hat: His History and Iconography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 118-119.

<sup>135</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 4.



‘proper’ object...”<sup>136</sup> The example of the Tramp’s originary appearance in *Kid Auto Races* suggests the importance of this strategy as does the iconic opening of *City Lights*, where the Tramp inadvertently interrupts the unveiling of a statue, sleeping in its arms and then rudely intimating sexual congress with a marble sword. While this moment has been read as an instance of the Tramp’s grotesque subversion of high society, the Brechtian interpretation emphasizes not transgression, but rather the way transgression exposes blind-spots within a social space.<sup>137</sup> This exposure is political because it is premised on making social conflicts laughable and thus thinkable, of showing spectators within the scene who double the film’s own spectators while also suggesting contrary ways of seeing and thus shaping space. In a later text entitled “Komisches,” Brecht offers a compendium of comic moments from across the arts. Chaplin is of course well represented, with a scene referred to directly following the “V-Effect” of the Tramp eating a boot: “In *The Gold Rush* Chaplin appears to his best friend, who is fevered by hunger, as a great chicken whom he would like to butcher.”<sup>138</sup> It is in that tension between ideal and social condition that defines Brecht’s understanding of the comic here, a gap that erupts cinematically as the spectator watches Big Jim watch Chaplin, whose gestures increasingly mime those of a chicken. This is funny for the same reason that Chaplin’s eating a shoe is funny, because of its alienating quality, but it is political because of the way this epic techniques formalizes a social content of degradation and desperation. This “form of the content,” to quote Brecht’s paraphrase of the *Brumaire*, is precisely the lumpenproletariat *Gestus*.

In contrast to Arnold’s caricature, there is never a clear division between victim and perpetrator because one can easily transform into the other. This is the lesson of Chaplin’s two

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> See Tom Gunning, “Chaplin and the body of modernity,” pp. 237-245 and William Paul, “Annals of Anality,” *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, edited by Horton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 109-130.

<sup>138</sup> Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 19* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) p. 464.

great films of World War II, *The Great Dictator* and *Monsieur Verdoux*, the one a realization of the earlier goal of making a comic film about Napoleon and the other a satire that reversed the direction of influence, with Brecht and a number of other Weimar exiles pointing the star in a more radical direction. While Brecht would use nonsensical sounds to emphasize the gestic way of speaking Chaplin would channel such nonsense into a hilarious take-down of Hitler's grandiloquent, media savvy performances. This occurs during an early scene, a rally where Hynkel screams, shouts and violently gestures in a pidgin language peppered with nonsense, grunts and random German phrases.



**Figure 7: A cough interrupts Hynkel's speech and the dictator dances to Wagner**

Several things are worth noting here. First, there is the joke in which Hynkel literally gags as he shouts his vitriol, raising his fist à la a Riefenstahlian Hitler and then succumbing to coughs. Not only is his attempted stature destroyed by this coughing, but the overlap of nonsense and coughing suggests that the violence of a dictator's speech lies less in a usually boring, often poorly worded content and more in physical and vocal gesture, which rely on certain affects to attach to their display. The coughing moment fissures this attachment and the moment when Hynkel reestablishes his previous pose is already laughably undone—through such interruption Hynkel is, according to Andre Bazin, nothing other than “Hitler's nothingness,” a nothingness

that can only manifest as *Gestus*.<sup>139</sup> But this laughter has a Brechtian bite in that it is immediately greeted with cheering, the comical disjuncture between nonsense and its reception both funny and horrifying. Hynkel silences this applause with an emphatic wave of the arm and immediately it is gone, turned off like a switch, approaching, in its medial self-consciousness, *Verfremdung*, and thereby suggesting Hitler's own status as a media figure, one in tight control of his image and voice (mocked in the ridiculously genteel narration that interprets Hynkel's hate-mongering nonsense in the most benign of ways). An even better example of such estrangement comes in the film's second most famous scene, the dictator's balletic dance with the globe, set to Wagner's prelude from *Lohengrin*. Rather than restricting his portrayal of Hitler to the apoplectic, Chaplin, like a Brechtian Napoleon, comically reduces the dictator to a delicate dancer, one whose exquisite movements still cannot prevent the world from exploding. Hynkel is both ridiculously childish and horrifying. Whereas the Tramp avoids such grandiose gestures, rather relying on a jerky economy of motion, Hynkel, like that "old naturalistic school of acting...with its large emotions"<sup>140</sup> Brecht contrasted with his Chaplin-played Napoleon, relishes them, full identifying with his role and proclaiming "Aut Caesar aut nullus, emperor of the world" as he first clutches the globe. This binary (Caesar or nothing) perfectly demonstrates the film's parallax of Hitler via the nothing of the trampish Barber (the excluded Jew) becoming the dictator. The film's end-title disclaimer, "Any resemblance between the dictator and the Jewish barber is purely coincidental" playfully insists on this contingency in the very repetition of resemblance. Despite the film's climactic appeal to humanism and peace, a speech that Chaplin would claim as his own in subsequent performances for the radio and in print, the implicit ambiguity of this coincidence is, as Žižek has argued, present in the film's soundtrack, where the

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<sup>139</sup> Andre Bazin, *Essays on Chaplin* (New Haven: University of New Haven Press, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>140</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 68.

Wagnerian prelude during Hynkel's ballet recurs as the speech reaches its climax, crowds cheering at Chaplin's great dictation.<sup>141</sup> This confirms Benjamin's other crucial insight on the relationship between film and fascism, from a footnote in the "Artwork" essay: "Radio and film are changing not only the function of the professional actor but, equally, the function of those who, like the politician, present themselves before these media. The direction of this change is the same for the film actor and the politician, regardless of their different tasks.... This results in a new form of selection-selection before an apparatus-from which the champion, the star, and the dictator emerge as victors."<sup>142</sup> This intersection of star and dictator, and more broadly of Wagnerian monumentalism and Brechtian technique, would reach its post-modern culmination in the first section of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler: Ein Film von Deutschland* (1977).



**Figure 8: From the first part of Syberberg's *Hitler***

Although *The Great Dictator* remains one of the few Chaplin features to never earn reference in any of Brecht's writings, there is much continuity between Hynkel and Brecht's two great satires of Hitler, both the previously mentioned *Schweik* as well as *Arturo Ui*, which was

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<sup>141</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 133-4.

<sup>142</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, p. 50.

already influenced by Brecht's other beloved American film genre, the gangster picture. Recalling Brecht's casting of Charles Laughton in the Los Angeles premiere of *Galileo* Karsten Witte goes so far as to wonder if Brecht ever considered casting Chaplin in a production of *Ui*.<sup>143</sup> Chaplin himself was on hand for that premiere and though he confessed to not understanding the play his attendance was a sign of his acquaintance with the playwright along with a number of other left-leaning German exiles including Salka and Berthold Viertel, Hanns Eisler and Lion Feuchtwanger. Charles Maland has argued that it is only by focusing on Chaplin's friendship with these figures, especially as the star became increasingly persecuted by both government and press for his political leanings, that one can understand his first complete turn away from the Tramp in *Monsieur Verdoux*. As Maland writes, "It is not unreasonable to assume that the sharply ironic and satiric comedy that emerged in *Monsieur Verdoux* was influenced by the humor Brecht and Eisler enjoyed," a humor, it is worth recalling, that emphasized "social bite."<sup>144</sup> Thus this film suggests an exceptional moment in which Brechtian tone, style and humor seem to be influencing Chaplin, in which the student returned the teacher's favor. While the empathetic, romantic Tramp films earned Brecht's scorn in *The Three Penny Lawsuit*—in the famous final scene from *City Lights* "Chaplin knows perfectly well that he must be 'human', that is, philistine [*spießig*], if he is to be permitted to do anything different and to this end changes his style in a pretty unscrupulous way"—all empathy is liquidated in Chaplin's tale of a petit-bourgeois Bluebeard who murders wives to earn money for his family in the midst of the great

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<sup>143</sup> "Brecht und der Film," p. 64-65.

<sup>144</sup> Charles Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 358-9. See also Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940's* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 284.

depression.<sup>145</sup> Brecht would go on to note in his *Arbeitsjournal* how much he liked the film, suggesting that it should instead be called “The Provider.”<sup>146</sup>

Brecht never explained why this title would be more apt than *Monsieur Verdoux* yet it is not hard to figure out—*The Provider* has an ironic meaning, with Verdoux providing his invalid wife and child money to survive the depression by murdering his “other” wives and stealing their money. Verdoux justifies this provision in his final speech, given after being sentenced to death: “As for being a mass killer, does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and little children to pieces? And done it very scientifically? As a mass killer, I am an amateur by comparison.” One can provide life only by providing death, a cynical logic that would culminate, Chaplin implies, in the mass slaughter of World War II. This speech’s “bite” no doubt provoked a loud laugh from Brecht—he had already written similar themed speeches and songs throughout the twenties and thirties. Verdoux, dressed up suavely yet cheaply like Mackie Messer, is only at the extreme end of the Tramp when, like Hitler, he “acts the well-bred man,” a failed petit-bourgeois whose place outside production ensures only the most violent form of labor. The discomfort audiences felt when first seeing this film came from a lack of empathetic identification, their beloved Tramp replaced by a cold opportunist much like Mother Courage. Verdoux is a tramp who will do anything to avoid becoming the Tramp, less a poor soul and more a devil. Verdoux is a Brechtian hero because he embodies, in his situation and attitude, a repressed contradiction between a society’s stated morality and its material conditions. The more those conditions betray the possibilities of being moral, the more morality itself becomes farcical, either ending in hypocritical judgment or, conversely, honestly adapting itself to the

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<sup>145</sup> Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, p. 171.

<sup>146</sup> Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, p. 422.

conditions in the most amoral of ways. Verdoux takes the latter path but only by overidentifying with the present situation. Like the Tramp at his most violent, lazy and unproductive, Verdoux looks at the obscene underside of the law, the exceptional space where morality no longer applies and opportunism, selfishness and war run rampant. By avoiding happy or tragic endings, Chaplin's film fully submits to Brecht's dictum, "Take your cue not from the good old things, but from the bad new ones."

## **VI. Conclusion**

*"[Chaplin's walking cane and shambling shoes] have gradually gone, along with the little black brush on the upper lip, from props to Attributes, and almost...in a mythological sense, Chaplin belonging like the grapes of Bacchus, the cornucopia, Schimek's umbrella, Bert Brecht's leather jacket."* Alfred Polgar (1928).

Throughout the nineteen thirties German artists and thinkers scratched their heads trying to understand Nazism's victory over such a large portion of the German population. Those inspired by the creation of the Soviet Union as well as theoretical advances in Marxism were faced with a catastrophe in both their revolutionary world-view and, more importantly, in the field of action and thought that view both supported and clarified. To understand what had happened and might still be done, theorists returned to that marginal figure who seemed to best capture the heterogeneous alliance of groups supporting Hitler and the pathetic and powerful figure of Hitler himself, the figure of the lumpenproletariat. Writing in 1936 the Austrian socialist Otto Bauer would claim that "The main significance of the term *lumpenproletariat* is not so much its reference to any clearly defined social group which has a major socio-political role, as drawing attention to the fact that in extreme conditions of crisis and social disintegration in a capitalist society large numbers of people may become separated from their class and come to form a 'free floating' mass which is particularly vulnerable to reactionary ideologies and

movements”<sup>147</sup> Bauer’s emphasis on the spatial dispersion of the lumpenproletariat, its potential existence across the social field among a whole host of groups or identities, is complimented by Ernst Bloch’s focus on temporal dispersion, what he famously called the “non-contemporaneous.” In his 1935 collection *Heritage of Our Times*, Bloch would directly cite *The Eighteenth Brumaire* after claiming that the “pauperized petit bourgeois of today is to be taken very seriously,” especially since the Marxist left had abandoned it to fascist ideology: “It is necessary that Marxism should no longer be misunderstood as the other side of ‘empty mechanics’, that it should irradiate those depths of revolutionary content within it which it abandons to its enemies for deception, to non-contemporaneous elements for exploitation...”<sup>148</sup> The emphasis on “revolutionary content,” similarly recalling Marx’s distinction between “phrase” and “content” in the *Brumaire*, refers to the non-synchronous elements of the lumpenproletariat, its trampish, criminal refusal to submit to the “empty mechanics” of either capitalist productivity or communist revolution, the teleological surety of both thereby threatened.

In the same text, Bloch quotes none other than Brecht, with whom he more often than not disagreed. Perhaps this was because he sensed that of all his contemporaries it was the Augsburger who had most confronted this “revolutionary content” in all its ambiguity, both as promise and disaster. He did this by inheriting Marx’s comedy and thus by transforming it, merging class dialectics with the inherently dialectical nature of cinematic gestic, embodied by the most “cinematic” of actors, Chaplin. For Brecht, Chaplin’s Tramp embodies the void between, beyond and beneath social forms, scattering them spatially into a slapstick mise-en-

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<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Stallybrass, p. 70.

<sup>148</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, translated by Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 139-140.



scène and disjoining them temporally within a perpetual comic present. He does so through the materiality of its *Gestus*, the nonsense of its bumbling and the alienated difference of any element from itself. Following Stallybrass, Ernesto Laclau argues that for any such difference or antagonism to visibly arise, its articulation “has to have something of the nature of the lumpenproletariat.”<sup>149</sup> When such figures appear they will look and act like Marx’s wastrels, cheats, thugs, pickpockets, pimps and soldiers. Such a list reads like a casting sheet for many of Brecht’s plays, which link figures of appetite and abjection to revolutionary change without the manipulative aid of timeless morals, empathy or irony. Brecht, unlike the socialist realists of his time, does not present simple heroic portraits of noble proletarians against evil capitalists— instead he finds roles beyond the dichotomies of Marxist science and its Second International aesthetics: capitalist criminals, vengeful prostitutes, trampish gangsters. These characters are not to be identified with, critically dismissed or cynically accepted. Rather precisely as such interstitial, supplementary anti-roles these dregs manifest a political site where antagonistic forces come into contact, with no easy resolution through romantic empathy or ironic distance.

Beyond the platitudes of moral injunction, Brecht turns to pimps, scoundrels, prostitutes and soldiers because it is such a mob, on the edge of any proper social utility. That is the comic spirit of Marxism that Brecht inherited and, following Chaplin, re-functioned, translating the lumpenproletariat and the humor it provoked in Marx into a comic apparatus for performing the political. The nonsensical materiality of *Gestus* names both the trampish content of this performance as well as the cinematic form by which social normalization is shook. This Marxist spirit of humor requires submission to the necessary theater of history as a contingent, mobile object of social relations and forces, while developing in that very submission an ability to see,

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<sup>149</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), p. 152.

for writer, actor and spectator, where the present is most vulnerable, most subject to satirical rerouting and playfully pedagogic experimentation. The comic shock of Chaplin's performance, the most shocking thing Brecht encountered as a spectator, encouraged the playwright's own submission to the farcical flux of history, a stage where there are no heroes or villains—only fools.

## CHAPTER 3

### FELIX THE CAT, THEOBALD DER REBUS-KATER AND THE UNCANNY ANIMATION OF WEIMAR CINEMA

#### I. Dial *M* for Mickey

*“And then there were the Mickey Mouse comics. In this entertaining world of images and stories I found a regular school of life. I remember how once I was sick in bed for a while and my mother had to bring me the newest Mickey Mouse comic book when she went shopping. They must have been out of the latest issue, and my mother returned with a German comic... You cannot imagine how dull, boring, and empty it seemed to me! It followed the same formula of comic book stories, but it was so stupid, so arrogant, so obviously ‘made-for-children,’ without any irony, subtlety, or humor, that I started to hate this imitation, this falsification, this German aping of the American original. I am telling you all this to demonstrate how willing I was as a child to let myself be colonized by another country and let it show me what ‘pleasure,’ ‘ease,’ and ‘adventure’ meant. There were German words for this, but they were empty, they had no correlates in actual experience.”* — Wim Wenders, “Thinking about Germany”

On the hunt for a killer, the police of Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) get their first break when a bakery wrapper is found at the crime scene of Elsie Beckmann’s murder. From this single clue, they are able to ring their way around the crime scene, visiting shops in the surrounding areas for information on the elusive killer. As detectives visit a bakery, the viewer’s eyes cannot help but notice a familiar friend in the middle of the frame, a figurine of Mickey Mouse on the counter. This desire to look comes not only from Mickey’s fame, but also because we, like the film’s urban inhabitants, know from the wanted posters plastered throughout the city that “a few sweets, a toy, an apple” are enough “to bring a child to their doom.” Yet the viewer also knows that the Mickey doll is not to the liking of Hans Beckert, the murderer, Elsie or, no doubt, Lang himself: in the film’s first sequence, it is a giant balloon, described by Tom Gunning as “possessing a grotesque humanoid shape, a round head with goggle eyes, a bulbous body and dangling arms and legs,” that Beckert buys for Elsie from a blind street vendor—who but a blind man could sell such balloons?<sup>1</sup> Refusing to show any hint of violence, Lang cuts between Elsie’s

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A theoretical elaboration of many of the concepts in this chapter has been published as “Life driven by Death: Animation Aesthetics and the Comic Uncanny,” *Screen* 54:1 (Spring 2013), pp. 1-19.

<sup>1</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 171.

mother awaiting her daughter at home, a home now hauntingly empty and thus *unheimlich* and the murder itself, which is telegraphed on an abandoned field by two objects. First, Elsie's ball, which had almost gotten her run over by a car before her fateful encounter with Beckert and second, that grotesque balloon, which is caught among inhuman power lines before blowing away, thus concluding the film's first sequence. As Gunning states, "The *inanimate motion* in these shots, the ball rolling to a halt, the balloon carried by the wind, emphasizes their distance from the human,"<sup>2</sup> a distance already implicit in that humanoid balloon, whose frozen flight is all the more striking given the surrounding emptiness of this non-urban space in the middle of the city, like Elsie's home alienated from all familiarity.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1: Mickey's cameo in *M***

In this opening sequence *M* recalls a range of thematic, filmic and historical associations embedded throughout Weimar cinema. Whether it is an invisible Beckert's shadow drifting across his own wanted poster, Grieg's fairy-tale tune "In the Hall of the Mountain King" (plus the resonance of the "The Pied-Piper of Hamelin"), a studio-city filled with alienating angles,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Anton Kaes likewise describes this balloon as "anthropomorphic" and "animistically com[ing] to life." Anton Kaes, *M* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 14-15.

dangerous city streets and *Hintertreppe* [Backstairs] apartments or Peter Lorre's neurasthenic performance as Beckert, the film bears many traces of its era's cinematic legacy. This legacy includes spaces of Expressionist horror, the gothic and romantic merging with the modern, urban narratives of both the *Kammerspiel* [Chamber play] and *Strassenfilm* [Street film] variety and an exaggerated acting style. This is best represented by Else's balloon, which calls to mind so many twisted, distorted and uncanny *Kreaturen*. It is the balloon's ambiguity that is most disturbing as it is unclear whether its grotesquerie embodies the shadowy Beckert or instead bears both metonymic and metaphorical witness to Elsie's corpse; whether, in or despite its grotesque Otherness, it represents perpetrator or victim. Or is this split already implicit in Beckert himself, who is both inhuman agent of and childish victim to an uncontrollable, murderous and hypnotic fetish?

*M* would thus bear witness to the historical experiences of Weimar Germany and its concomitantly "anxious modernity."<sup>4</sup> Like the "inanimate motion" of Elsie's balloon, the Weimar subject's loss of control, its immobilization, corresponds with some unexpected animation of what is typically lifeless and subject to human mastery. Writing in 1925 about a murder case that would partially inspire *M*, Siegfried Kracauer draws attention to this animating division: "The more relationships among people become objectified, with emancipated things gaining power over people rather than people seizing hold of the things and humanizing them, the more easily it can and will happen that the disfigured humanity that has been repressed into the deepest recesses of unconsciousness will reappear in hideous form in the world of things."<sup>5</sup> Thus, it should not surprise us that the balloon's trajectory matches exactly the same angle of the power lines in which it is caught, as if animated by the electricity coursing through the wires,

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<sup>4</sup> Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, p. 206.

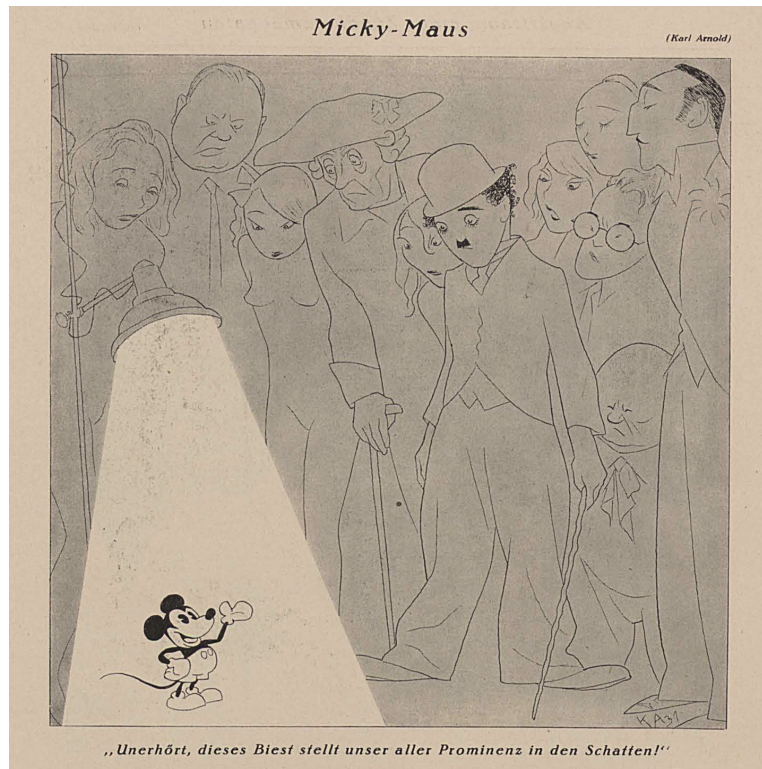
connoting the shock effect of the urban, technological and industrial, a shock for which many individuals, like Beckert, paid with their egoic consistency. Such threatening animation is thus also indicated by a human being reduced to “inanimate motion,” the flip side and end result of an undead object world. The merging of the grotesque balloon and the hyper-modern power line is a disturbing emblem of Weimar cinema’s “historical imaginary” (to use Thomas Elsaesser’s term), one in which an animate modernity took on ghostly tones, where the most modern of societal phenomena were translated into age-old myths: Golem, vampires, somnambulists, homunculi, androids, ghosts and pied pipers. Cinema above all expressed this strange, paradoxical ambiguity, the most modern, reality-based of optic technologies suddenly the venue for unreal effects. If anxiety is the fundamental affect of Weimar cinema, then it is only because of a certain animation.

It is at this point that I want to return to Mickey Mouse. If the Mickey figurine in *M* functions as a negative indicator, pointing in its familiarity only to the unfamiliar and wholly Other balloon, then it simultaneously suggests an alternative approach to the anxiety-inducing animation that preoccupied Lang as well as so many of his contemporaries. Rather than representing a superficial distraction from that anxiety, what if Mickey, and with him a host of popular American cartoon heroes of the twenties and early thirties, responded for Weimar audiences, critics and artists to precisely the same phenomena as the canonical films of Weimar cinema? Mickey was already, by the time of *M*’s release in August 1931, a huge success in Germany and in this following on the heels of his successful forerunners, Otto Messmer’s Felix the Cat and the Fleischer Brothers’ Inkwell Imps.<sup>6</sup> Essential to the popularity of these figures was their directly confronting an animated world with pluck, humor and perverse playfulness in

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<sup>6</sup> Carsten Laqua, *Wie Micky unter die Nazis fiel*, pp. 15-43; Storm and Dreßler, *Im Reiche der Micky Maus: Walt Disney in Deutschland 1927-1945* (Film Museum Potsdam, 1991), pp. 8-64.

contrast to psychic breakdown, anxiety or a will to order. This confrontation becomes clear when juxtaposing Mickey's minor cameo in *M* with his German debut as caricatured by Karl Arnold in the pages of the humor magazine *Simplicissimus* in January 1931.



**Figure 2: Now it is Mickey who is the object of attention.**

In contrast to *M*, here Mickey is the center of attention, literally overshadowing both his American peers in the *Groteskfilm* (Chaplin and Lloyd) as well as German and French icons Emil Jannings, Adolphe Menjou and Otto Gebühr. As one *Film-Kurier* critic tellingly wrote of Mickey, “Du spielst mit Schwertern und mit Krieg, / Mit allen Formen der Musik, / Mit dem, was bitter Ernst uns ist, / und wandelst es mit weiser List.”<sup>7</sup> Mickey gained further tribute among German toymakers, who made remarkable wind-up tin toys that have since become, because of

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Laqua, p. 32. Translated: “You play with swords and with war / with all forms of music / with what is to us bitterly serious / and change it with clever trickery.”

their craftsmanship and detail, highly valuable collectibles (Kenneth Anger filmed them for his loving appreciation of the Disney icon, *Mouse Madness* (2004)).

American cartoon characters inverted the effects and affects of Weimar cinema, bringing forth the images, motifs, techniques and fairy-tales familiar from Expressionist horror, *Kammerspielfilm* and *Neue Sachlichkeit* thriller, while quite literally spinning each genre on its head, exaggerating already exaggerated gestures to the point of the ridiculous. Succumbing to an animate modernity did not, for these cartoon characters, entail psychic dissolution any more than it required absolute control of self or world—rather, it meant a fearless proximity to that which was most threatening. Audiences did not laugh at Mickey, Felix or Koko the Clown because of their own distance from these characters’ sufferings, but rather because they were mimetically instructed, by virtue of the psycho-physical experience of watching these films, to find ways to laughably re-master a ceaselessly vivified world. Rather than freezing or dissolving in the face of such animation, these cartoons offered a “regular school of life,” following Wim Wenders’ not dissimilar post-war experience, one which exuded a “feeling of living in the here and now and being satisfied with it... You can only live in the present if the past is an open book and the future an open field.”<sup>8</sup> As opposed to the destiny-obsessed fatalism of so much Weimar cinema, the submission of these characters to a plasmatic, libidinally saturated world short-circuits the shocking contingencies that modern spaces relay, re-claiming them as the very possibility for experiencing the new beyond the burdens of fate or tradition.

Despite Wenders’ chastising the German aping of American superficiality and fun, the all too common narrative of German humorlessness does not quite match the reality of Weimar culture. On the one hand, there were artists who adapted the lessons taught by this school,

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<sup>8</sup> Wim Wenders “Talking about Germany,” *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*, edited by Cook and Gemünden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), p. 55.



instructing their audiences not to fear uncanny spaces, but to rather seek them out as a site for both vertiginous fun as well as a kind of playful knowledge production. On the other hand, such adaptation hinted at repressed, hidden or overlooked traditions of the comic grotesque or uncanny in both recent and older Germanic literary and visual cultures. This explains how so many detected in Mickey Mouse, for example, the familiar power of the German fairy tale to unsettle the fatalist myths propagated in the name of some eternal, death-obsessed German spirit.

In this chapter, I will focus on a few moments of such “aping,” eccentric to dominant considerations within Weimar Germany’s own self-analysis as well as present day scholarly accounts. I will first identify the essential components of the dominant anxiety-bound animation we have witnessed in *M*, before turning to that anxiety’s repressed underside—humorous acknowledgment and affirmation of the grotesque and uncanny, revealed, for figures as various as Freud, Lukács, Brecht, Grosz and Benjamin, by a different animation, one expressed best by the attractional pulse of American cartoons and trick-films. I will then turn to a close analysis of a specific series of filmic texts, Paul Leni and Guido Seeber’s crossword *Rebus* series. These films integrate montage, stop motion animation, audience interactivity and, most importantly, character animation drawn explicitly from Messmer’s Felix the Cat to playfully guide its spectators within a chaotically assembled world of texts, images and objects. It does so, as I will illustrate, by inverting the dominant trends and techniques of Weimar cinema, following the lead of its American cartoon role models while articulating alternative forms of humor, play and instruction contained within both contemporary and past German cultures. The first half of this chapter is concerned with one side of the Weimar subjectivity mentioned previously, that of destabilizing, creaturely and repressed animation, familiar above all from Expressionist film. The second half follows the other side of Weimar culture, that of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, bringing

animation in line with a playful, pedagogical mode of testing the film spectator not for the sake of protection or armoring, but rather to engage animate objects and desires in order to better understand and navigate the modern world. Like Wenders after them, the *Rebus* films privilege the child spectator for both sensational entertainment as well as to matriculate them within an American “school of life.”

### III. If it moves, kill it...

*“The Germans, used as they are to savage legends, have an eerie gift for animating objects. In the normal syntax of the German language objects have a complete active life: they are spoken of with the same adjectives and verbs used to speak of human beings, they are endowed with the same qualities as people, they act and react in the same way.... Animate objects always seem to haunt German narcissism. When couched in Expressionist phraseology the personification is amplified; the metaphor expands and embraces people and objects in similar terms.”*—Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, uncanny animals seemed to be coming home to roost. The return of the repressed by which Freud, in 1919, defined the *unheimlich* made this homecoming especially haunting, asserting a power of the surrounding space and its creaturely objects as much as it provoked a fundamental de-vivification of the human subject, whose powers physical, linguistic and mental in turn broke down. Spyros Papapetros is the sole scholar to analyze such “covert exchanges” in terms of a concept of animation, whose modern variant he defines “as the transference of energy from a semidepleted animate subject to its surrounding architecture, which becomes menacingly reinvigorated.”<sup>9</sup> Both a continuation and radicalization of the nineteenth century’s haunted houses and crowded boulevards, the “symptoms of modern animation” collapsed the comforting distinction between plush bourgeois interiors, which Walter Benjamin identified as a narcissistic “stimulus to intoxication and dream” and the increasingly commercial, chaotic and object-filled city-street, the two spaces that defined the experience of an

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<sup>9</sup> Spyros Papapetros, “Malicious Houses: Animation, Animism, Animosity in German Architecture and Film—From Mies to Murnau,” *Grey Room* 20 (Summer 2005), p. 8. I follow Papapetros in identifying animation not in terms of a specific technical or medial determinism and instead view it more as a complex of linguistic, visual, psychological and cultural effects.

“architectural uncanny” on the cusp of modernism.<sup>10</sup> The Austrian feuilletonist Alfred Polgar perfectly expresses this anxiety in the essay “Die Dinge” [The Things], where his apartment seems to come alive every time he turns his back on it—for this “neurasthenic” “the living is merely surviving, the dead stirs, the mute receives voice, the shadows bodies, the things sight and breath.”<sup>11</sup> Suddenly, his modest living room becomes a “nocturnal Forest,” his stool transforms into a hedgehog, each creak in his door connotes a worm in the wood and even the darkness has “squinting eyes” so that finally there is “everywhere mysterious liveliness, the feeling of being touched by invisible hands, to become grazed by the breath of nearby beings...”<sup>12</sup> In this incapacity, Polgar follows his countryman Hugo von Hofmannstahl, whose famous “Lord Chandos Letter” likewise connotes physical and linguistic exhaustion in an encounter with the animated, animal-like and uncanny: “My mind [Geist] compelled me to see all things...in an uncanny closeness.”<sup>13</sup> This compulsive *Geist*—an ambiguous word to say the least—forces Chandos to see in “mute and sometimes inanimate beings”—his examples include “an insignificant creature, a dog, a rat, a beetle...” —“nothing dead anywhere.” Chandos has already described one such animated image: the death throes of poisoned rats, which haunt his mind and are most animate at the moment when they have just died. The crisis of language that Hoffmannstahl’s text famously announces, the fragmented transformation of a word into an eye and of self into void, installs the animation of the deathly *Kreatur*, which Polgar, Vischler and, as

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Eiland and McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 216. The phrase “architectural uncanny” is taken from Anthony Vischler’s *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992). For a discussion of the uncanny elements in Benjamin’s concept of the interior and its relation to literary and filmic narratives of detection see Tom Gunning, “The Exterior as Interior: Benjamin’s Optical Detective,” *boundary 2* 30:1 (2003), p. 105-130.

<sup>11</sup> Originally, “Das Lebendige is...überlebendig, das Tote regt sich, das Lautlose bekommt Stimme, der Schatten Körper, die Dinge Blick und Atem.” Alfred Polgar, “Die Dinge,” *Kleine Schriften Band 2: Kreislauf*, ed. Reich-Ranicki (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Hugo von Hofmannstahl, “Ein Brief,” [http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/?id=5&xid=1247&kapitel=1#gb\\_found](http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/?id=5&xid=1247&kapitel=1#gb_found). I have slightly revised the translation found in *The Lord Chandos Letter*, translated by Rotenberg (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), p. 117-128.

we will now see, a host of filmmaking contemporaries detected in malicious things, animalized spaces and neurasthenic selves.

It is no wonder that of all the animals F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* would bring with him, it would be rats, of which Freud would write in his *Ratman* case-study "In legends generally the rat appears not so much as a disgusting creature but as something uncanny—as a chthonic animal, one might almost say, and it is used to represent the souls of the dead."<sup>14</sup> It is precisely to such legends that the Weimar art cinema of the teens, twenties and early thirties turned, translating the most contemporary of experiences into gothic tales. For every trauma-provoking threat there was a corresponding animation produced on the screen, an animation composed of both spatial vivification and subjective depersonalization. According to Hermann Warm, the set designer of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), "Films must be drawings brought to life," but it is important to make clear exactly what *kind of life* is thus expressed.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, an immobilized and anxious central character, usually male, is confronted with a destabilizingly foreign situation, event or being, one that threatens the very core of his self-identity, revealing some transgressive underside beneath the petit-bourgeois ego. This is the narrative motif of the split personality, which one can find in the first *Autorenfilme*, *The Other* (1913) or *The Student from Prague* (1913), but is also more than evident in *Caligari*, *From Morn to Midnight* (1922), *Raskolnikow* (1923), *Nosferatu* (1922), *Orlac's Hands* (1924), *Warning Shadows* (1923), *The Golem* (1920), *Phantom* (1922), *The Eyes of Mummy Ma* (1918) and even distinctly non-expressionist films such as *New Year's Eve* (1924), *Backstairs* (1921), *Pandora's Box* (1929), *Metropolis* (1927) and *The Blue Angel* (1930). After enduring the traumatic ordeal of this division and the various narrative events that escalate its effect, the protagonist is left riven, haunted and angst-bound. On

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<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Case Histories*, translated by Strachey (New York: Touchstone Books, 1993), p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 68.

the other hand, that which is revealed by this shadowy doubling comes to life, expressed either by a fragmented, jagged and disorienting world, one whereby “the protagonists’ restless inner world animates their surroundings; they encounter their environment like a repressed and haunting double” or instead by some embodiment for the repressed, demonic and death-signaling Other unleashed by the film’s particular preoccupation.<sup>16</sup> What Papapetros calls “animalization” leads to automatism, a destructive insistence and repetition compulsion, one evident in objects diverse as the Golem, the android Maria, the somnambulist Cesare, Lola Lola’s legs or Orlac’s self-annihilating hands.

The spectator, via the formal and narrative animation of these films, unconsciously doubles the protagonists, overcome by a feeling of surrounding dread, anxious about the cinematic space which ensnares their gaze. Paradoxically, it is off-screen space that most directs the spectator’s vision—like Polgar’s neurasthenic sensing the darkness squinting at him, “attention is directed towards off-screen space, emphasizing what is not seen but must be there, and thus invoking an absent cause, invested by the spectator with imaginary power, encouraging him to give shape and substance to the invisible.”<sup>17</sup> This giving shape cannot ever adequately figure or make visible the unseen, perhaps because the entire frame of reference is itself skewed, defined by an always absent, commanding and hypnotic gaze that both guides and frustrates the audience’s *Schaulust*. This “uncomfortable, anxious subject position” implies for Weimar cinema as a whole, again following Elsaesser, a doubling of the character’s immobility among the audience, which doubts what it is seeing and feeling: “Spectator positions are...marked by the same lack of knowledge, the same anxiety that characterizes the protagonists: torn between on-screen space, which seems insufficient and off-screen, which is (‘dread-fully’) unknowable,

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<sup>16</sup> Kaes, *Shellshock Cinema*, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 91.

the spectator is locked into the fiction as a split subject.”<sup>18</sup> The mixture of on-screen dissolution, aided by those various formal or stylistic effects, with anxiety of who or what lies off-screen, produces a decidedly hypnotic effect, which was, not surprisingly, one of the thematic obsessions of the era, most famously, in Lang’s first *Mabuse* film where cinema and hypnosis explicitly coincide.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this hypnotic repetition, the only other option is that route Vischer chose when confronting the maliciousness of objects—an animosity that rejects, controls or eliminates animated otherness for fear of succumbing to the threat of chaotic dissolution. Either submission to the hypnotic, ever-absent gaze and thus inevitable egoic collapse or an attempted mastery of the gaze itself, adopting it as the only means to secure oneself against the vivification of all one fears, hates or secretly desires.

While I do not take complete issue with this dichotomy as it is embedded and performed within the practices of these still famous Weimar films, I do want to argue against both the teleological essentialism implicit in such oppositions as well as the starkness of the opposition itself, which consigns to the Weimar subject an anxious, split and, too often, male position. What if, against Papapetros, “modern animation” is not restricted simply to the stark binary of “mastery *or* destruction,” “narcissism and magic” or “the void”?<sup>20</sup> What if, on the contrary, Weimar Germany’s animate modernity necessitated alternative identificatory positions, ones whose affects reach beyond anxiety, fear or dread, finding in an increasingly mobile object world neither maliciousness nor fetishistic overload? If the dominant trends of German cinema were not capable of proffering such positions, where were they to be found?

### **III. The Uncanny in comic overdrive...**

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> See Stefan Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema*, translated by Jansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Papapetros, “Malicious Houses,” p. 30.

“Where and how did we get the idea that the Germans are a stolid, phlegmatic race? In truth, they are widely removed from that. They are warm-hearted, emotional, impulsive, enthusiastic, their tears come at the mildest touch, and it is not hard to move them to laughter.”—Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad*.

Perhaps the best place to start for re-articulating and re-thinking modern animation is with the central concept of Weimar cinema itself: Freud’s uncanny. Aside from being a central frame of reference for film scholars, the uncanny is itself a product of its period, a document of the immediate post-war experience, what Freud calls at his essay’s beginning “the times in which we live,” as well as an indirect reflection of expressionist cinema itself.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in analyzing the figure of the double and its associated mirrors, shadows and “guardian spirits,” Freud explicitly follows Otto Rank’s 1914 study, which takes as its point of departure Ewers’ *The Student of Prague*.<sup>22</sup> Even more relevant for our purposes is another early text that Freud discusses, Ernst Jentsch’s “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” where one of the key examples of uncanniness is “doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate.”<sup>23</sup> Re-reading this passage, Freud will summon up a list of familiar images and motifs from gothic and Romantic fiction, but which are also all too familiar from the most well-known German films of his time: dolls, automata, waxworks, epileptics or grotesque animal-human hybrids, who, in *Totem and Taboo* (published one year before Rank’s study) are likewise connected to that repressed stage when there is no “hard-and-

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<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *Writings on Art and Literature*, translated by Strachey (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 194. The key section of Elsaesser’s text, from which I have quoted extensively, is titled “The uncanny, or the powerless power of the gaze” (91). Paul Coates’ book begins with a discussion of the uncanny on its very first page while Heidi Schlüpmann’s seminal study of Wilhelmine cinema is entitled *The Uncanny Gaze* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010). Finally, Kaes references the uncanny several times throughout his *Shellshock Cinema*, identifying cinema itself as the most uncanny of modern powers, a point he also raises on the first page of his essay “Modernity and its Discontents: Notes on Alterity in Weimar Cinema.” See Paul Coates, *The Gorgon’s Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> “The Uncanny,” p. 210 and Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, translated by Tucker (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. 4-7.

<sup>23</sup> Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” translated by Sellars, *Angelaki* 2:1 (1996), p. 11. Not cited by Freud, but equally relevant for our purposes is this passage: “The horror which a dead body (especially a human one), a deaths’ head, skeletons, and similar things cause can also be explained to a great extent by the fact that thoughts of latent animatedness always lie so close to these things” (15).

fast line between [children's] own nature and that of all other animals.”<sup>24</sup> In moments when such animism recurs, the animal can only appear as uncanny, becoming, as in Freud's two famous animal-related case studies, an “anxiety-animal.”<sup>25</sup> If anxiety and animation are structurally linked within Weimar film, then it is only due to a feeling of uncanniness. Indeed, in that most creaturely of films—*Nosferatu*—the narrator explicitly describes the sped up, reversed image of Orlok in his carriage as an “uncanny vision.”

Taking this insight at his starting point for a seminar devoted entirely to the originary affect of anxiety, Jacques Lacan explains precisely how the recursive return and repression by which Freud defines “this class of frightening things” makes the subject anxious: “Imagine that you are dealing with the most relaxing of desirable things, in its most pacifying form, the divine statue which is only divine. What would be more *unheimlich* than to see it coming to life, namely to see it showing itself as desiring!”<sup>26</sup> In Lacan's “return” to Freud, a return that has itself guided so many psychoanalytic readings of Weimar cinema, the animated desire of the object effectively turns the tables on the subject, whose own desire “is supported by the ideal of an inanimate object,” a freezing, fetishizing enjoyment that Lacan explicitly connects to cinema: “Think of a fast-rolling cinematographic movement stopping all of a sudden, freezing all of the characters at one point. This snapshot is characteristic of the reduction of the full, signifying scene...to what is immobilized in the phantasm.”<sup>27</sup> Fantasy turns into nightmare when the statue or scene starts moving, animated by a desire beyond the viewing subject's narcissistic pleasure. The uncanny occurs when the fundamental fantasy of the subject's self-image, secured in that famous mirror

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<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, translated by Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950), p. 157.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, *Three Case Studies*, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Lacan, unpublished seminar, “Anxiety.”

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Didi -Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, translated by Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 77-78.



stage by which a foreign, specular image yokes itself to the ego, dissolves or distorts, revealing a repressed enjoyment connected to another subject, one defined by grotesque desire. In the text that has most inspired psychoanalytic film theory as well as many approaches to Weimar cinema, Lacan suggests that in the history of art there was a movement that followed Bosch in successfully representing this disintegration: expressionism. If fantasy is founded on the subject's viewing the tranquil scene with a mastering look, then expressionism depends on placing the gaze, that negative object or navel that structurally eludes scopic capture, within the image itself. Achieving a "satisfaction" connected to the Freudian death drive, "it is in a quite direct appeal to the gaze that expressionism is situated."<sup>28</sup> When the gaze appears, the film scene starts to uncannily move, the statue comes to life and the darkness starts squinting but, as with expressionist cinema, this statue is a Golem, a life death-driven, the inversion of the immortal "I" of the mirror stage into its other, the insistent, compulsive and undead, that which embodies "a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people."<sup>29</sup>

With Freud's uncanny and its Lacanian re-reading, the psychoanalytic structure of modern animation becomes clear. Yet Freud's text is far from consistently argued and contains a series of highly ambiguous moments, which undermine an anxiety-centered reading of the uncanny and its accompanied animation. As we have seen, the key feature of the uncanny is its repetitive structure, its haunting insistence of repressed and destructive desire. In a key paragraph Freud first describes a personal experience of such repetition in which he continually gets lost in an Italian town then going on to describe a typically romantic scene of someone losing their way

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 101. That section is entitled "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*."

<sup>29</sup> Freud, "The Uncanny," p. 212.

in a misty mountain forest. Like a reversal of Polgar's "Die Dinge," Freud goes from this nocturnal forest to the interior of the room, yet it is precisely here where an affect beyond anxiety, dread or fear is cryptically suggested: "Or one may wander about in a dark, strange room, looking for the door or the electric switch, and collide time after time with the same piece of furniture—though it is true that Mark Twain succeeded by wild exaggeration [*groteske Übertreibung*] in turning this latter situation into something irresistibly comic."<sup>30</sup> Later in the text, discussing "apparent death and the re-animation of the dead" Freud will apparently distinguish the example of Twain and its "feeling of the comic" (and with it the fairy-tale and Bible story) from the uncanny he finds far more directly in Hoffmann. It is at this point that an ambiguity creeps into the text, an ambiguity centered around the relationship between aesthetics, affect and a certain cultural approach to issues uncanny. Freud states, "We might say that these preliminary results have satisfied *psychoanalytic* interest in the uncanny, and that what remains probably calls for an *aesthetic* enquiry. But that would be to open the door to doubts about what exactly is the value of our German contention that the uncanny proceeds from something which has been repressed."<sup>31</sup> There is something very strange in this statement. Freud has at no point connected the uncanny or its theorization to a cultural lineage or tradition, except perhaps in his primary example, but here, at precisely the point where aesthetic experience threatens the scientific claims of psychoanalysis, such a claim suddenly becomes inexplicably necessary.<sup>32</sup> Since the fairy-tale cannot be directly excluded from German culture, one is left to assume that it is the American example that requires this distinction.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 213.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 224-5.

<sup>32</sup> The next paragraph will go on to distinguish the experience of fiction from the real experience of the uncanny, but this distinction has already been undone by Freud's admission on the uncanny as a highly aesthetic phenomenon. See Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*," *New Literary History* 7;3 (Spring 1976), pp. 525-48.

Freud's largely critical opinions of the United States and its repressive culture are well known, but Mark Twain was an exception to this rule of general suspicion.<sup>33</sup> Following Nicholas Royle, the sole scholar to discuss this passage in "The Uncanny," Freud had read Twain's work fondly, imitated him in correspondence and even seen him speak in Vienna in 1898.<sup>34</sup> If the United States largely served Freud as "principal exhibit in his indictment of bourgeois morality," then Twain seemed to be an exceptional and humorous outlet for critiquing, undermining or flat-out ignoring such repression.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, Freud's most developed reference to Twain comes at the end of his *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*, where the latter serves one of the key examples for the former's concept of humor. In fact, humor is what allows us to resolve the ambiguity of Freud's text, the ambiguity of an uncanny experience that produces a feeling of the comic in excess of a feeling of anxiety.

Humor is "the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego," a "rebellious" means of obtaining pleasure during threatening moments, especially those moments when "repression...has failed."<sup>36</sup> Yet if the comic tests Freud's theory of the uncanny so too does the uncanny, in turn, test his theory of humor. For if humor is primarily a means for the pleasure principle, and with it the narcissistic ego, to remain triumphant in the face of some threat, the uncanny represents a kind of meta-threat that pulls the rug out from the ego itself, not simply a moment when repression fails, but when the return of what is repressed grotesquely repeats. The

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<sup>33</sup> See Peter Gay, "Freud's America," *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History*, pp. 303-314.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Royle, "Hotel Psychoanalysis," *Angelaki* 9:1 (April 2004), pp. 3-14.

<sup>35</sup> There is some indication that Germany was always for Freud the preeminent site of repression. Writing in 1925, Freud would note with not a little irony "To negate something in a judgment is, at bottom, to say: 'This is something which I should prefer to repress.' A negative judgment is the intellectual substitute for repression: its 'no' is the hallmark of repression, a certificate of origin—like, let us say 'Made in Germany.'" "Negation," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 9* (London: Hogarth, 1976), p. 236.

<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Humour," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 21*, translated by Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1976), p. 165 and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 290.

uncanny therefore presents a hallucinatory moment in which the ego itself has no ground to stand on and thus, for a comic feeling to even be possible in such a situation, it must not aim for pleasuring a conscious ego, but rather for satisfying the unconscious enjoyment of the superego. According to Kojin Karatanji, “The superego in humor...functions with spontaneity and activeness, but not with consciousness. If it functioned consciously, it would not be humor but irony and simple repudiation.”<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that this humorous super ego is not an agent of repression nor an obscene stand-in for the father of the primal horde—it is a distinctly death-driven super ego, one that “surmounts the automatism” of the neurotic or hysterical symptom and its broken gestures, by over-identifying with that automatism, exaggerating its already grotesque exaggeration. By doing so, it short-circuits the anxiety necessitated by the experience of the uncanny and generates an unconscious, “spectral affect”<sup>38</sup> associated not with the pleasure principle but rather with those drives which “bear witness to active subjectivity on a level that [is] not consciousness.”<sup>39</sup> The humor of the uncanny then is not an agency or a program, but is rather an improvisatory means of short-circuiting the link between anxiety (and its various symptoms: projection of a threatening environment, gestural immobilization or a counteractive superego) and the return of the repressed.

It is here where Royle’s interpretation of the Twain passage falls short: inexplicably emphasizing the Latin etymology of the (English) word “exaggeration” throughout, Royle ignores the important conceptual and semantic associations of the German word Freud uses, *Übertreibung*. Both *Übertreibung* and *Trieb* (Freud’s word for drive, poorly translated by Strachey as “instinct”) originate in the verb *treiben*, which connotes pushing, propelling, drifting

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<sup>37</sup> Kojin Karatani, “World Intercourse: A Transcritical Reading of Kant and Freud,” *Umbr(a)* (2007), p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Royle, “Hotel Psychoanalysis,” p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Karatanji, “World Intercourse,” p. 145.

or forcing. If the uncanny and its corresponding anxiety descends from the drive, like the anxious protagonists of *Phantom* or *Nosferatu* driven by the spectral, repressed Other of their desire, then we can say that a comic uncanny occurs when the protagonist and its projected environment accelerates this propulsion, exaggerates such driving into over (*über*)-drive.<sup>40</sup> Such humor, the improvisatory and unconscious condition for this comic uncanny, is found precisely in the scene Freud references, a chapter from, not coincidentally, *A Tramp Abroad*, the 1880 account of Twain's travels in Germany. This chapter reads at once like a lampoon of the gothic tales for which German authors were then so known as well as a repudiation of the uncanny modernism we have witnessed in writers like Vischer, Polgar and Hoffmanstahl or in those films most emblematic of Weimar cinema and its anxious historical imaginary. Twain stumbles about a German hotel room at night, confronted with seemingly alive objects and endless, alienating reflections of himself—what is funny here is not Twain's hallucination of such animations but his own over-animated, highly destructive response. The implicitly un-German "contention" of the comic uncanny is thus that anxiety is only one affective side of the coin, that the spatial and subjective dislocation of the uncanny offers both a threat of unconscious automatism as much as a chance for unconscious improvisation.

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<sup>40</sup> This link between psychoanalysis, the uncanny and the modern technological imaginary was picked up on by Freud himself. After all, "psychoanalysis, which is concerned with laying bare these hidden forces, has itself become uncanny to many people for that very reason" ("The Uncanny," p. 220) In his book on dreams, Freud would link the uncanniness of psychoanalysis to a particular, recurring image among his patients' dreams: "It is not surprising that a person undergoing psycho-analytic treatment should often dream of it and be led to give expression in his dreams to the many thoughts and expectations to which the treatment gives rise. The imagery most frequently chosen to represent it is that of a journey, usually by motor-car, as being a modern and complicated vehicle." See Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 419.



**Figure 3: Twain's destructive over-drive in *A Tramp Abroad*.**

There are thus two subjective sides to the death driven, one de-vivified by a threateningly animated projection of the repressed and the other brought to an exaggerated and over-driven humor, taking part in the projection's animation rather than freezing in fear. For Freud, libido, as opposed to desire, is always too present, too alive and the image he suggests for this highly mobile *Trieb* points to the creaturely nature of an immortal life, too fully lived for repression to contain: "For complete health it is essential that the libido should not lose this full mobility. As an illustration of this state of things we may think of an amoeba [Protoplasmatierchen], whose viscous substance puts out pseudopodia, elongations into which the substance of the body extends but which can be retracted at any time so that the form of the protoplasmic mass is restored."<sup>41</sup> Perhaps building on this image of an amoeba-like libido, Lacan would construct an

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Catherine Malabou, 'Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,' *diacritics*, 37:4 (Winter 2007), p. 83.

entire “myth” through which libido could be both understood and graphically figured, a myth he called “lamella.” Although Lacan introduces this term in a highly humorous way, “stress[ing] its jokey side” by calling it a “manlet” [*l’hommelett*] most commentators have stressed a more disturbing bent.<sup>42</sup> This is perhaps justified by Lacan’s own description:

This *hommelette*, as you will see, is easier to animate than primal man, in whose head one always had to place a homunculus to get it working. Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the *hommelette*, or the lamella. The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something...that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal—because it survives any division, any scissiparous intervention. And it can run around. Well! This is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelopes your face while you are quietly asleep... I can’t see how we would not join battle with a being capable of these properties. But it would not be a very convenient battle. This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ...is the libido. It is the libido, *qua* pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life.<sup>43</sup>

This passage comes from the very seminar that would emphasize the expressionist satisfaction of drive and its role as a harbinger of death and at first glance, the lamella seems only to be an extended metaphor of the expressionist *mise-en-scène* that Lacan has previously described. Indeed, its description is merely the other side of that “halted cinematic picture,” Warm’s drawings brought to undead life, which reflect that repressed part of the subject’s history beyond or retroactively “before” the mirror stage, when, as in *Totem or Taboo* or *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, there was no firm separation between child and world, human and animal. The lamella would then be both the presumed primal flux of this world as well as its uncanny representative for the now unbound ego, which it slowly envelops and entraps. The lamella is the paradoxical organ that is not part of this subject’s body, enveloping the subject and alienating it from both its

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<sup>42</sup> See Michael Grant, “‘Ultimate Formlessness’: Cinema, Horror, and the Limits of Meaning,” *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud’s Worst Nightmare*, ed. Schneider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 177-187.

<sup>43</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 197. See also *Ecrits*, translated by Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 716-718.

self-image and its image of the world itself, not to mention all the other corresponding, intersecting sensations.

Just as Twain presents an inverted, exaggerated image of the uncanny comically over-driven, so does the lamella provide Lacan with a decidedly cartoonish realm beyond anxiety and its various homunculi, figures already recognizable from the cinema of Freud's contemporary, German-speaking cinema. Whereas expressionism relies on filmic stand-still and a hypnotic off-screen gaze, Lacan will connect the lamella to surrealist montage, a "montage of the drive" "presented as having neither head nor tail."<sup>44</sup> Montage, in this case, implies temporal flux as opposed to spatial stasis, a shifting, exaggerative and repetitive distortion of a world become enjoyment, saturated with libido, which, like the lamella, bends and distorts figures, places and shapes, the reverse image of the static, supposedly immortal mirror ego. The lamella is an organ without body, a partial fragment that fits in no whole, "a phantom—an infinitely more primal form of life," compulsively repeating the difference within any claim an ego makes for figural consistency, semiotic sense or corporeal mastery.<sup>45</sup>

There are uncanny continuities between this analysis and another contemporary account of animation, written at roughly the same time as Lacan's first presentations on the mirror stage: the texts by Sergei Eisenstein on Walt Disney's cartoons drafted in the late thirties. The central concept Eisenstein develops is that of "plasmaticness," represented by

a being which has attained a definite appearance, and which behaves like the primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a 'stable' form, but capable of assuming any form and which, skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, attaches itself to any and all forms of animal existence.... A lost changeability, fluidity, suddenness of formations—that's the 'subtext' brought to the viewer who lacks all this by these seemingly strange traits which permeate folktales, cartoons, the spineless circus performer and the seemingly groundless scattering of extremities in Disney's drawings.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 169.

<sup>45</sup> Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 716.

<sup>46</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 21.



Eisenstein, not at all unfamiliar with Freud, will, in his memoir, connect this “initial ‘protoplasmic’ element” to a mythic childhood period before the ego’s fixed construction.<sup>47</sup> The “attractionness” of the folktale, circus or cartoon, an enticing effect on the viewer that Tom Gunning and Donald Crafton have followed Eisenstein in relating to an entire field of comic, fantastic and grotesque films in early cinema, is the playful affect, the “jokey side” of the uncanny, its spatial dislocation and temporal disjuncture.<sup>48</sup> And like the uncanny’s comic champion, that tramp abroad Twain, the specifically American phenomenon of trampish, creaturely cartoons emphasizes a nervous, violent and mobile metamorphosis, one that subverts the ruling *mise-en-scène* of Weimar cinema.

#### **IV. From *Groteske Übertreibung* to *Groteskfilm*...**

*“The Kaiser blinked, his eyes so dry they almost clicked. Americans...The American character had been such a part of his daydreams, his childhood, the need to bring it down to earth and study it seemed as impossible as lassoing a cloud. Which was something Americans might try.”* —Glen David Gold, *Sunnyside*.

In the German imaginary of the Weimar Republic, there is a through-line from American late nineteenth century humor like Twain’s right to the then very contemporary experience of American cartoons, slapstick and trick-films so popular in the three decades after film’s invention. The notion of a comic grotesque quite naturally follows the comic uncanny we have detected on the margins of Freud’s text, an uncanny exaggerated by a montage of libidinous, plasmatic and metamorphic pratfalls. According to Gerhart Pohl, writing in the socialist *Film und Volk* in 1929, the progenitor of the *Groteskfilme* is none other than Mark Twain, claimed by Pohl to be the “‘inventor’ of grotesque art.”<sup>49</sup> Pohl has an understanding of the comic grotesque

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<sup>47</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories* translated by Marshall (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12. See Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 56-62; Donald Crafton, “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy,” *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, pp. 106-119.

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

similar to Freud's, emphasizing "Übertreibung" as a means for making a repressed "impossible" suddenly possible. He goes on to connect this humor to the three great slapstick stars of the twenties, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton, but what is most important here is Pohl's implicit rejection of a German comic grotesque, beginning his essay with a list of the different artistic forms Germans are capable of producing before sarcastically dismissing Weimar cinema's weak capacity for comedy. It is precisely from American comedies, especially cartoons, the most grotesque of *Groteskfilme*, that Weimar audiences, thinkers and artists would draw on in both experiencing and effecting the grotesquely funny destruction of such hierarchies. Rather than completely ignoring or rejecting the emblems of anxiety endemic to Weimar cinema, American animation inverts these emblems through the disjunctive montage Lacan detected in the lamella and its drive. American cartoons are like lampooning parasites of the motifs, techniques and narratives of the predominant films of the period with this subversion activating repressed, forgotten or ignored elements of comic grotesquerie within German culture itself, traditions ranging from the fairy-tale to the rude children's story.

Take Georg Lukács' seminal 1913 essay, "Thoughts toward an Aesthetics of Cinema." This text has been taken by most scholars to be one of earliest intellectual documents of German expressionism and its inheritance of Romanticism.<sup>50</sup> Yet the only example of Lukács' cinematic "life without presence, a life without fate, without reasons, without motives, a life with which the innermost part of our soul will never become, nor can become, identical" is Edwin S. Porter's adaptation of the Winsor McKay comic strip, *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* from 1906.<sup>51</sup> Lukács describes a scene most directly drawn from an image in the McKay strip: "The fidelity to nature

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<sup>50</sup> See Kaes "Modernity and its Discontents," p. 136.

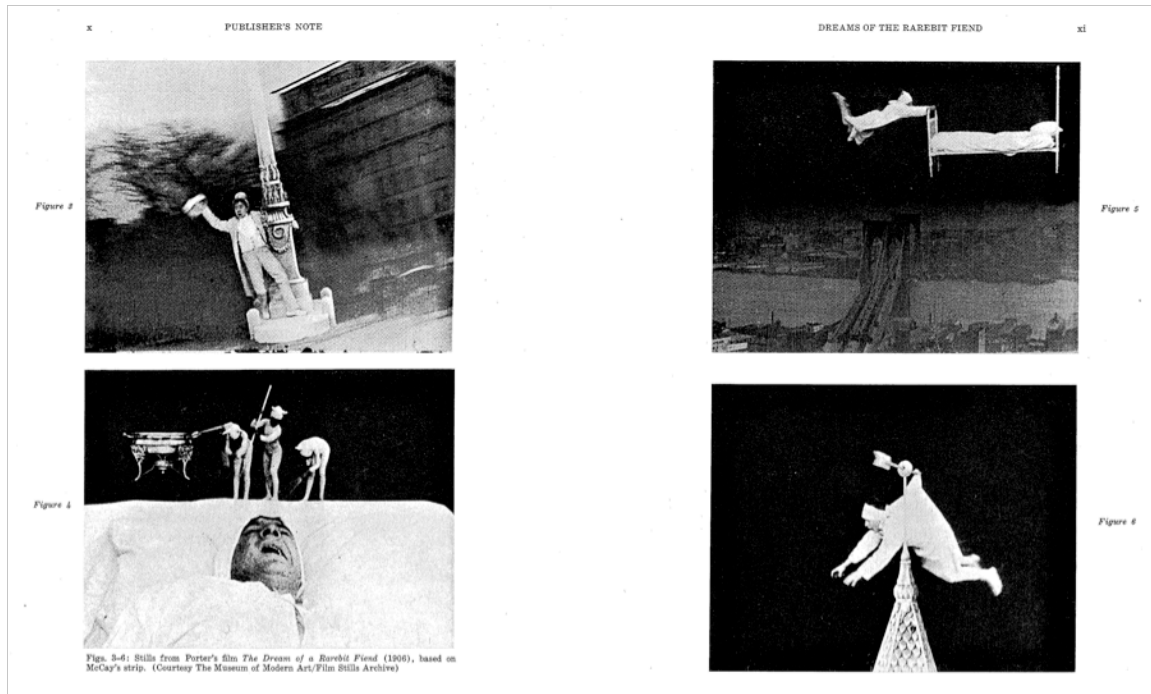
<sup>51</sup> Georg Lukacs, "Thoughts on an Aesthetics of Cinema," *German Essays on film*, translated by Garmer (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 13.

of the ‘cinema,’ though, is not attached to our reality. The furniture moves in the room of a drunken person, his bed flies with him—he was able to grab onto the edge of his bed at the last moment and his shirt waves around him like a flag—out over the city.”<sup>52</sup> This famous film, one of the great trick-films in early American cinema, utilizes practically every special effect technique of its time, including stop-motion animation of objects, which move according to their own will. McKay’s strip inadvertently follows the Twain episode that so tickled Freud: someone goes to sleep filled with undigested food (in McKay’s case, the rarebit of the strip’s title) and hallucinates a grotesquely animated adventure. In the case of Lukács’ scene, it is the bed itself that moves, flying across a modern metropolis that had already spun furiously during the protagonist’s drunken walk home. McKay was himself one of the first great cartoon artists, translating many of his strips, including *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend*, into groundbreaking animations. For Lukács the lack of presence on the part of the cinematic image, the implicit feeling that anything could appear at any moment, implies an experience of fatelessness. As opposed to a negative or off-screen space freighted with dread, these works produce a space saturated with metamorphic, plasmatic possibility so that even the empty white spaces interior to the cartoon image possess an intensely felt positivity, humming with virtual movement. Because “the world of the ‘cinema’ is a life without background and perspective, without difference of weights and of qualities” the viewer’s eye is not drawn to the outside of the image, but to the interior, where literally anything on screen could shift, move, explode or change in some surreal, funny way.<sup>53</sup> The plasmatics of the image, once again exemplified by a distinctly American hero, take place on the surface of the image, on those bodies, matters and spaces that exist as events rather than souls, joys rather than threats.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Lukács, p. 13.



**Figure 4: Porter's *Dream of a Rare-bit Fiend***

Just as they followed Lukács' lead politically and aesthetically throughout the Weimar era, so too did a host of German intellectuals unwittingly follow him in celebrating the adventures of American cartoon creatures. Like Lukács, Walter Benjamin was particularly interested in the animated body, writing throughout the late twenties and thirties paeans to Disney's Mickey Mouse. Many scholars have discussed Benjamin's reading of Mickey, drawing special attention to the compensatory, utopian function of his adventures for audiences damaged by the "dangerous tensions" of technology.<sup>54</sup> I will return to this argument in a later section, but for now I want to dwell on a feature of Benjamin's analysis unmentioned by critics: the importance of Mickey Mouse for German audiences in reactivating the subversive power of the fairy tale. This was an extremely common trope in the reception of American cartoons—according to *Die Lichtbild-Bühne*, "With these [Mickey Mouse films] the fairy-tale is newly

<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3*, p. 118. See Hansen, "Of Ducks and Mice" and Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 80-122.

born, but it is a different fairy-tale from that of our grandmothers, a modern, time-bound, magnificently living fairy-tale, separated from a haughtily sensitive chimney Romanticism, fresh and witty, full of incident and enchantingly comic.”<sup>55</sup> Somewhat in distinction, Benjamin saw Mickey as embodying a more repressed tradition of German fairy-tales, one likewise distinct from both gaudy imitations of Romanticism as well as more recent expressionist or symbolist interpretations: “Not since fairy tales have the most important and most vital events been evoked more unsymbolically and more unatmospherically. There is an immeasurable gulf between them and Maeterlinck or Mary Wigman. All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is.”<sup>56</sup> Without the symbolism of Maeterlinck nor the expressionism of Wigman’s dancers, Disney’s Mouse properly evokes the most radical strain of the fairy-tale. This provocation is, for Benjamin, embodied in the Mickey-like adventures of one of the greatest of Grimm *Märchen*, “The Tale of the Boy Who Set Out To Learn Fear,” which presents a comic uncanny itself uncannily reminiscent in motif and image of Twain, McCay or, as Benjamin claimed, Disney. Taking as its hero a “dumb” younger brother who “could not learn or understand anything,” this fairy-tale’s central motif, a joke really, is the boy’s desire to learn “was mir gruselt,” which one could translate as learning what makes one afraid or, following the English translator, learn what makes one’s flesh creep.<sup>57</sup> It is his dumbness, his insensitivity to the feeling of fear and its corresponding physical symptom, which makes the boy a hero. He accepts an offer from a king to stay in a haunted castle for three nights, the boy hoping to learn about fear and flesh-creeping, the king hoping to get his castle back, offering his daughter as

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Laqua, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 2*, p. 545.

<sup>57</sup> “Märchen von einem, der auszog, das Fürchten zu lernen,” *Kinder- und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), p. 34. I have followed, with partial revisions, the English translation in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Selected Tales*, translated by Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 20-27.

reward. On the first night, after slaughtering several malicious cats (as well as their returning ghosts), the boy lies down on a huge bed only to find the bed suddenly come to life, taking him throughout the castle. His response to the all too animated bed explains the success he has in eventually winning the king's daughter's hand: "'That's fine,' he said, 'only do it faster.' So the bed began moving as if it were being pulled by six horses, in and out of doorways and up and down stairs; flop, flip, it turned upside down and he lay right there underneath."

Like the rarebit fiend flying across the cityscape in his bed, like Twain crashing into everything in his seemingly haunted German inn, the boy travels about the haunted castle, more than willing to play victim to this ghostly world and all the more victorious as a result of this willingness. Indeed, one can say that victory comes not only from the boy's desire to be driven by these objects and creatures disturbingly alive, but to exaggeratedly animate them further, ride them faster and act more violently than they do. Because Benjamin's discussions of Mickey Mouse are scattered and schematic at best, we are left to speculate how and why he connected Disney's cartoon hero to the Grimms' protagonist, who "shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through."<sup>58</sup> In fact, the great cartoons of the twenties and early thirties, like the cinema of attractions before them, were obsessed, haunted by ghostly phantoms, haunted castles and mobile objects. Alan Cholodenko has drawn attention to early cinema's obsession with crypts, haunts and the uncanny, arguing that the animate life they produced with their new-found special effects was inescapably touched by death.<sup>59</sup> This partially explains why, from the Lumiere's *Le Squelette Joyeux* (1898) to Blackton's *The Haunted Hotel* (1907) to numerous Méliès shorts (featuring perpetually, like Porter et al, a sleeping man thrown into nightmares), so many films of the cinema of attractions depicted ghosts, skeletons and things come alive, as if

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<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3*, p. 157.

<sup>59</sup> Alan Cholodenko, "The Crypt, The Haunted House, of Cinema," *Cultural Studies Review* 10:2 (September 2004).

cinema itself, with its capacity to move the immobile, animate the undead, possessed a kind of inherent power of the uncanny. Not surprisingly would the development of the first cartoon studios in the teens and twenties, as with their film studio forebears, continue this obsession, converting the formal principle of animation, the ability to morph static images, forms and figures into the unexpected and surprising, into narratives prominently featuring precisely those motifs Freud was identifying as uncanny and which his contemporary German cinema anxiously duplicated.

While Cholodenko, and with him most contemporary scholars of animation, have drawn important attention to connections between Freud's concept and cartoons, few have explained how and why the uncanny is often depicted in a comic fashion in so many early animated films.<sup>60</sup> While one could explain such comedy by the seemingly inherent distance of cartoon reality, which is drawn, caricatured and full of impossible events and objects, from the viewer's own world, I do not believe this is a sufficient explanation. Once again it is Eisenstein who correctly drew a connection between the formal principles of animation and its earliest narrative preoccupations: "It's natural to expect that such a strong tendency of the transformation of stable forms into forms of mobility could not be confined solely to means of form: this tendency exceeds the boundaries of form and extends to subject and theme. An unstable character becomes a film hero; that is, the kind of character for whom a changeable appearance is...natural."<sup>61</sup> Eisenstein's subsequent example, the relatively late 1937 Disney short *Lonesome Ghosts*, explains that American cartoons' charm comes less from the comic-producing distance

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<sup>60</sup> For whatever reasons, scholars have enjoyed dwelling much more on the abject, nauseating or gothic side of things. Representative are three essay collections *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation*, edited by Cholodenko (Sydney: Power Publications, 1991), *The Illusion of Life 2: More Essays on Animation*, edited by Cholodenko (Sydney: Power Publications, 2007) and *Animated Worlds*, edited by Suzanne Buchan (London: Libbey, 2007).

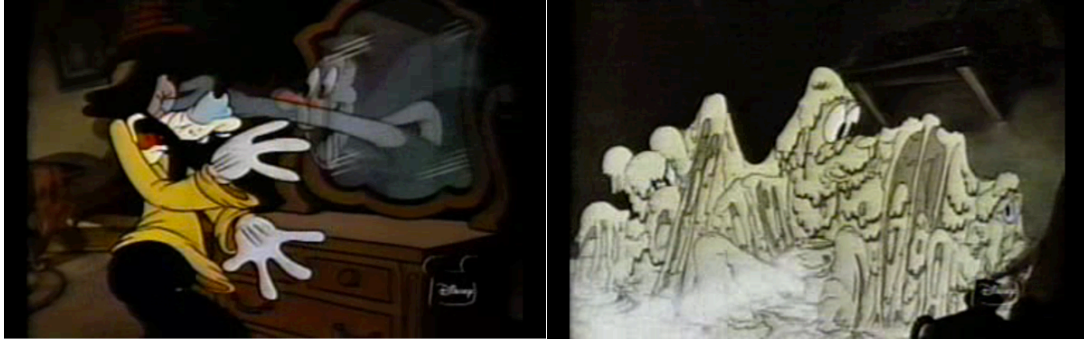
<sup>61</sup> *Eisenstein on Disney*, p. 21-22.

of foolish protagonists (in this case, Mickey, Goofy and Donald), but rather, as in the Grimm fairy-tale, from the character's humor-full acceptance of a surreal reality. In this cartoon, lonely ghosts hire Mickey's crew of ghost-busters to come to their haunted house, hoping to play a few tricks on their clumsy visitors. The tables turn when the ghosts themselves become haunted after Mickey and friends are covered in dough, resembling shape-shifting phantoms. For Eisenstein, the film's lesson is that "only having joined in the fantastical, alogical and sensuous order is it possible to achieve a mastery and supremacy in the realm of freedom from the shackles of logic, from shackles in general."<sup>62</sup> There is something both hilarious and instructive about ghosts being haunted, the uncanny frightened by itself, undead immortals terrified by undead living. This reversal suggests that the best way of confronting the uncanny is to overidentify with it, an overidentification capable only among those most naive, literal-minded and goofy. For Eisenstein, as for no doubt many German spectators, this image of Mickey immediately called to mind Max and Moritz, who, covered in dough, are eventually baked and eaten after their mischief-making. A documentary short, *Wie ein Trickfilm entsteht*, made in 1929, isolates Wilhelm Busch's rude children as a kind of forerunner of cartoon characters like Felix the Cat and his illustrations as precursors for film animation. Despite the rudimentary techniques of early German efforts at animation (the brilliant and singular silhouettes of Lotte Reiniger notwithstanding), there was an adaptation of Busch's famous illustrated book already in 1923.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*





**Figure 5: A mirror scene reversed and a plasmatic turning of the tables in *Lonesome Ghosts***

*Lonesome Ghosts* is a late entry in the canon of comic ghost cartoons, which were a consistent preoccupation on the part of American animators. From Disney, there was the first and greatest “Silly Symphony,” *The Skeleton Dance* (1920), in which a gothic graveyard is haunted by skeletons coming out of the ground, playing themselves like xylophones until a rising sun scars them away. This film was distributed in Germany in February 1930 as *Die Geisterstunde*, and was part of the first program of all Disney cartoons in Berlin, which was a smash success and led to a veritable Mickey boom throughout the nation.<sup>63</sup> Though most early Mickey cartoons largely took place in daytime pastoral settings there was the exceptional *The Haunted House* from 1929, in which Mickey enters a haunted house, his own shadow detaching to scare him, and is forced to play an organ for dancing skeletons. These Disney cartoons were preceded and exceeded by Otto Messmer’s *Felix the Cat*, who first arrived in Germany in 1924 and the Fleischer Brothers’ *Inkwell Imps*, appearing in 1925 and praised by *Lichtbild-Bühne* as “excellent.”<sup>64</sup> More than Disney, Messmer’s *Felix* and the Fleischers’ *Koko the Clown*, *Fitz the Dog*, *Betty Boop* and *Bimbo* were constantly confronted with ghosts, ghouls and haunted houses in films like *Koko’s Haunted House* (1928), *Betty Boop’s Halloween Party* (1933), *Felix the Ghost-Breaker* (1932), *Felix Switches Witches* (1927) and *Sure-locked Homes* (1928). In all

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<sup>63</sup> Laqua, p.18.

<sup>64</sup> *Lichtbild-Bühne* 13 (1925).

these films the characters shift from fear of an animated world to one in which they themselves take part in the animation that is, after all, already their own formal make-up.

These American films successfully invert the ghostly exterior world of the death's head found in so many Weimar films of this period, converting the death's head into a dancing skeleton. The numerous special effects used by filmmakers like Murnau or Wiene to produce a spectral feeling of dread, doubling or haunting are here radicalized since animation can easily convert shadows into ghosts, mirror images into doubles and the entire world into a threatening, but simultaneously ludicrous space. Here, animation is the art of the uncanny exaggerated into comic mis-shapes. Murnau's trick from *Nosferatu*, the negative reversal of the phantom carriage ride, is likewise deployed by Messmer (*Felix turns the Tide* (1922)) and the Fleischers (*Minnie the Moocher* (1932)) to produce an uncanny effect, but rather than taking the protagonist into a dreaded unknown, such tricks are themselves part of the perverse enjoyment of a world unburdened by order. If German cinema of the time approached this disorder with anxiety, viewing it as a threat to the subject's self-identity and mastery over a now plasmatic world filled with desire, Messmer, Fleischer and Disney's protagonists confronted precisely the same threat with a perverse willingness to succumb to the chaos, to be animated and disfigured by it, and, through this overidentification, ridiculously succeed. Richard Fleischer, in his memories of going to the movies with his father Max, the creator of *The Inkwell Imps*, suggests this shared concern of Weimar cinema and American cartoons of the twenties and early thirties:

The first movie I remember was a film that my father particularly wanted me to see. I was probably about seven, and he told me that it was something I had to see. He took me alone, during the day, to an 'art-house theater.' I never forgot the experience. The film was *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. I still carry an image from it around in my head—a tall, pale-faced, thin man in a long black coat, his eyes circled in black, standing in a narrow hallway, its walls askew. I remember not so much being frightened as somehow being hypnotized by the image. I've never really figured out why my father wanted me to see that surrealistic masterpiece. By no stretch of the imagination was it a film for children. Perhaps, with this film, he was initiating me

into the world in which he lived. His animated cartoons always relied heavily on surrealism for their effect.<sup>65</sup>

Unnoticed by the young Fleischer, the difference between the Fleischer Brothers' comic surrealism and the expressionism of *Caligari* and its children is that in place of the hypnotic effect so evident in this viewing experience, Koko and friends exaggerate the already exaggerated décor of Weimar cinema, metamorphing it into silly, grotesque and hyper-animated comedy.<sup>66</sup> This aesthetic dimension is suggested by Lacan in his distinguishing between expressionism and surrealism, the former lying on the side of a subject's desire undone by a world uncannily alive with *jouissance* while the former chooses precisely this animated world as the setting and subject of its art.

The body of this subject is thus not one of desire and its dividing of the ego from its alienated object, but rather of drive, the ego itself reduced, via an uncanny effect, into a plasmatic object. This explains the fundamental distinction between the mortified gesture of actors in Weimar cinema and the cartoon body of Felix, Koko or Mickey. If it is the soul's paralysis, an interior angst, that is expressed in the poses of the great German actors (or, following Benjamin, in the rhythm of Wigman's dancers), then, by contrast, cartoon heroes will not only not remain frozen—they will, like the boy who could only learn about fear by mistaking fish on his skin for himself (the final joke of the Grimm fairy-tale), lack any interior anxiety, instead taking the world's movement as the motion of their enjoyment. Such figures will only be happy when the bed moves faster. Everything for them exists at the surface of their skin, which like the image that is their very composition, can contort according to the wishes of their environment. It is this that perhaps best explains their creatureliness, which shares with the

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<sup>65</sup> Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell: Max Fleischer and the Animation Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), pp. 72-73.

<sup>66</sup> S.S. Praver, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

*Kreaturen* of Weimar cinema something “chthonic” and death-like. It is not coincidental that Mickey Mouse began life as a rat, bothering the Felix-inspired cats of Disney’s final *Alice* cartoon, his last venture before inventing Mickey. Before he became the cute, empathetic mouse-commodity which we are still familiar with today, there was something disgusting about Mickey, which is precisely what drew Benjamin to him and perhaps also explains why the very first Mickey short distributed in Germany, *The Barn Dance* (1929), was deemed not appropriate for the young.<sup>67</sup> There is thus no firm separation between a character and their setting and rather than de-vivifying into a protective, final frieze of one’s all too mortal self, the cartoon will take part in that “immortal life” which is the other side of the death drive.

Just as this drive is often embodied in Weimar cinema by a technological modernity, from Murnau’s war-resonant carriage to the robot Maria’s hypnotic dance, so too do American cartoons insist on a ghost in the machine. It is not by coincidence that Mickey Mouse’s first appearance came in *Plane Crazy* (1928) or that pilots like Charles Lindbergh or Ruth Elder took Felix the Cat with them on their transatlantic flights. Several late twenties Mickey shorts (*The Barn Dance*, *The Picnic* (1930) and, most notably, *Traffic Troubles* (1931)) anthropomorphize cars, converting them into dancing, shaking and strangely smiling creatures, comically preventing any attempt of Mickey’s to use them to get from one place to another. Max Fleischer, following the McCay-inspired trend of placing the animator directly in the film as a kind of modern magician, interacted with his cartoon characters, integrating the photographic with the drawn. In these interactions Fleischer would be overcome by his creations to the point that the

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<sup>67</sup> This suggests the weakness of Stephen Jay Gould’s analysis of Mickey Mouse, which is based on the evolutionary analysis of animals in Lorenz. In fact, Mickey’s early rudeness, like that of so many early cartoon animals, was based not on instinct, but, in the words of Eric Santner, “animals whose *instincts* have mutated into *drives*.” See Gould, “A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse,” *The Panda’s Thumb* (New York: Norton, 1992) and Santner *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

latter would eventually invade and destroy the photographic reality of surrounding New York City. The implication is that animation's own technology has, like the lamella, a capacity for infesting everything, absorbing it all into an inky world of pure actuality and metamorphosis. 1931's *Bimbo's Initiation* represents the perfect symbiosis of American animations twin obsessions of the ghostly and the modern, with Bimbo, walking along a city street, only to trip through a pot-hole into a cavernous realm filled with monsters, grotesque mirrored reflections of himself and mocking shadows. The villain who locks Bimbo into this haunted sewer—Mickey Mouse. While intellectuals and critics enjoyed such reflections there were also those artists who took the forms and figures of American cartoons and adopted them for the specific cultural context of Weimar Germany. It is to two German figures of such re-appropriation that I now turn.

## **V. From Doctor Caligari to Mr. Rebus...**

*"The spectators freeze when the train goes by.  
'If he always asks [frägt] me.' The ã released from the sentence flew off like a ball on the meadow."* Franz Kafka's Diary.

In both 1928 and 1929, the grotesque comedy of American cartoons made two surprising appearances at a well-known modernist music festival in Baden-Baden. Three months before Disney released the first synchronized cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*, composer Paul Hindemith experimented with synching mechanically produced versions of a new composition with a Felix short, *Felix Frolics at the Circus* (quite coincidentally, the film centers on Felix's attempts to stop a disruptive mouse from ruining a circus—an unintentional allegory of Disney's eventual relation to the circus-like age "before Mickey").<sup>68</sup> Although Hindemith ran into difficulties and was never able to have the technically reproduced cat/music perform, he did successfully play

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<sup>68</sup> This phrase comes from the title of Donald Crafton's *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

his score for Hans Richter's *Vormittagspuk* (1928), a film in which various objects, via a host of special effects tricks, come alive to avenge their instrumental use, the most animate of which are a series of bowler hats, the obligatory headwear for American slapstick stars like Chaplin, Ben Turpin and Stan Laurel. One year later, Hindemith would return, this time working with, in place of Felix, a German collaborator, but one who likewise had an intense admiration for American *Groteskfilme*: Bertolt Brecht. Brecht debuted several of his *Lehrstücke* at this festival, nearly causing a riot (and sending *Phantom* author Gerhart Hauptmann fleeing), with the final section of the piece in which a clown named Smith is violently dismembered by two grotesque friends who supposedly want to ease his pain. Aside from characters drawn from American slapstick, this piece indirectly references Brecht's already discussed *Mysteries of a Barbershop*, starring cabaret clown Karl Valentin. At one point in the film Valentin, an incompetent barber, absent-mindedly cuts off the head of a bowler-wearing patron only to have the head, via a stop-motion effect, uncannily roll around on the floor, a disturbing yet funny organ without body familiar to any viewer of early trick films or cartoons. After the man's head is reattached, he gets into a duel only to have his head once again removed by a woman with a string and a hook. As Joel Schechter has pointed out, Brecht had already drawn on such images of the dead reanimated in his similarly riot-inducing 1918 poem, "The Legend of the dead soldier" where the military digs up dead soldiers to make them keep fighting.<sup>69</sup> Although there are obvious affinities between the images in Brecht's poem and the drawings and sketches of George Grosz or Otto Dix, which are replete with corpses and skeletons grotesquely out and about, the more important connection comes with another Dadaist, John Heartfield. As Andre Mario Zervigon has recently shown,

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<sup>69</sup> Brecht's first performance of the song in Berlin led, according to Trude Hesterberg, to a near-riot. See *Cabaret Performance Volume II: Europe 1920-1940*, edited by Senelick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 82-3. Joel Schechter, "Brecht's clowns: *Man is Man* and after," *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, pp. 75-76.

Heartfield, and with him Grosz, were hired during World War I to produce propaganda cartoon films, but they instead, following the inspirations of the American *Mutt and Jeff* cartoon series, hoped to shock and unsettle soldiers and civilians via the attractational violence and “somatic terror” implicit in American cartoon narrative and form.<sup>70</sup>

Like Zervigon, I will isolate an instance of re-appropriation of American animation by German artists of this period, but instead of shock and sarcasm, I want to turn to a somewhat different series of film texts: the crossword films of Paul Leni and Guido Seeber. While the examples of Grosz, Hindemith, Richter, Brecht or Heartfield represent aesthetic and political positions more or less diametrically opposed or marginal to the dominant “modern animation” of Weimar cinema, Seeber and Leni both had essential roles in translating that animation onto the screen—with Seeber, the “wizard” and “the old master of black arts,” as one of the great technical innovators and cinematographers of German film going back to its infancy and Leni, “the great fantastic talent among film architects,” an innovative set designer of several canonical Weimar films, including *Backstairs*.<sup>71</sup> While Seeber was responsible for developing a host of uncanny special effects and camera tricks, Leni had likewise innovated in painting and building sets that externalized a character’s anguished inner psyche. For one of his directorial efforts, *Waxworks* (1924), Leni hoped, in his designs, “to engender [an] indescribable fluidity of light, moving shapes, shadows, lines, and curves. It is not extreme reality that the camera perceives, but the reality of the inner event...”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Andres Mario Zervigon, “A ‘Political *Struwwelpeter*’? John Heartfield’s Early Film Animation and the Crisis of Photographic Representation,” *New German Critique* 107 36:2 (Summer 2009), p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> *Lichtbild-Bühne* 255 (1925) and *Der Kinematograph* (1924).

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Eisner, p. 127. In an article published in *Der Kinematograph* entitled “Architecture in Film,” Leni explains this view as directly being inspired by German expressionism: “If I may be allowed to recall the ‘Caligari’ Film or ‘The Golem,’ whose monumental townscape Hans Pölzig designed. It is important for me to emphasize how the film-architect must be distanced from the daily viewed world in order to encounter the actual nerve of the world.” *Der Kinematograph* 911 (1925).

Yet with the shift away from the most gothic, extreme expressionism of the early twenties and the concurrent rise of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, it makes a good deal of sense for Leni to turn to those techniques associated with American film as well as a subject matter directly dealing with *Amerikanismus*, Weimar Germany's name for both Fordist capitalist and new leisure industries like jazz, *Girlkultur* and film entertainments like Felix the Cat, who arrived on German screens in 1924, the very year his *Waxworks* was released.<sup>73</sup> As much as it seduced Weimar audiences so too did such industries threaten the film industry that Leni and Seeber were partially responsible for building into an international success, a success based on the prestige of their expressionist art. Not only did the notorious Paraufamet agreement of 1926 threaten to flood German cinemas with American films, but every film, German or otherwise, was sure to be surrounded in the accompanying *Beiprogramm* by Felix and Co. German film trade newspapers reflected this anxiety, publishing countless articles on the threat of American "Kontingentfilme" (quota films) and on the poor quality of the German *Beiprogramm*. An article from *Lichtbild-Bühne* suggests both the threat of American films as well as the possibility of learning from them so as to beat them at their own game: "In the handling and correct treatment of the supporting program we can certainly...learn still much from America. And our importers have done well winning for our market some of the most famous short film productions, already popular in other countries for a long time. Here we are thinking above all of the Felix films..."<sup>74</sup> Even more ambitiously, a writer for the same journal would claim that "America needs German *Lehrfilme* [educational films]," isolating the American market and its own emphasis on showing

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<sup>73</sup> The first advertisements for Felix, distributed by none other than the UFA itself, appear in *Lichtbild-Bühne* 49/50 in May 1924 and are continually advertised throughout the year in full page ads. This advertising campaign becomes associated with American tactics of film promotion in an article from *Der Kinematograph* 917 (1924), where a picture of Felix is featured, as well as a discussion of Felix products like "soaps, matches, cookies, cigarettes and other things."

<sup>74</sup> *Lichtbild-Bühne* 1 (1925). This particular issue also devotes considerable space to an article on animals in film, mentioning Felix, "who can certainly thank his existence only to the clever art of drawing."



educational films at thousands of schools as a great “export possibility.” This was all the more urgent given the “catastrophic financial situation of German educational films.” Undoubtedly, Seeber and Leni, both leading lights in the German film industry, were thinking of Felix as well when they made the *Rebus* films, implicitly following this article’s suggestion of learning from American *Groteskfilme* in order to spice up the German supporting program. It is not without coincidence that *Lichtbild-Bühne* would, when describing the *Rebus* films, emphasize both an animation or giving of filmic “life” as well as a correspondence with “reality.”<sup>75</sup>

Before turning to their reappropriation of Felix, it is worth explaining the background for these films’ production.<sup>76</sup> Leni and Seeber founded a new film company, “Rebus-Film” and had the firm “Nemo-Film-Verleih” finance and distribute their films. With Leni directing and providing the central ideas, Seeber in charge of the filmmaking itself and screenwriter Hans Brennert writing the intertitle texts, they began production in 1925, with the first *Rebus* film debuting in January of 1926 at the Primus-Palast in Berlin. They were contracted by Nemo to make eight films, which would play in cinemas over the next two years. The films, according to censor titles, were eventually played again in theaters in 1933, just a few months after Hitler was appointed Chancellor and already four years after Leni had died of blood poisoning while working in Hollywood. Leni himself produced an adapted version of the first *Rebus* film for American audiences, slightly altering a few of the more German-centered clues, of which, as we will see, there are actually quite few. Indeed, it is the “Americanness” of the *Rebus* films that is

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<sup>75</sup> *Lichtbild-Bühne* 255 (1925).

<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, only two of the *Rebus* films have been preserved in film archives, the first and third films. Having screened both these films I have also consulted the censor records for the intertitles of all eight films, which reveal the content of every puzzle. I have also used the *Deutsche Kinemathek*’s Seeber and Leni archives, which include personal letters, hand-written notes of several of the crosswords, drafts of Seeber’s collages and the crossword cards distributed to theaters.

most apparent, not simply in the answers to many of the questions, but also in the very nature of the film's construction.

Each of the eight *Rebus* films is composed of two parts, the first a ten-minute section played at some point before a feature film and outlining a crossword puzzle with roughly six to seven words. The audience has already been given a small card with the crossword as well as short clues in the typical manner of any newspaper puzzle. What is less typical is the innovation of the clues supplied in this first film: through a montage of images and rhyming inter-titles, designed as helpful, playful limericks, the audience must connect each particular series of words and images to the specific crossword space. Going from left to right and then from top to bottom, this first section goes through each word-space, supplying relevant information to the viewer, who must then write down answers. At the end, each word is quickly reviewed one final time, with one image sequence intended to remind them of each specific word. Later in the film program, perhaps after another short or after the feature, a five-minute "Solution-Film" ["Auflösungsfilm"] is played, in which the clues, both textual and visual, are quickly run through once more before each answer is given.

What is most interesting about the *Rebus* films is not necessarily the idea of adapting a crossword puzzle for the cinema, but rather the way this adaptation is carried out, how Leni and Seeber used various techniques and tricks to aid the interaction implicit in the films' relationship with their pencil-holding audiences. In many ways, the rhythmic, cosmopolitan and attractational modernity of these film's answers originates in the modernity of these techniques, techniques dominated by, on the one hand, the complex montage editing and multi-field collages that Seeber had already developed for his celebrated *KIPHO* film of 1925 and would outline in his 1927 book *Der Trickfilm in seinen grundsätzlichen Möglichkeiten* [*The trick film and its fundamental*

*possibilities*] and, on the other, the stop-motion and rudimentary character animation effects then best practiced, in Germany, by Seeber's *KIPHO* collaborator, the advertising filmmaker Julius Pinschewer.<sup>77</sup> Michael Cowan, the sole scholar to analyze the *Rebus* films, has drawn attention to the important connections between these training techniques and discourses of rhythm within advertising, the avant-garde and psycho-technical testing.<sup>78</sup> While I do not disagree with Cowan's important analysis, I believe the *Rebus* films, and to a lesser degree *KIPHO*, need to be understood against the background of the *Amerikanismus* that, for so many of the writers Cowan cites, produced this rhythm.<sup>79</sup> For Fritz Giese, author of *Girlkultur. Vergleiche zwischen amerikanischen und europäischen Rhythmus und Lebensgefühl* [Girl Culture: Comparisons between American and European Rhythm and Attitude to Life], one of the key texts within this constellation, not only did German films (or German culture in general) need to be americanized according to the rhythms of mass ornamental, dancing girls and jazz band syncopation, but it also needed to learn the lessons taught by the American *Groteskfilm*. And who is Giese's first and best example of this slapstick? None other than Felix the Cat, that "mocking" cartoon creature who uses his tail as "walking stick, as gun, as telescope; the excessive increase of grotesquerie to show the thought processes of this cat with exclamation points or brain-leaping

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<sup>77</sup> Seeber had himself filmed stop-motion animations much earlier in his career, with the 1910 *Die geheimnisvolle Streichholzdose* and 1909 *Prosit Neujahr*. The character animation dominant in Germany was, throughout the twenties, achieved using a cut-out or "decoupage" system. In contrast to the cel animation of American animation studios, this method created characters far less metamorphic or dynamic. In effect, this was no different from the silhouette technique of Lotte Reiniger, although the overall visual effect of her films is obviously quite distinct. Working for Pinschewer, Walter Ruttmann used his techniques of absolute film to sell, among other products, tires. These three figures (Pinschewer, Reiniger and Ruttmann) represent, for the most part, the dominant figures in actual cartoon filmmaking in Germany during the teens, twenties and early thirties. See Crafton, p. 231-2 and Annika Schoemann *Der Deutsche Animationsfilm* (Meisenweg: Gardez! Verlag, 2003), p. 85-143.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Cowan, "Training Perception in Paul Leni and Guido Seeber's 'Rebus' Films," *Screen* 51:3 (Autumn 2010), pp. 197-218.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Cowan, "Advertising, Rhythm, and the Filmic Avant-Garde in Weimar: Guido Seeber and Julius Pinschewer's *Kipho* Film," *October* 131 (Winter 2010), pp. 23-50.

["gehirnentspringenden"] question marks."<sup>80</sup> For Giese, Felix personifies an *Amerikanismus* that is Fordist in its design, but is also a free and easy hero who can effectively negotiate those halting, jerky and dehumanizing rhythms, representing both the machine as well as those liberating moments when the machine breaks down, turns off or comically goes awry. An American like Felix can

abstract in to the grotesque because he can switch off occasionally. Because he does not possess an inherited brain full of inhibitions, because in the film he does not speak of the elevation and dignity of the theatrical stage, because he casually stands over the meaninglessness of existence and the city's orgy of roars. For him all this is nothing special. Precisely the grotesque in film reveals it more or less clearly and more or less and deftly daily. For this we have no talent.<sup>81</sup>

This passage returns us to the central concept of this chapter, that of an *animated* modernity, one that, against the dominant discourses of both *Neue Sachlichkeit* and expressionism, emphasizes uncanny, disorienting excesses of seemingly objective or rational processes as well as a way for playfully handling those excesses without "inhibition" or anxiety of the threat of losing control, awareness or understanding of one's shocked body or roar-filled world. Here, Adorno's description of surrealism's relation to *Neue Sachlichkeit* is relevant: "The *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s horror of the crime of ornamentation...is mobilized by Surrealist shocks. The house has a tumor, its bay window. Surrealism paints this tumor: an excrescence of flesh grows from the house."<sup>82</sup> This disturbingly animated image, evoking at once haunted houses and anthropomorphized spaces was, as we know, a recurring image of American cartoons and surrealism itself championed Felix, claiming him as one of its own, a "sur-chat."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Fritz Giese, *Girlkultur. Vergleiche zwischen amerikanischen und europäischen Rhythmus und Lebensgefühl* (Munich: Delphin-Verlag, 1925), pp. 55-56.

<sup>81</sup> Giese, p. 56.

<sup>82</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Looking back on Surrealism," *Notes on Literature Volume I*, translated by Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 89-90.

<sup>83</sup> Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). p. 349.



**Figure 6: The first trade paper advertisements for *Felix the Cat*, distributed by UFA.**

It is only within this context that we can understand why Leni and Seeber chose a cartoon cat as the protagonist for their crossword films, one who navigates this trick-infused, cinematic world with jokey play, in his nervous excitement a surrogate for the audience and a guide for dealing with flurrying words, fluctuating images and bodily assaults. I am speaking of “Theobald der Rebus-Kater” who accompanies the films’ other animated figure, “Mr. Rebus” across the *Rebus* films’ clue-laden landscape. The latter, a rotund, coat-wearing and seemingly German figure literally embodies the crossword, with each film’s puzzle deposited on his large, Professor Unrath-like frame. At the beginning of each film, Mr. Rebus detaches from the puzzle, then using his cane to point to each space as the film cycles through its various image and inter-title clues. Theobald, a tall black cat standing upright on his hind-legs (like the German translation of Felix the Cat, a “Kater,” which means tomcat, but also hangover) starts each film by introducing Mr. Rebus, but he also, with this introduction, seems to manifest the source of each film’s jokey, rhyming inter-title hints. This is bolstered by the two central roles Theobald performs in the *Rebus* films as both protagonist and audience surrogate and with each he reveals both the

particular influence of Felix the Cat, the first global cartoon star, and the appropriation effected by Leni and Seeber.

The very first *Rebus* film begins with the world turned upside down, turbulent water moving in the wake of a boat, but with the water hanging at the top of the frame before the next image returns it to its “proper” place below, corresponding to the familiar laws of gravity. Following this are a series of equally animated images: an unchained camera shifts diagonally from right to left and from left to right to capture various images of a city (a street, a monument and a movie theater showing the Jannings-starring and Leni-designed *Variete* (1925)), sped up film from the front of a train shooting rapidly forward and finally a montage of superimposed crossword puzzles followed by a similar superimposition of fingers typing, picking up puzzles, pencils and playing cards. Finally there is one of Seeber’s oft-used multi-field collages, in which the screen is divided up into five simultaneous shots, fracturing the images, but also linking them together according to some common purpose, motion or event. As Cowan has pointed out, this is one of the key techniques used in *KIPHO*, but here there is a crucial difference: as in *KIPHO* it is a collage of film reels and spools, but here the film in one reel animates up and a black cartoon cat, Theobald, pops out, literally a product of the very stuff of cinematic projection. Theobald moves around, looking at the audience and then announces, via inter-title, Mr. Rebus, who next appears and leads the viewer to the first word. While the techniques of this first section were an increasingly common element of both Weimar art cinema (e.g. Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (1924)) and the avant-garde, the eruption of Theobald distinguishes the *Rebus* films and almost retroactively re-casts these effects. Describing some of Seeber’s trick shots in the *Rebus* series, *Lichtbild-Bühne* would emphasize this animation effect: “Thus do inanimate things also achieve

life and one successfully avoids the danger of showing only postcards in the film.”<sup>84</sup> As opposed to a static or frozen perspective, these images fracture the visual field and infuse it with excessive motion. They are also an “amazing joke,” one which “we have never seen in a film before.”<sup>85</sup> The appearance of Theobald stresses this comic animation and not simply with his form, but also with his place in this world, as much a part of it, despite his construction, as any of the photographed images. Rather than creating a distance between drawn animation and filmic reality, this image of Theobald appearing out of the very fabric of film, stresses that cinema originates from and is dependent on animation rather than being somehow more real or objective.<sup>86</sup> The distorted, urban and highly self-reflexive reality this first sequence presents as the montage universe of the *Rebus* films thus takes on an almost fantastic quality and what better hero for such a world than a cartoon cat?



**Figure 7: Theobald the Rebus-Cat debuts.**

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<sup>84</sup> *Lichtbild-Bühne* 255 (1925).

<sup>85</sup> *Berliner Volks-Zeitung* 614 (1925).

<sup>86</sup> This argument has been put forth in (admittedly different ways) by Lev Manovich and Tom Gunning. See Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Boston: MIT Press, 2007), p. 298-300; Gunning, “Gollum and Golem: Special Effects and the Technology of Artificial Bodies,” *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings*, ed. Mathijs and Pomerance (Netherlands: Rodolphi, 2006), pp. 321-2.

Despite Theobald appearing only twice more in *Rebus No. 1* the third *Rebus* film reveals his role as these films' protagonist. Rather than appearing out of the photographed world of film rolls, here Theobald emerges on a drawn landscape, arriving, like Mickey Mouse in his first film *Plane Crazy*, in an airplane, stepping out with aviator goggles, comically stretching out his neck and announcing, via a dialogue bubble drawn straight from the Felix films, Mr. Rebus's arrival. It is important to note that this highly modern arrival is preceded by a montage sequence, which starts with the films' credits drawn by a flying crayon and then wiped away by a kind of invisible, glittery sponge. There is then a collage of hands cranking cameras and projectors, followed by a montage of films (the fire-breathing dragon from *The Niebelungen* (1924), athletes from *Ways to Strength and Beauty* (1925) and stop-motion animation of a knife cutting vegetables on its own) intercut with the rhythmic, flashing intertitle proclamation "Des...Kurbelkastens...Hexe...Hexe...Hexerei...Zeigt was er kann" ["Witch, witch, witchcraft of the crankcase shows what it can"]. This conflation of cinema with the fantastic and magical was, as we know, exceedingly common, but here rather than appearing as a threat, it demonstrates the capacity of cinema for attraction and enchantment as well as empowering instruction since this is, as we will see, the introduction to a film that tests the audience's concentration, ability to read and connect images and knowledge of the modern world. But here I want to stress that it is Theobald who confronts the witchcraft of the crankcase, arriving as he does in an airplane, which likewise contains this mechanical part in its engine. The sequencing suggests that Theobald will most directly encounter this animated force, confronting the automatism of the films' projection (the film's highly reflexive first image) as well as its translation into words, carried out under the watch of the more stodgy and immobile Mr. Rebus.



Like his better drawn cartoon inspiration, the implication is clear: in order to deal with an animated, uncanny and fantastic realm one must be willing to become animated oneself.

This is confirmed by Theobald's appearing after several of the film's clue and answer segments, interacting with a rudimentarily drawn version of the image-world the viewer has just seen montaged. The first clue sequence for the word "Girl," featuring images of those Tiller girls who so bewitched Giese and Kracauer, is followed by an image of Theobald sitting in a theater box with binoculars, suggesting that not only is he, like the audience, watching the dancers, but that he is also inhabiting the same rhythmic, mobile world as them.<sup>87</sup> The next word, "Amerika" connotes, for the magical crankcase, images of cowboys, steamships, zeppelins, Time Square, chewing gum, skyscrapers, the subway, whiskey and, most amazingly, the drunken stumbling of a man against the whirling background of a city, an image from an early trick film that seems to have much in common with the Lukács-captivating *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*. In the first part of *Rebus No. 3* Theobald appears after this sequence, chewing gum and then spitting it out and in the second part of the "solution film" he is finishing a bottle of whiskey, with dozens of (empty) bottles behind him, thus fully revealing the double meaning of his name, "Kater." Later, after the answer "Akrobat" is revealed the film returns to Theobald, the whiskey bottles still behind him, only now he is wearing an acrobat's costume and lifts himself off one of the bottles, stretching and splitting his legs in the air all the while smiling to his audience. As should be apparent, the *Rebus* films did not choose its subject matter, the elusive words evoked by its highly animate montages, by happenstance—the vast majority of them are highly contemporary, both metropolitan and international, evoking a largely American-defined universe of rhythmic,

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<sup>87</sup> The intertitles make direct reference to the Tiller girls: "Das erste Wort -- das hört man trillern in den Revuen / – und sieht man schillern mit seidnen Beinchen, welche müllern / Beziehungsweise rhythmisch tillern! / Der jüngste Knirps, der kleinste Kerl kennt heut das Wort --!" A similar couplet appears in a Mickey Mouse spring revue show "Nur nicht mausig machen" from April 1931. See Storm and Dreßler, p. 53.

attractational and invigorating forms and phenomena: entertainment and energetic leisure (“Puppe,” “Girl,” “Akrobat,” “Variete,” “Jazzband,” “Bier,” “Café,” “Sport,” film stars like “Jannings,” “Henny Porten,” and “Harry” Liedtke and Piel), cites and countries (“München,” “Paris,” and “India”), style (“Mode” [“Fashion”], “Schminke” [“Make-up”], “Barbier,”), technology (“Radio,” “Automobil,” “Bar,” “Maschine,” “Motor,” “Elektrizität,” “Waffe”) and perhaps most importantly “Amerika” itself. In other words, Seeber and Leni chose words with both a contemporary resonance for their audience, but also those that produce intense visual associations best translated by various film tricks. There is something essentially cinematic about these experiences or perhaps cinema is in a unique position to match the phenomena of these words in affectively evocative yet pedagogically instructive ways.

Like so many of these words and images, Theobald, unlike his more Germanic (and thus less animate) taskmaster Mr. Rebus, originates in America.<sup>88</sup> Felix the Cat, Theobald’s obvious role model and inspiration, would in the mid-twenties become an international icon-commodity, the first global cartoon star and after Charlie Chaplin (from whom Felix stole many gags, Otto Messmer having already animated a series of Tramp cartoons in the teens), the most recognizable and universal figure associated with cinema. Already in the United States Felix had inspired the first wave of imitations, with cartoon cats produced by nearly every major or minor cartoon studio, including Disney and Fleischer. Seeber and Leni were not alone in following Felix by turning to an animal as the hero of their films—in Jennifer Bean’s words, “Felix’s phenomenal rise to stardom ignited a wave of cinematic spin-offs and imitations,” a stardom soon eclipsed by Disney’s own coterie of animal characters.<sup>89</sup> What is it in Felix that made him

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<sup>88</sup> According to an article from *Der Kinematograph* 18 (1929).

<sup>89</sup> Jennifer Bean, “1924 Movies and Play,” *American Cinema of the 1920s* ed. Fischer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), p. 131. Felix would appear in one other German animated film, a cartoon advertisement by

so perfect a foil to both the missing words of Mr. Rebus along with the magical movement of their associated collages and montages? Like Theobald, Felix inhabited a world in which “hyperkineticism prevails; everything moves,” from buildings to everyday objects, natural landscapes to Felix’s own fragmented body.<sup>90</sup> Often this world is specifically urban, as in *Felix Saves the Day* (1922), which precedes the *Rebus* films in placing Felix within a photographic landscape as opposed to a drawn one. This landscape at times morphs and shifts into dream-like states, especially when Felix has, like McCay’s rarebit Fiend or Twain in Germany, eaten something disagreeable. In *Felix the Cat Dines and Pines* (1927) a bad meal converts reality into a shifting, plasmatic and hallucinatory city, with skyscrapers surreally alienated and alive. While Felix was, like so many heroes of early trick and cartoon films, often confronted with ghostly visions, often uncannily identical to the images of German expressionist cinema (especially *Sure Locked Homes*), he was also equally used to the fantastic effects of modern technology. In several films, Felix travels through telephone lines or radio waves, going across the globe in a manner of seconds. Otherwise Felix is quite comfortable flying a plane (as in *The Non-Stop Fright* (1927)) though he runs into trouble when his plane gets caught up in a cloud, forcing him to get out and drain the water out of it using a spigot he has pulled miraculously out of his backside. As scholars have noted, Felix’s body is a kind of technology, not only produced and projected by machines, but itself “an object capable of endless assembly and reassembly; his signature, detachable tail forms any number of instruments...”<sup>91</sup> It is also, due to the discontinuity that defines the very form of animation, highly syncopated and it is not surprising that Felix would have a jazz song (“Felix kept walking” by Paul Whiteman) written in his honor. As this

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Curt Schumann in which a white, female cat (also taken from one of Felix’s many love interests) named Felita who is met by an obvious Felix knock-off in the ad’s climax.

<sup>90</sup> Crafton, *Before Mickey*, p. 297.

<sup>91</sup> Bean, “1924,” p. 132.

walk suggests, Felix, in contrast to the more benign animals of Disney, is clever, mischievous and all too willing to bend an already shifting world to serve his purposes, which range from fighting mouse armies, leading an organized strike of cats, becoming a star in Hollywood or simply playing tricks on animals and people alike (for instance, switching the heads of a rabbit and a chicken in *Switches Witches*).

Patricia Tom explains Felix's role in terms similar to those I have sketched above in relation to both the comic uncanny as well as the role of American animation for Weimar audiences: "Like desire bursting through the mechanisms of repression, Felix broke through the constraints dictated by society, as well as those imposed by...industrialization and the mechanization of labor. Yet, as an animated character, Felix also signified the machine itself. He thus represented the paradox of rupture and containment..."<sup>92</sup> This paradox defines Felix's struggle to both maintain himself, to "[keep] his cool" in the face of an animate modernity as well as his willingness to allow, encourage and even enjoy the physio-psychological ruptures he continually experiences and often provokes.<sup>93</sup> Many of these cartoons directly responded to contemporary anxieties. Messmer himself was of German descent and had served in World War I and unlike the many Weimar artists and filmmakers who translated bodily fragmentation, mechanical death and battlefield trauma into emotionally charged tragedy, this experience was "reflected in...unsentimental animation."<sup>94</sup> In *Felix turns the Tide*, Felix fails to beat back an army of rats and a brief image of a battlefield filled with cat corpses cannot help but perhaps unconsciously remind the viewer of the real deaths experienced by soldiers only a few years before the film was made.

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<sup>92</sup> Patricia Tom, "Felix as Trickster," *American Art* 10:1 (Spring, 1996), p. 86.

<sup>93</sup> Crafton, *Before Mickey*, p. 302.

<sup>94</sup> John Canemaker, *Felix: The Twisted Tale of the World's Most Famous Cat* (New York: Da Capo, 1996), p. 55.

The *Rebus* films' attempts to access the violent sensorial experience of "the meaninglessness of existence and the city's orgy of roars" corresponds to the description of audience reception of the Mickey Mouse cartoons in Walter Benjamin's "Artwork" essay, where "the countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies."<sup>95</sup> Yet there is also, as Cowan has argued, another feature of these *Rebus* films evoking Benjamin's famous text, written almost ten years after the films were made—the notion of testing or instruction. Consider Benjamin's definition of "the function of film," which is "to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily."<sup>96</sup> This training is related to these films' central feature: the crossword and its necessary testing of audiences' ability to read the content, flow and relation of often diverse, fractured and highly elliptical images so as to find a common word to articulate them. The *Rebus* films are not simply a testing of trivial knowledge on the part of its viewers: aside from the fact that they are highly contemporary and presume some engagement or familiarity with a decidedly urban, international and technological vernacular, they also require that one be able to formally analyze often complex montage allegories.

In the first *Rebus* film, the final word, simply the number "nine," is represented by a virtuosic assault of objects: fanning playing cards, shape-forming matchsticks (evoking Seeber's first experiments with animation), Russian dolls uncovering themselves and a cartoon hand juggling balls. The viewer must not only connect all these disparate images into one encompassing, associative word, but must also place them within the poetic phrasing of the

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<sup>95</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 3*, p. 118.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, p. 132.

intertitle clues, juggling, like that drawn hand, words, images and their own mental or even physical associations. The press reception of these films was all too aware of the unique relationship between the stream of images (and images within images), masterfully constructed by Seeber, and the stream of consciousness on the part of the spectator. One critic in *Lichtbild-Bühne* suggests the inherent difficulty of this mental processing, using the specific example of the “nine” sequence:

One sees at first a confused chaos [“wirres Durcheinander”] of concepts of things, of persons, of images, of movements, in short: ‘I don’t know what it means!’... Impressions overflow themselves; more clear technical difficulties, but also a more clear understandability, which the observer, if he pays a little attention, will be able to guess... I want to guess a number, a simple number, but, as I count dice or knives or a skipjack or matches or the balls of an abacus or the balls of a juggler and who knows what else, they go away. It means you must simply pay attention!<sup>97</sup>

It is obvious that this effect of confusion and overflowing information is a calculated part of Seeber and Leni’s editing and word choice strategies. This is made explicit at the very beginning of the “solution film” for *Rebus No. 1* which begins with the intertitle “We assume that it looks something like this in your heads,” this prediction followed by a rapid montage of some of the images seen in the previous film, thus conflating the montage of editing with a kind of montage of thought, of unconscious metonymic or metaphorical association as well as conscious thought-processes attempting to convert these associations into awareness, knowledge or, following Benjamin, habituated expertise. Because of the gap between the first film and its solution-film, there is also the teasing, perhaps frightening possibility that this montage of thought will scramble the viewer’s ability to watch other films, their brains running furiously to figure out the answer to each word in the meantime.

It is Theobald who will step in, following his position as the inhabitant of this animated landscape, to represent the spectator itself, giving a cartoon, comic image of this overflowing

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<sup>97</sup> *Die Lichtbild-Bühne* 253 (12/10/1925).

brain. After reviewing the words at the end of *Rebus No. 1* the film asks its viewers to recall the first word, then showing an image of Theobald's head, manically shaking from side to side, suggesting a kind of maddening, syncopated melody: the answer is "Jazzband." The "solution-film" repeats this image, once again testing the viewer's ability to process images, thoughts and now memories, to see whether they have sedimented into a habituated recollection. Thus, Theobald not only acts as the hero of this animated, Americanized world—he also acts as a surrogate for the audience, responding to Mr. Rebus's entreaties, watching the girls kick yet also racking his brain for the answer suggested by this motion. The final moment of the first part of *Rebus No. 1* makes this explicitly clear as Theobald shifts his head back and forth in a confused state and then runs across the flat horizon of the frame to a cinema, anxious to discover the solutions.

This mixture of cartoon and instruction is, as before, no doubt partially inspired by Felix, who was, after all, distributed by an educational films firm throughout the mid- and late twenties. Aside from the violence of his mischief-making adventures, Felix's most iconic motion was his contemplative walk, shifting horizontally with his eyebrows furrowed in cool concentration. Such concentration was often reflected in the transformation of his tail into a textual object, a question mark or exclamation point, which in turn could transform into an object. Not only do such transformations reflect the "hyperkineticism" of Felix's world—they also suggest a kind of power of thought itself, one that Felix demonstrates in converting a sudden flash of insight or perplexity into an animating action of his body or environment. Following both Norman Klein and Esther Leslie, this cinematically infused ability for Felix to materialize words or punctuation marks into material things reveals a "typographical play, "producing something syncretic, an

object between a poem and a picture.”<sup>98</sup> The English writer W.O. Brigstocke detected in Felix’s body a host of educational possibilities: mathematics, architecture, biology and even the theory of relativity. Dziga Vertov had likewise envisioned cartoons as the realm for revealing Einstein’s insight, but neither he nor Brigstocke knew that Max Fleischer, Messmer’s greatest competitor in the mid-twenties, actually made a cartoon explanation of the theory of relativity already in 1923. For Seeber and Leni, it is one icon of *Amerikanismus* who inspires their own attempts to make something “between a poem and a picture,” with the answers to their crosswords an explosive, energetic signifier that refers to a flurry of words, objects, images and rhythms. In *Rebus No. 3* Theobald even converts his tail into a question mark while listening to the radio and contemplating the answer for himself and his like-minded audience.

To return to the starting point of this chapter, it is worth contrasting the *Rebus* films and their particular formal and spectatorial features with the dominant approach within Weimar cinema’s anxious animation. If, following Elsaesser, the defining feature of most Weimar films, from expressionist fairy-tale to futuristic allegory, was that “they are invariably constructed as picture puzzles,” then it is important to stress that the epistemological uncertainty reflected a more fundamental uncertainty within the Weimar subject itself, one coded as anxiously paranoid, frozen and often male.<sup>99</sup> In contrast to these puzzles with no answers, which revealed in doubts about “the foundations of the self” and its capacity for mastery or knowledge, the *Rebus* films produce a spectator that is at once destabilized, but simultaneously reconsolidated as an always animated participant within the world of its image-thoughts. There is an obvious anxiety in the experience of answering the crossword puzzle, heightened by the associational chaos of each

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<sup>98</sup> Leslie p. 22-3 and Norman Klein, *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Cartoon* (New York: Verso Books, 1993).

<sup>99</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 4.



clue-sequence, but it is an anxiety that is playfully defused, at least in part by a humor almost entirely absent within most Weimar films. The avatar for such humor is Theobald, who, despite his rudimentary, stilted movements, responds to Mr. Rebus with a willingness to engage the sights, sounds and physical attractions of *Amerikanismus* without overwhelming fear. Unlike *KIPHO* and, following Cowan, its revision of Caligari's command into an enticement for consumerism and advertisement, the *Rebus* films use the commands of Mr. Rebus as invitations for nothing other than being aware and engaged with the rapidly transforming world around them. In contrast to the hypnotic relationship between Caligari and Cesare, which represented an entire matrix of spectatorship for Weimar cinema as a whole, Mr. Rebus and Theobald convert hypnosis into a jerky, jazz-syncopated game. The tricks, montages and animations, in contrast to similar techniques used by Lang, Murnau or Pabst, directly produce shocks not in order to freeze the actor/spectator, but rather to invite them to a kind of uncanny life between unconscious tick and conscious awareness. Like Twain's "nervous excitement" the viewer is placed outside itself by such shocks, at once subject to neurasthenic symptoms of "suggestibility, an exaggerated exaltation of the nervous system, and lack of will" while simultaneously enabled by such symptoms to access reality in new forms of apperception equal to the destabilizing, cinematic spaces of the contemporary.<sup>100</sup>

According to Rae Beth Gordon, such neurasthenia could be experienced comically, as in the surreal French cartoon comedies of Emile Cohl or it could, as in German cinema, "produce anxiety, fascination, and fear instead of laughter."<sup>101</sup> Theobald's nervous, jerky and at times drunken twitching, a reflection of his overall experience within these films, easily fits this

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<sup>100</sup> Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 228.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p. 220.

descriptions of neurasthenia. Not surprisingly would a critic for the journal *Der Querschnitt* make the same observation of Mickey Mouse in 1931: “A diagnosis of the spindley-legged, hydrocephalitic, astigmatic and neurasthenic Mickey Mouse results above all in the disturbances of sensation in the spheres of the face and ears...The extremely animated [“lebhaft”] and eccentric expressions of life of Mickey Mouse indisputably indicate a manic form of euphoric nature, the so-name ‘classic or [“flotte”] mania...”<sup>102</sup> The author ends his article with concern for a public exposed to such neurasthenic mania, noticing in German audiences a fundamental similarity between the cartoon Mouse and his adoring public: “But here also manifestly exists a similarly abnormal mental state of the broad masses of the public as with Mickey Mouse.” Against this fear of unconscious, contagious imitation of Mickey, Benjamin would see in his humorous mania a return to childhood’s “positive barbarism” as well as to a distinctly collective form of experience: “It is a type of dreadful and very cheerful cannibal attitude, related to the barbarism of children...Who could better corroborate experiences like Mickey Mouse has in his films? A Mickey Mouse film might be incomprehensible to the individual, but not to a public. And a Mickey Mouse film can direct a whole public rhythmically.”<sup>103</sup> While most scholars view the audience’s interaction with cartoons through the framework of character empathy, Benjamin’s insight recognizes that it is the rhythm and movement of the image and its various bodies, rather than any explicit, conscious or narrative meaning, which directs the audience. Like the rhythm-induced, often jazz-accompanied adventures of Mickey and so many other cartoons, Theobald would likewise instruct his public, not simply by pointing to words or images that

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Laqua, 36.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Leslie, p. 85. For the concept of “positive barbarism” see Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 2*, p. 731-735.

might help them find answers, but also through his twitchy body and its various attractational encounters: alcohol, radio tunes, acrobatics, Tiller girls or airplanes.

The *Rebus* films evoke a barbarism evocative of childhood cruelty, but they also remind one of the games children play with words and images. Benjamin himself would describe such rebuses in his essays on children's books, published the same year as the first *Rebus* films (1926) and almost uncanny in its resonances with Seeber and Leni's testing of audiences: "Though such pictures may seem related to those drawings full of contradictions and impossibilities which nowadays are used for tests, these are likewise really only a masquerade: exuberant, impromptu games in which people walk upside down, stick their arms and legs between tree branches, and use a house roof as a coast...[Rebus is] a word that, curiously, was formerly traced back to *rêver* rather than *res*."<sup>104</sup> This strange intersection of the modern, psychotechnical test and the surreal dreamscape is precisely the place where the *Rebus* films operate and in this they follow, as Benjamin does, Freud's use of the word "rebus" in *Die Traumdeutung*: "Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away, and so on. Now I might be misled into raising objections and declaring that the picture as a whole and its component parts are nonsensical."<sup>105</sup> To effectively approach any of these seemingly ludicrous, nonsensical or surreal elements, the dream must be understood as a montage, fragmented into discontinuously connected words and images that need to be filled in like a crossword puzzle. On the one hand, "we fill in any letters or syllables that may have been accidentally omitted" in the various speeches and linguistic revisions of the dream while on the other, as Freud states in his *Studies on Hysteria*,

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<sup>104</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume I*, p. 437.

<sup>105</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 296.

We go on to examine the memory picture itself in order to discover the direction in which our work is to proceed. 'Look at the picture once more. Has it disappeared?' 'Most of it, yes, but I still see this detail.' 'Then this residue must still mean something. Either you will see something new in addition to it, or something will occur to you in connection with it.' When this work has been accomplished, the patient's field of vision is once more free and we can conjure up another picture. On other occasions, however, a picture of this kind will remain obstinately before the patient's inward eye, in spite of his having described it; and this is an indication to me that he still has something important to tell me about the topic of the picture. As soon as this has been done the picture vanishes, like a ghost that has been laid.<sup>106</sup>

Citing this passage, Friedrich Kittler draws attention to its cinematic quality, connecting it to Otto Rank's discussion of *The Student of Prague* and the inherently filmic nature of dreams.<sup>107</sup> Yet while this particular film, as well as those that followed it in motif and affect, would dwell on the mortifying moment in which this residue or ghost does not disappear, the *Rebus* films follow psychoanalysis in making the images both move and montage, "chopping up an internal film" that is nothing more than the unconscious allegory of the audience's collective anxieties, desires and drives. Perhaps more importantly, the emphasis on both montage and collage up the ante on Freud's patient and its "field of vision" since it does not wait for its viewer to consciously trace out unconscious associations suggested by a picture, but rather quickly produces the latter first so that former might come about later when the viewer is tasked with constructing and then writing an answer. Viewers of the *Rebus* films must, like the subjects of psychophysical tests discussed in a chapter of Kittler's *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* entitled, not surprisingly, "Rebus," cycle through its images and words, filling in blanks, teasing out meanings and finding that elusive signifier—lacking any transcendental meaning, such signifiers connote a range of movements, ideas and bodily experiences on the part of the neurasthenic spectator.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 280-281.

<sup>107</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, translated by Winthrop-Young and Wutz (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 142.

<sup>108</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, translated by Metteer (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 265-346.

It is only against this background of child's play with word and image as material things (the other possible origin of "rebus," *res*, meaning thing) that one can understand the testing Seeber and Leni hoped to perform on their audiences. Often this audience was quite intentionally composed of test-batch kids—an article in the *Berliner Volks-Zeitung* describes a showing of several *Rebus* films for school children:

Guido Seebers and Paul Lenis crossword-films...were shown a few days ago in the Steglizer cinema to a group of students in the presence of teachers for the purpose of a teaching-test ["Lehrprobe"]. The leader of German educational film distribution, Dr. Edgar Beyfuß, who carried out this interesting and quite new test of intelligence, at first gave the children...a short instructive introduction to the format of the crossword puzzle, because it was emphasized that most children still had previously never tried to solve a crossword puzzle. Thus the solution to the first puzzle-film turned out rather unsatisfying and it appeared that those teachers who maintained that the puzzle-films would be too difficult for the children were right. But the second and third films brought for the teachers and organizers a great surprise. Barely a mistake was made and images that have often caused adults to scratch their heads were correctly filled out in the completed diagram.<sup>109</sup>

Here we have direct evidence of the training and immediately improved habits of children exposed to the *Rebus* films. Although unaccustomed to the format of the crossword, they apparently picked it up quite easily, putting their cynical teachers to shame while also revealing their own faculty for playing with cinematic puzzles, a faculty that many adults quite obviously lacked. Given the German film industry's embarrassing deficiency in producing supporting films against the increasing American onslaught of shorts and serials, as well as the possibility of producing innovative, educational short films for both domestic and American markets, this screening reveals Seeber and Leni's interest in re-habilitating the German *Beiprogramm* by stealing a page from the American's (comic) book.

Given this, it should not surprise us that in Germany Mickey Mouse, quickly surpassing Felix the Cat in popularity, would appear on his own series of newspaper crosswords. Yet rather than animating the crossword and its various associations like Theobald or gravitating between

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<sup>109</sup> *Berliner Volks-Zeitung* (7/11/1926).

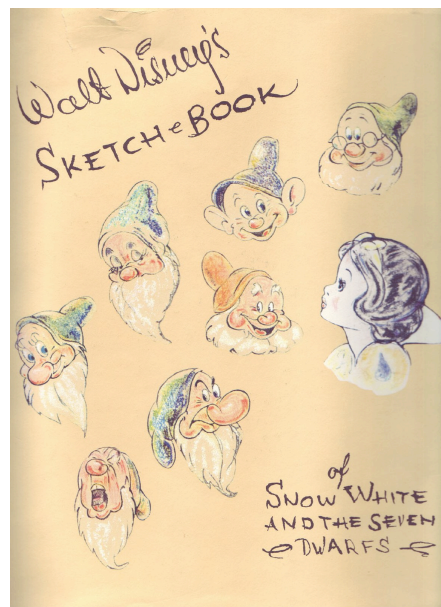
punctual poem and mechanical object like Felix, Mickey would become increasingly sentimental, natural and life-like. Rather than absorbing the uncanny, death driven thrills of attractional entertainment and techno-industrial shock effect, Mickey would inhabit a kitschy, pastoral setting without violence, metamorphosis or machines. Although Nazi censors would prohibit any further screenings of Felix the Cat, Disney cartoons would continue to enjoy success until the general prohibition of all American films during the war. After this prohibition at least one person had access to Disney's cartoons: Hitler. Already having received several Mickey Mouse shorts as a birthday present from Joseph Goebbels, Hitler also had a personal copy of *Snow White* (1937), one of his favorite films. Recently, paintings of various Disney characters were found in Norway, most likely painted by Hitler in 1940, copied from a Disney tracing book.<sup>110</sup> A year later, Disney started producing anti-Nazi films although that has not stopped historians from questioning Walt Disney's own already deeply conservative politics, most evident, at least in the case of Nazism, in his warm reception of Leni Riefenstahl in 1938.

Guido Seeber would himself continue to work in the film industry during the Nazi period, overseeing the animation department at UFA in 1935. This department would shift from playful montages, trick shots and Felix-inspired characters instead trying to compete with Disney by turning, like their opponents, to German fairytales and nineteenth century kitsch. Paul Leni would die in Hollywood, having been recruited by Carl Laemmle at Universal to bring his atmospherically gothic *mise-en-scène* to a new, German-derived genre: the horror film. Although Leni did produce one *Rebus* film for American audiences, the irony is that rather than continuing on with such work, he returned to the world of *Waxworks*, even finding in Hollywood one of its

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<sup>110</sup> "Hitler als Cartoonist: Zwölf Micky-Filme für den Führer," *Einestages: Zeitgeschichte auf Spiegel Online* (2/22/2008), [einestages.spiegel.de/static/authoralbumbackground/1445/zwoelf\\_micky\\_filme\\_fuer\\_den\\_fuehrer.html](http://einestages.spiegel.de/static/authoralbumbackground/1445/zwoelf_micky_filme_fuer_den_fuehrer.html).

villains (Conrad Veidt) to star in his horror film *The Man Who Laughs*. Scholars have ignored not only the alternative spectatorial positions elicited by American *Groteskfilme*, but also those marginal moments when the other scene of anxiety is comically revealed, its affect rechanneled into playful, engaging and humor-filled forms of knowledge production. The *Rebus* films are paradigmatic of this repressed tradition, the underside to Weimar cinema, haunting it as a kind of all too related double, but one, like the comic shadows of Felix, Koko or Mickey, unafraid of the uncanny, grotesque exaggerations, attractions and shocks endemic to a comically animated modernity.



**Figure 8: Hitler's supposed sketchbook of Disney tracings.**

## CHAPTER 4

### ECCENTRIC AUTOMATA, INDIFERRENT MARIONETTES: BUSTER KEATON AND RAOUL HAUSMANN AS WEIMAR MEDIA

#### I. Introduction

“*Is there anybody on board?*” “*Nobody.*” Inter-title exchange from *The Navigator* (1924).

“*I don’t understand life. I don’t seek peace. Am no bourgeois, no revolutionary, am NOTHING. Simply, precisely nothing [garnichts].*” From Raoul Hausmann’s novel, *Hyle*.

In the “propaganda” materials given out to German film exhibitors for the release of Buster Keaton’s final silent feature, *Spite Marriage* (1929), one promotional item is especially worthy of note: “Buster Keaton appears in this film for the first time in tails.”<sup>1</sup> A German filmgoer might see this line in an advertisement and, tickled by the idea, would find at a screening or in a newspaper more information about this comic feature—for instance, an article supposedly written by Keaton himself, entitled “Dressed as a Gentleman.” Here the slapstick star insists on his ignorance of matters of fashion, complains against the opinion that clothes make the man, and states that “I have dressed as a gentleman because I am convinced that this dressing up will have a comic effect and that you will laugh about it as you have at my other films. Because I am a comedian and anything but a dictator of fashion.”<sup>2</sup> *Spite Marriage* seems to confirm these claims as Keaton’s character first appears as immaculately tuxedoed gentleman only to be revealed as a pants-presser borrowing his clients’ clothes to catch his favorite starlet in the proper attire. Audiences are meant to laugh at the implicit contrast between Buster and the opulent clothing that he wears, a punch-line driven home in the revelation of his occupation and, more importantly, in his continual failure to navigate his world’s customs and tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> MGM and Parufamet Presse- und Propaganda-Heft: *Die unvollkommene Ehe*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*





**Figure 1: Keaton stands out in *Spite Marriage* (1929)**

Whether Keaton wrote this article or not is less important than that it accurately reflects his own understanding of the laughter his slapstick provoked, which was premised on the audience never “feel[ing] sorry” and instead laughing *at* him.<sup>3</sup> Fashion was simply one more tool in emphasizing this divergence between Buster’s status as, on the one hand, a slapstick object and, on the other, proper norms and the greater the contrast, i.e. the better dressed Buster is, the bigger the laughs when he acts stupidly. This becomes clear in another clothes-centered promotional article for *Spite Marriage*’s German market, entitled “Black Art,” where Keaton explains why a black tuxedo is best for comedy: first, because it provides a good frame for seeing the face, second, because it makes his body look smaller in contrast to larger antagonists and third, because it suggests solemnity and formality, which adds to the comic effect when someone so dressed “slips on a banana peel.”<sup>4</sup>

Keaton’s technical attention to dress suggests, however, a studied admiration for the varied role of fashion in his films and especially in terms of his own explicitly dandyish

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<sup>3</sup> *Buster Keaton: Interviews*, ed. by Sweeney (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2007), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> MGM and Parufamet Presse- und Propaganda-Heft: *Die unvollkommene Ehe*.

characters. In fact, any fan of Keaton's would have certainly known that his characters often appeared as well-dressed, upper class gentlemen.<sup>5</sup> German advertisements emphasized Buster's status as dandy and Keaton's many fans among German critics, artists and writers of the twenties and early thirties recognized him as the very embodiment of the gentleman. In an earlier article entitled "Me as Gentleman," Keaton would stress the strange intersection of comedy and fashion in a film like *Battling Butler* (1926): "I've never appeared in such a funny role, than as 'Dandy' or 'Gent' ... 'my dumb face,' which works in other roles grotesquely, is in this role so unbelievably fitting that I cannot understand how people laugh about it."<sup>6</sup> Like a well-dressed mannequin or dancing marionette, Keaton's appeal for German audiences and critics depended on both a passive, deadpan element as well as a frenetic, gymnastic motion. For the theater critic Herbert Jhering, Keaton presented a "masculine Olympia from *Tales of Hoffmann*."<sup>7</sup> This "new film type," "dry, sober, but of elastic agility and buoyancy," was like Olympia herself, an "uncanny," androgynous amalgam of, on the one hand, automated movement and, on the other, a fashionable passivity, ever-present in photographs and ads of Keaton, which circulated in billboards, movie-fronts and newspapers throughout Germany and especially in Berlin.<sup>8</sup> Yet rather than suggesting some contradiction it is through a basic in-distinction that Keaton effected success both within the gags of his films as well as a figure of pleasurable attraction for his German audiences.

Five years before *Spite Marriage*, just as Keaton's first features were being released in German cinemas, the Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann wrote an article entitled "Fashion,"

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<sup>5</sup> Even today Keaton's stylishness has been given tribute in a 2011 show by controversial fashion designer, John Galliano.

<sup>6</sup> *Die Filmbühne* 1 (April 1927), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Jhering, "Buster Keaton auf Deutsch," *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht: Vier Jahrzehnte Theater und Film, Band II 1924-1929*, p. 378-379.

<sup>8</sup> The term "uncanny" was used to describe Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* in *Das Tage-Buch*, 6:22 (5/30/25).

demanding that German tailors watch American movies to learn how to design proper suits for men, suits that helped one properly function amidst the disruptions of contemporary life.<sup>9</sup> Hausmann, at once “Dadasoph,” painter, inventor, monteur, dancer, novelist, photographer and fashion designer, followed his Dada companions in celebrating American cinema, praising especially Chaplin and Keaton as points of inspiration and overlap.<sup>10</sup> Among figures circulating within the media-scape of Weimar Germany, Keaton was thus not alone in effecting his subversion. In fact, his presence allowed, encouraged or repeated similar kinds of convergences. Hausmann’s essay “Die Neue Kunst” [“The New Art”] suggests this shared terrain: arguing that humans have reached a “new optical knowledge” “through the train, the airplane, the photographic apparatus, the x-ray,” Hausmann continues, “In the state of hovering between two worlds, when we have broken with the old and the new cannot yet form itself, satire, the grotesque, caricature, the clown and the puppet appear; and it is the deep meaning of these forms of expression, through the demonstration of the marionette-ness, the mechanization of life, through the apparent and real freezing of us, that let a different life be conjectured and felt.”<sup>11</sup> Although Hausmann’s career contains numerous phases, this desire for a new life would be a consistent goal of all his work and thought, from his Dadaist montages to his dance performances, from his theories of fashion to his own cinema projects. As with Keaton, Hausmann’s interest in the comic mechanization of life is not based simply on satirizing those mechanically encrusted, but on rather finding in this very immobility a more intense kind of motion and feeling. Linking seemingly opposed polarities of new and old worlds, technology and

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<sup>9</sup> Raoul Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen: Texte bis 1933 Band 2*, hrg. Michael Erlhoff (München: edition text + kritik, 1982), p. 101-104.

<sup>10</sup> On this point see Beeke Seele Tower, *Envisioning America*, p. 71; Simmons, “Chaplin Smiles on the Wall: Berlin Dada and Wish-Images of Popular Culture,” p. 33

<sup>11</sup> Raoul Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit: Texte bis 1933 Band 1*, hrg. von Michael Erlhoff (München: Edition text +kritik, 1982), p. 181.

the primitive, masculine and feminine, dandy and dancer, advertisement and art, Hausmann operated as an indifferent, eccentric medium by which these phenomena and their accompanying concepts and attractions pulsed.

Despite the many biographical differences between Keaton and Hausmann, we are dealing both with a “new film-type” or “a new man”<sup>12</sup> as well as a kind of “New Human” beyond the “constructed support” of “the bourgeois type as normal human.”<sup>13</sup> Yet in contrast to the utopianism usually implied by this concept, Keaton and Hausmann’s “New Human” is paradoxically a “barber’s head” or “fashion puppet,” achieving the new only by negating traditional humanity and its accompanying constrictions.<sup>14</sup> In a period of German history in which the relationship between mass culture and gender was so often defined by extreme polarization of, on the one hand, masculine anxiety of an armored ego unbound and, on the other hand, some perceived feminine threat in the guise of ornamental commodities, fashionable bodies and automating technologies, Keaton and Hausmann’s shared subversion is worth exploring. Many critics have drawn attention to this polarity, where an invading mass culture, often dressed in explicitly American garb, is counter-posed to a typically male subject anxious or ashamed of being overcome by such invasion.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Weimar’s many personifications and images of both feminine threat and masculine subject, Keaton and Hausmann’s Dadaist

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<sup>12</sup> *Film-Kurier* (27.12.1924), p. 304.

<sup>13</sup> Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> This polarization has been long analyzed. See Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies, Vol. 2: Male Bodies—Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*; Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*” and “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 44-81; Peter Wollen, “Modern Times: Cinema/Americanism/The Robot,” *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Lungstrum, “*Metropolis* and the Technosexual Woman of German Modernity,” *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 129 and 134; R.L. Rutsky, *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 58 and 72.

comedy playfully joins these presumably opposed spheres, producing a hybrid mixture of the machine and the dandy, the armored athlete and the naked mannequin.

Within Berlin Dada, Hausmann was not alone in his admiration for slapstick. Well before Chaplin or Keaton's films were even available for view in Germany word had gotten around about the great Charlot from fellow Dadaists in France and Switzerland. In the teens, George Grosz painted *A Self-Portrait for Charlie Chaplin*, in which a caricature of the artist stands upright at the center of a cinematically scattered urban scene, complete with a naked woman with a skull for a head, kicking, gartered legs, skyscrapers, advertisement slogans and streaming streetlights that could just as easily be film projectors. In a 1920 issue of Berlin Dada's journal, *Der Dada*, we find the following announcement, placed right in the middle of Hausmann's essay "Dada in Europa": "The International Dada Company, Berlin, sends Charlie Chaplin world's greatest artist and a good Dadaist, friendly greetings. We protest against the banning of Chaplin's movies in Germany."<sup>16</sup> Hausmann and Chaplin had already appeared together in an international edition of Tristan Tzara's journal *Dada* in 1919, his sketch *Bois* appearing directly below the announcement: "Charlot Chaplin nous a annonce son adhesion au Mouvement Dada."<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, Grosz's dedication to Chaplin, which he would repeat for his now lost painting, *Der Schmerz des Kronprinzen über die Fahnenflucht seines Vaters*, was only one of several such projections onto the still absent clown: Otto Schmalhausen converted Beethoven's death mask into a portrait of the Tramp for the 1920 International Dada Fair; Johaanes Baader, Hausmann's closest friend among the Dadaists, painted an *Honorary Portrait of Charlie Chaplin* which doubled as a "tribute" to Guttenberg's invention of printed type and thus claimed for film and its greatest representative a shared, mediatic power; Gerhard Preiss, the "Music Dada" exhibited a

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<sup>16</sup> *Der Dada* 3 (April, 1920), <http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/derdada/3/index.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> See *Dada* 4/5 (May, 1919), [http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/dada/4\\_5/index.htm](http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/dada/4_5/index.htm).

series of photographs of himself in bowler hat and black clothing dancing the “Dada-Trott,” a dance that cannot help but recall the Tramp’s own derby-bedecked displays; Erwin Blumenfeld dubbed himself “President-Dada-Chaplinist” and produced a montage of the slapstick comedian simultaneously lying on and becoming the cross, surrounded by various religious and art icons. Yet another of Blumenfeld’s montages inverts the phallic resurrection of Grosz’s *Self-Portrait*: a montage-postcard for Tzara in which Blumenfeld cut out his head and tie and placed it atop a divided, naked female body, the top half photographed, the bottom-half drawn—across the image a signature is written in block letters: “BLOOMFIELD-PRESIDENT-DADA-CHAPLINIST.”<sup>18</sup>

Many scholars have drawn attention to this connection between slapstick and Dadaism, with particular focus on the role of the unseen Chaplin, but in contrast to dominant accounts of this connection, not to mention the related polarization of gender so crucial to our understanding of mass culture of the twenties and thirties, I argue that Hausmann and Keaton’s shared union of mechanical nonsense and androgynous synesthesia sublates anxieties about shame, objectification and mass culture itself into playful, exploratory encounters at the limits of the traditional human corpus. Articulating a different understanding of Keaton’s slapstick and Hausmann’s Dadaist humor requires that we envision this nonsense less through the dimensions of the performative, self-reflexive or parodic and more through what Hausmann called, in his most famous essay “Der deutscher Spießer ärgert sich” [The German Philistine Gets Upset], “all sorts of amusement, be it in words, forms, colours, noises,” that “fantastic nonsense” that is both

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<sup>18</sup> See *Erwin Blumenfeld: I was nothing but a Berliner: Dada Montages 1916-1933*, ed. Adkins (Berlin: Hate Cantz/Berlinische Galerie, 2008), pp. 106-112.

produced and loved.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the question is not simply revealing meaninglessness—that is not the end-point of Keaton and Hausmann’s art, but rather the beginning. The point of such amusements is not simply the negative relation they have to social or aesthetic sense, but rather the new experiences opened up beyond this negation, the surplus sensations of a nonsense that is always materially mediated.<sup>20</sup> It is not enough to point out these amusements’ distance from narrative or sense, but rather to ask what was achieved or revealed by this distance? What realms of feeling or thought were opened up? How were prior modalities of experience as mediated by film, commodity, technology or gender, transformed? If both Hausmann and Keaton’s nonsense is produced, what were the techniques and tactics for effecting this production and what surplus byproducts were necessarily tied to the process? Perhaps most importantly, how did such productions and the various media by which they were known, sensed and felt, re-route the psycho-techno-sexual dichotomies dominating the extreme ends of Weimar Germany’s cultural imaginary?

In what follows, I will analyze both Hausmann and Keaton’s shared position within the context of Weimar Germany’s media culture. This position exists both under the sign of Hausmann’s familiarity with Keaton, but more important than the topic of influence is situating both artists as themselves Weimar media, producing comparable short-circuits of the dominant oppositions that seemed to structure Weimar Germany’s anxious fascination with all things

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<sup>19</sup> Re-published in *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ades (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> The reading of Dadaist montage (and in a few cases, their interpenetration) in allegorico-ironic terms of negation or a related radical or traumatic nonsense can be found throughout secondary literature on the movement, beginning as early as Hans Richter, *Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p. 64. See also Hal Foster, “Dada Mime,” *October* 105 (Summer, 2003), p. 169; Hanno Bergius, *Das Lachen Dadas: Die Berliner Dadaisten und ihre Aktionen* (Wetzlar: Anabas Verlag, 1989); Andrei Codrescu, *The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 2; Brigid Doherty, “See: ‘We Are All Neurasthenics’!” or, the Trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical Inquiry* 24:1 (Autumn, 1997), p. 118; Maude Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 142; Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 88.

*Amerikanismus*. In the case of Keaton, we will be interested not simply in his film performances, but also in his very status as a commodity, one that circulated beyond the screen in advertisements, songs, articles, reviews, publicity images and accompanying performances.<sup>21</sup> Following Charles Wolfe, one cannot solely approach Keaton through pure formal analysis of his films, but must, in addition, connect his performances to varied, internationally contingent sites of reception, distribution and reappropriation.<sup>22</sup> While Wolfe focuses primarily on American and French contexts, Germany gets short shrift. There Keaton's modernism was very real, his films watched carefully and appreciatively by artists like Hausmann and can thus be read comparatively in relation to a host of other avant-garde projects. Keaton's name and image circulated in the same journals in which an artist like Hausmann published his essays and those who reviewed Hausmann's art reviewed Keaton's cinema, often in identical terms. Wolfe's reading Keaton in terms of an "interplay of screen performances, studio publicity and promotion, journalistic reportage, and critical commentary" implicitly involves, in the case of Weimar Germany, a whole media apparatus, one that an art movement like Dada and an artist like Hausmann were, in their own self-promotions and advertisements, intensely familiar.<sup>23</sup> Reading Keaton *with* Hausmann is thus both an issue of influence as much as it is an issue of situated analysis, one grounded in a specific context. Reading Keaton in terms of Hausmann and

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<sup>21</sup> The vast majority of Keaton scholarship has ignored these alternative modes of reception within various historical sites as well as theoretical questions of sensation and synaesthesia. The dominant claim has been the negative or ironic relationship Keaton's comedy has to mechanisms of both narrative and technology. See Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Peter Krämer, "Derailing the Honeymoon Express: Narrative Closure in Buster Keaton's *The Blacksmith*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 23, pp. 101-117; Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008); Sylvain du Pasquier, "Buster Keaton's Gags," translated by Silverstein, *Journal of Modern Literature* 3:2 (April 1973), pp. 269-291.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Wolfe, "Buster Keaton: Comic Invention and the Art of Moving Pictures," *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the Twenties*, edited by Patrice Petro (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); pp 41-64. See also Wolfe, "California Slapstick Revisited," *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. King and Paulus (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 169-190.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfe, "Buster Keaton: Comic Invention and the Art of Moving Pictures," p. 62.



Hausmann in terms of Keaton is thus not merely speculative or projective, but is implied by their status as constructed, playful and played media figures, ones whose circulation carried formal similarities as much as they implied shared modes/sites of reception.

While I will throughout privilege primary texts in approaching both topics, it will also be necessary to address current scholarly assumptions as well as re-frame the potential legacy of this particular mass modernist conjunction for contemporary film theory. The writings of Gilles Deleuze will be particularly instructive, not least because Deleuze has written the most persuasive account of Keaton as a supremely Dadaist figure, one far removed from all too common accounts of Dadaism's nihilism, irony and negativity. If the central topic of this essay is the far from spiteful marriage of the machine and the mannequin, Deleuze's writings on the machinic as a deterritorializing, desirous force encompassing both the organic and the technical—a synthesis found most powerfully in cinematic vision and best exemplified by Keaton's own filmic gaze—will be an indispensable reference point.

### **III. From Machines to the Machinic...**

*"Like the burlesque comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement."* E.E. Cummings.

Just as Berlin Dada seemed to be dispersing, Hausmann would publish several essays in Theo van Doesburg's journal *De Stijl* [The Style] in the early twenties, seeking to diversify the possibilities of Dadaist art and performance. "Dada ist mehr als Dada" [Dada is more than Dada] is one such an essay, presenting his first effort to re-frame Dadaism in relation to Weimar's ever-changing present as well as proto-Dadaist thought which might be refashioned. Emphasizing the "carefree" nature of Dadaism, Hausmann would locate a kind of subjectivity in the "a-musical, a-psychological, a-individual," an "indifferent," "new type of human" that sees "peace only in

movement.”<sup>24</sup> This seeing is at once a “view of life” and an embodied movement within life itself, one that “runs over the free, intelligible I with laughter and once again primitively surrenders to the world.”<sup>25</sup> This “laughter and irony” reflects Dadaism’s negationist spirit, especially its resistance to a bourgeois culture of tragedy.<sup>26</sup> Yet this “tendency for the untragic” paradoxically originates in a “mechanical, subsiding, so-called freedom, out of which [Dada] whistles.”<sup>27</sup> A year later, Hausmann would clarify this mechanical elasticism in another essay for *De Stijl* entitled “PREsentismus” [Presentism]. Demanding the “expansion and conquest of all our senses,” Hausmann emphasizes a “haptic art” predicated on a sixth sense of movement, which lets one be “spun around and ruptured.”<sup>28</sup> Here Hausmann continues preoccupations laid out in his very first Dadaist texts on while connecting such interests to a host of new phenomena. Thus, this “presentist” Dadaism is best characterized as “new, bold and [American]” and best expressed in that most mechanical yet synasthetic of arts: “Our art is already today the film! Simultaneously, event, statue and image!”

In an issue of *De Stijl* published four years later, Hausmann’s demand for a “mechanical consciousness” and “forward-pushing engineer” would be fulfilled. Friedrich Kiesler, a stage designer and architect affiliated with both the *De Stijl* group as well as the Bauhaus, published “The Renewal of Theater” in a 1926 issue of van Doesburg’s journal.<sup>29</sup> While the article suggests these affiliations all too clearly in its demand for a stream-lined theater without “illusion and illustration,” two photographs opposing the article reveal a surprising inspiration: on the left side is a photograph of Kiesler’s “Raumbühne” [“Space-stage”], presumably an exemplary space for

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<sup>24</sup> Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, p. 166-171.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 24-30

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Kiesler, “Erneuerung des Theaters,” *De Stijl: internationaal maandblad voor nieuwe kunst, wetenschap en kultur*, ed. Theo van Doesburg 75/76 (1926), pp. 51-54.

this “renewal” while on the right side there is an image of Buster Keaton, only his head and tie visible via collage, seeming to look to his right at Kiesler’s circular, highly geometric theater; beneath this Keaton cut-out we find the phrase, “Cineaste de l’avenir” [Filmmaker of the future].

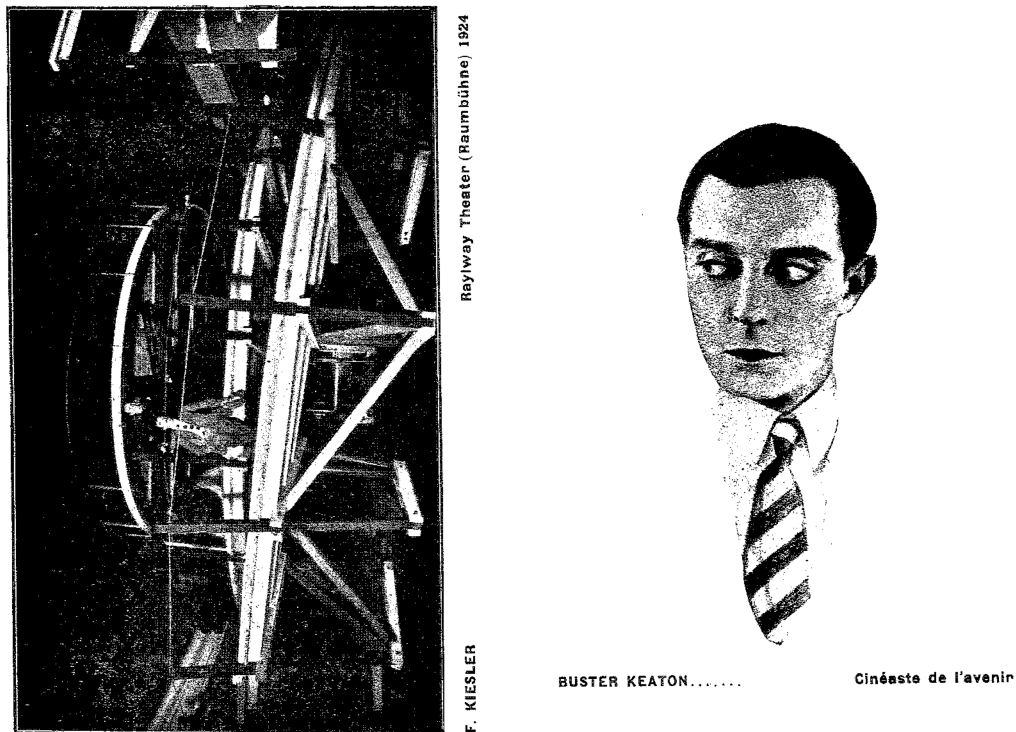


Figure 2: Keaton is made to gaze at Kiesler’s *Raumbühne*.

Kiesler designed similarly innovative stages throughout the twenties, most notably for a production of Karl Čapek’s landmark play *R.U.R* in both Vienna and Berlin, a play detailing the dystopic rise of a robot labor force but which Kiesler converted into a comic celebration of the industrial machine.<sup>30</sup> This production initiated Kiesler’s membership within *De Stijl* and his association with artists connected to both the Bauhaus (Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe, El Lissitzky) as well as with Dadaism (Kurt Schwitters and Hans Richter), artists whom Hausmann

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<sup>30</sup> For a stage design and (harshly negative) review of Kiesler’s production see Carl Einstein, “W.U.R.,” *Der Querschnitt* (1923), pp. 74-75.

knew well and collaborated with. Decades later Hausmann himself intimated acquaintance with Kiesler as well as Walter Benjamin, through mutual membership in Richter's *G* group. The very stage shown in Kiesler's montage was the site of a landmark festival in Vienna, which included the not unrelated film *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) by Fernand Léger, a far more famous merging of slapstick star (Chaplin) and mechanical rhythms and sensations.<sup>31</sup> The very year this essay was published Kiesler would present his theories and designs to New York audiences, among whom included e.e. cummings, who shared the German artist's enthusiasm for merging the industrial modern with slapstick comedy.<sup>32</sup> Although Kiesler is perhaps best known for designing Peggy Guggenheim's landmark exhibition, *Art of this Century*, one of his first designs was a beautiful, Bauhaus-inspired cinema in New York City's West Village, the Guild Theater. When the cinema opened in 1929, George Gershwin and John dos Passos were on hand and of course a slapstick film was shown: Chaplin's most Keatonesque work, the gadget-obsessed *I A.M* (1916).

Kiesler's "filmmaker of the future"—Keaton—was a perfect fit for the *Raumbühne*'s simulation of the rollercoaster, circus and cinema. Such spaces provided the settings for many of Keaton's silent films, from the Fatty Arbuckle short, *Coney Island* (1917), to the multiple Keatons of *The Playhouse* right up to the driver-less motorcycle ride in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) (not to mention that film's taking place within the dream space of film itself). Kiesler's juxtaposition of the *Raumbühne* and the slapstick star, then at the height of his German popularity, was not to imply a space of technological order on the one hand and a figure of human disorder on the other, but rather to suggest two essentially linked figurations that are equally mechanical as well as burlesque. Keaton appears here both as a body, but also as an object to be inserted into the

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<sup>31</sup> See Janet Stewart, *Public Speaking in the City: Debating and Shaping the Urban Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 146.

<sup>32</sup> See Allison Carruth, "The Space Stage and the Circus: E.E. Cummings's Him and Frederick Kiesler's Raumbühne," *Modern Drama* 51:4 (Winter, 2008), pp. 458-481.

opposing space, a projectile that is as much human as it is a mechanized partial object.

Discussing Kiesler's production of *R.U.R.*, Patricia Pringle has developed the concept of "spatial pleasure," "an underlying sense that body/space is shifty, elastic, and a suitably malleable material for play," a sense that is less cognitive and more a merging of the body with its environment because "we know space through our knowledge of our bodies, but since that knowledge is itself uncertain, space too is uncertain, subjective, and contingent."<sup>33</sup> Such space is far from fixed and is instead animated by a conjoined movement of space, sight and body. This contingency opens up a whole realm for the senses to intermingle, moving from one to the other in ceaseless transmission, less contemplative and more "a reaching out to the world in a participatory process."<sup>34</sup> This realm was not only the preoccupation of artists like Kiesler or van Doesburg, Schwitters or Hausmann, but encompassed both the filmic universe of Keaton's cinema as well as the various pleasures that cinema relayed.

Keaton was the embodiment of Hausmann's Dadaism beyond Dadaism, at once "event, statue and image," the engineer who finds peace only in the whirling of the machine. Hausmann, like his Dada compatriots, seems at first to have favored Chaplin more, writing about him at length in his texts on film. Nonetheless, Keaton is included in Hausmann's most substantial reflection on film, "Filmdämmerung" [Twilight of Film] where he, Chaplin and the stars of Fox's slapstick shorts, all suggest an optically informed cinema, one based not on "literary" or "actorly" criterion.<sup>35</sup> Instead Chaplin "plays, similar to an acrobat, only out of his bodily possibilities (one thinks of his best film: *Chaplin spielt allein [1 A.M.]* or the dance of bread-rolls

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Pringle, "Spatial Pleasure," *Space and Culture* 8:3 (May, 2005), pp. 141-159; Pringle, "Seeing Impossible Bodies: Fascination as a Spatial Experience," *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 1:2 (June 2004), p. online ([http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=34](http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=34)).

<sup>34</sup> Pringle, "Spatial Pleasure," p. 143.

<sup>35</sup> *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 111.

in *The Gold Rush*). Because his gestures address the problem of the formation of space and the movement within the field of film through the body, he is no psychologist but rather one of the first physiologists. Chaplin sees with all limbs, he effectively sculpts in space.” Hausmann goes on to state that film “requires a formation, an optic construction from analogies or contrasts of forms, objects, movements”<sup>36</sup> and while he would devote much of his explicit writings on cinema either to Soviet film or to avant-gardists, he would reference both Chaplin and Keaton as well as the continued importance of silent film for thinking through issues of photo-montage, photography and cinema, all of which relate to the “education of our vision, our knowledge and can contribute, through the clarity of their means by which content and form, meaning and the giving of form coincide, to the optic, psychological and social structure of what is still vast and undreamed of.”<sup>37</sup>

It is important to emphasize not only the cinematic nature of Hausmann’s art, but to draw attention to his interest in actual cinematic production.<sup>38</sup> Most telling here is Hausmann’s “film manuscript” for what can only be called a Dadaist slapstick film, *My Engagement*.<sup>39</sup> Previously unexamined, this typed manuscript suggests that Hausmann was not only interested in making films, but that it was slapstick that motivated this interest in the first place, a slapstick that cannot help but seem directly inspired by Buster Keaton and specifically by his most Dadaist film, *Sherlock Jr.* As the title suggests, the film concerns a bachelor, Kasimir Edelschmied, and his attempt to keep the hand of his beloved, Kunigunde (a name perhaps inspired by *Candide*)

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 132

<sup>38</sup> This in contrast to Hausmann scholar Michael Erlhoff, who has argued that Hausmann never turned to filmmaking in his own artistic practice because of, first, a lack of financial/technical means and second, because Hausmann’s own art, understood as “already today the film” and “synthetic cinema,” was far more “spectacular” than what film’s own technology, industry or artists could produce. See Michael Erlhoff, *Raoul Hausmann, Dadasoph: Verusch einer Politisierung* (Hannover: zweitschrift 1982), p. 90.

<sup>39</sup> “Meine Verlobung,” Accessed at the Raoul Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

against the interferences of her mother. Already this plot immediately recalls the basic narrative structure of virtually every Keaton short or feature, which invariably involve Keaton's perpetually failed relationship with a fiancé, bride-to-be or object of affection, a failure that reverses itself into success at film's end due either to absolute contingency, ridiculous achievement or some combination thereof. After a first sequence in which Kasimir chases his bride around a tree, a second, entitled "Blessed love, heartfelt dream," turns the tables in a Dadaist dream in which the bride's head multiplies, first three, then eventually twenty times over, chasing Kasimir. This sequence recalls not only the importance of chase gags from Keaton's slapstick, but also the specific type of chase found in *Cops* (1922), *Go West* (1925) or *Seven Chances* (1925), in which Buster, isolated and harried through both urban and natural settings, is mobbed by a mathematically sublime number of mobile things: police, cattle, stones or, most relevantly in this case, brides-to-be.

This Dadaist logic returns in a later sequence in which Kasimir decides he must dress himself "as a gent" to keep his girl and, employing the same multiple exposure effect used at the start of Keaton's transformative dream in *Sherlock Jr.*, pulls a version of himself as gent ("as he would like to be") out of himself, to compare the two versions before a mirror. He is provoked in this by another effects-produced joke: standing before "twenty photos of the beautiful mother-in-law," Kasimir is surprised to find her stepping out of one of the photographs, "looking at [his] suit contemptuously." A reversal of *Sherlock Jr.*, here it is the image that enters reality, rather than the real entering the frame—regardless of the direction, the implication is clear: effects in both films suggests a realm ruled by the animating laws of cinema. "Between the gent and himself," he chooses the gent, heading to a bazaar, dressing down to his underclothes and changing into what he considers the proper attire, thus provoking both the salesman as well as

the film's hypothetical audience "to bend over from laughter." After leaving the bazaar "as gent," Hausmann notes that for the rest of the film, Kasimir "gets a mask of his own face so that it will no longer move." Presumably this "mask" is to be absolutely devoid of sentiment: in a final sequence in which his clothes fall apart, Kasimir "becomes gloomy" and "dreadfully tough." This humorless face, so evocative of Keaton, who in Hans Siemsen's words "carried his face like a mask," is only the culminating moment in a series of gags reappropriated by Hausmann for the purposes of this Dada-farce.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the dominance of Chaplin's star for Berlin Dada and for Hausmann in particular, "My Engagement" suggests a distinctly Keatonesque strain, one that, in contrast to the earlier fascination with the Tramp, was nourished by the actual viewing of Keaton's films and a careful attention to the narratives, gags and effects that formed their comedy. It is thus not surprising that Hausmann's favorite Chaplin film was not one obsessed with issues of class, labor or social relations, but the same film that fascinated Kiesler, where a drunken gentleman in a tuxedo struggles to go to bed against the malicious will of his plush furnishings and hypermodern comforts. While this is an exceptional film in Chaplin's oeuvre, Keaton, often dressed as a "gent," performed alone in wider angled shots that privileged comic interaction with a technological *mise-en-scène* over a victimized individual and its gestural responses. If for Berlin Dada "the engineer/machine man was [Chaplin's] technological counterpart", then we find, as Kiesler did for *R.U.R.*, a robotic exemplum of this type in Keaton, who was simultaneously victim and agent or, rather, achieved agency precisely through his self-victimizing submission.<sup>41</sup> Keaton is less the anxious beating heart within the machine than an anonymous element beyond

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<sup>40</sup> Hans Siemsen, "Buster Keaton," *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über den Stummfilm*, ed.. Fritz Güttinger (Deutsches Filmmuseum Frankfurt am Main, 1984), pp. 251.

<sup>41</sup> Tower, *Envisioning America*, p. 70.



emotion or empathy. In contrast to the neurasthenic Tramp, Keaton displays no symptoms, tics or shattered nerves and his placid reserve against the world's continual violence suggest a complete omission of the traumatic. Indeed, this is one of the most interesting things about his comedy. The same can be said for Hausmann, who escaped both military service and psychological internment during the War.

Keaton and Hausmann unwittingly shared the same image for this constructor-engineer: the sailor. Perhaps his most recurrent role, Keaton often finds himself aboard ships and boats, forced into complex negotiations within the constricted yet ever expansive space of the ship, whether that space is miniscule as in *The Boat* (1921), moderately sized as in *The Love Nest* (1923) and *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928) or massive as in *The Navigator* and *Spite Marriage*. These ships are determined by a whole series of spatial delimitations, but they are also ceaselessly open to new events, adventures and intruders and it is this play of limitation and openness that defines the comedy of Keaton's ocean-bound comedies. The paradigmatic image of this dialectic is the sequence in *The Navigator* in which Buster's Rollo Treadway is forced to wear a deep-sea diver's suit. Rollo almost chokes while smoking inside the suit and then cautiously submerges into the water, executing a series of increasingly ridiculous gags: putting up a "Men at work" sign, re-functioning a lobster to cut a cable, using a swordfish to fence with another swordfish, and, in a gag Keaton was forced to cut from the film but which he recounts in his autobiography, acting as a traffic cop for various schools of fish. Perhaps the paradigmatic image of *The Navigator*, Keaton would, in a publicity still, take the joke of the diving suit further, looking deadpan into the camera while his trademark porkpie hat sits askew atop the suit's metal helmet. This image was a prominent feature in UFA's propaganda for the film when it played in German

theaters, other advertising materials including a “Sailor’s song” and an excerpt from a Jack London sea story.<sup>42</sup>



**Figure 3: A publicity still for *The Navigator* and Hausmann’s part in Höch’s *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser...***

There are profound connections here with Dadaism and with Hausmann in particular. This is perhaps already clear in Hausmann’s own language for his projected “new human,” “a-psychological, a-individual.” There is a fitting image of this human in Hausmann’s appearance in Hannah Höch’s landmark montage, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands*, where the Dadasoph’s head is awkwardly placed atop a small diver’s suit. Hausmann himself was interested in the figure of the sailor and enjoyed listening and moving his body to “Matrosenlieder” [Sailor songs]: in his unpublished novel, *Hyle*, Hausmann’s alter-ego Gal plays a record of “Seasons and Shanties” and notes, in English, the lyrics to a particular favorite: “What shall I do with the drunken sailor, early in the

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<sup>42</sup> MGM/UFA Presse- und Propaganda-Heft: *Der Matrose*.

morning’.”<sup>43</sup> Gal’s dancing is creaturely, off-kilter, always moving to and on its side, an animal aspect that Kurt Pinthus would find in that “inhuman creature” Buster and whom the playwright Marieluise Fleißer would compare to both a “mollusk” and “a dried fish.”<sup>44</sup> In an unpublished essay on the choice, “Middle Ages or *Amerikanismus*,” Hausmann definitively opts for the latter, celebrating the “electric brightness” of “this modernity, this electric art of witches, the great cities,” a realm best lived by the American, who “stretched himself horizontally, surrounded gigantic complexes.”<sup>45</sup> This horizontality, this turning sideways of the body, is perhaps best exemplified by beings of the sea: aside from Keaton’s conviviality with such creatures in *The Navigator*, a publicity image for that film likewise emphasizes this off-kilterness, Keaton staring through a telescope on the deck of a ship, his body bent laterally into a parabola hanging from the ship’s ropes.

One of the first and still most relevant accounts of Dadaism emphasizes the inextricable link between stateless circulation and the sailor—the Russian structuralist Roman Jakobson’s 1921 essay “Dada.” Regarding the former, Jakobson would write “[Dada] is simply a meaningless little word thrown into circulation in Europe, a little word with which one can juggle *a l’aise*, thinking up meanings, adjoining suffixes, coining complex words which create the illusion that they refer to objects: dadasopher, dadapit.”<sup>46</sup> It is not without relevancy that one of Jakobson’s examples of such a “complex wor[d]” refers to Hausmann’s very own title: “Dadasoph.” Hausmann—the drunken sailor, the montaged and montaging deep sea diver, the crab dancer—points to Jakobson’s own interest in the figure best suited for navigating this fluid

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<sup>43</sup> Hausmann, *Hyle*, p. 343

<sup>44</sup> Kurt Pinthus, “Keatons Kuh,” *Filmpublizist*, (München: Edition text + kritik, 2008), pp. 220-1; Marieluise Fleißer, “Ein Porträt Buster Keatons,” *Berliner Börsen-Courier* 569 (1927).

<sup>45</sup> Hausmann, *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele*, p. 117.

<sup>46</sup> Roman Jakobson, “Dada,” *Language in Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 37.

circulation: “Is this not the reason for the fact that sailors are revolutionary, that they lack that very ‘stove,’ that hearth, that little house of their own, and are everywhere equally *chez soi*?”<sup>47</sup>

The failed revolution in Berlin that played such an essential role in radicalizing Berlin Dada was led primarily by German sailors while another Dadaist, Franz Jung, who had published many of Hausmann’s essays in his journals *Die Neue Jugend* and *Die Freie Strasse*, hijacked a German frigate and sailed it to the Soviet Union as a gift for the newly installed Bolsheviks—a Dadaist precursor to *The Navigator*, which departs from a “funny little war” between nations and ends up having as much political efficacy as Jung’s hijacking did.

It is more likely that Jakobson is referring to his own nation’s experience of the revolutionary sailor: the Battleship Potemkin uprising of 1905. Yet here too for Weimar critics Keaton is of crucial importance. Writing in exile in Princeton, New Jersey in the late thirties, Erwin Panofsky would explicitly align *The Navigator* with Sergei Eisenstein’s landmark depiction of that uprising: “How the earlier Russian films exploited the possibility of heroizing all sorts of machinery lives in everybody’s memory; and it is perhaps more than an accident that the two films which will go down in history as the great comical and the great serious masterpiece of the silent period bear the names and immortalize the personalities of two big ships: Keaton’s *The Navigator* and Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*.”<sup>48</sup> When presenting his essay to non-academic audiences, Panofsky would show *The Navigator* in full, even going so far to play a scholarly version of early cinema’s Lecturer, “accompany[ing] [the film] with an extremely funny running commentary.”<sup>49</sup> Another East Coast Weimar exile, Siegfried Kracauer, praised the intimation of this “more than” accidental conjunction of the “serious” and the

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style* (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), p. 108.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Levin, “Iconology at the Movies: Panofsky’s Film Theory,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9.1 (1996), p. 27.

“comic,” stating in a letter to Panofsky that this “analogy” was an “exquisite find.”<sup>50</sup> Writing ten years before Panofsky, Kracauer’s friend and Hausmann’s colleague in the G group Walter Benjamin likewise drew an explicit connection between Eisenstein’s film and American slapstick, writing that “[American slapstick comedy’s] target [is] technology. This kind of film is comic, but only in the sense that the laughter it provokes hovers over an abyss of horror. The obverse of a ludicrously liberated technology is the lethal power of naval squadrons on maneuver, as we see it openly displayed in *Potemkin*.”<sup>51</sup> Yet there is a third element in this essay, related to this “laughter,” the trauma produced by Dadaist assaults, which according to Benjamin, anticipated, for a small avant-garde audience, the immensely popular violence of slapstick.

Rather than focus on the machine as the indistinct site of a traumatic shock or utopian construction, Hausmann’s Dadaism was less an aesthetic to be celebrated, satirized or suffered and rather syn-aesthetic, a reflection of Benjamin’s own claims about the “tactile quality” of Dadaism not merely as traumatic “missile” but also as “alluring appearance” [*lockend Augenschein*] and “convincing image of sound.” [*überredenden Klanggebilde*].<sup>52</sup> Hausmann’s interest in such unbound conditions descends from two essential concepts/figures: first, the notion of “creative indifference” developed by the philosopher and grotesque humorist, Salomo Friedlaender (known, in his comic writings, as Mynona, “Anonym” written backwards) and second, the concept of “exzentrische Empfindung” [“eccentric sensation/feeling”] developed by the neo-Kantian philosopher, Ernst Marcus. According to the former’s opus, written before World War I but first published in 1918, the eponymous concept of creative indifference entails a

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<sup>50</sup> Kracauer and Panofsky, *Briefwechsel 1941-1966* (Berlin: Oldenbourg Akademieverlag, 1996), pp. 44-45.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 2*, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, p. 39.

neutral midpoint between dichotomous poles such as self/other, subject/object, person/world. This “nobody” was neither internal subject nor externalized part of the world, but rather both and neither simultaneously, achieving creativity at the price of alienation, a “paradoxical balancing act” between contradictory, ever differing worlds, experiences, sensations, “the polarity of face, hearing, smell, taste” carried to various and ever conflicting extremes.<sup>53</sup> Yet this alienation was far from tragic as Friedlaender, a fellow traveler of both the Expressionists and the Dadaists, identified a “humor of extremes” as essential to this “act,” resulting in both “laughing” and “self-mocking.”<sup>54</sup> Although steeped in German traditions philosophical and aesthetic, Friedlaender ultimately defined his thought as “a synthesis of Kant and Chaplin,”<sup>55</sup> converting Nietzsche’s Dionysianism into an “American verve profanely directed to the outside.”<sup>56</sup> Like the *Groteskfilme* of Chaplin, whom Friedlaender opposed to Buddha in one of his many lists of polarized figures/forms, Mynona’s *Groteske* were demonstrations of this humorous synthesis of extremes, a synthesis that was necessarily synaesthetic, involving everything that one “can see, hear, taste, smell and touch.”<sup>57</sup>

Also published in 1918 Ernst Marcus’ treatise, *Das Problem der exzentrischen Empfindung und seine Lösung* [“The Problem of Eccentric Feeling and its Solution”] would have profound influences on both Friedlaender and Hausmann. According to Marcus, sight, the most important of the senses, is not to be understood as separate from the world it surveys, but rather co-extensive. Vision is made eccentric to itself, achieving sight only through a simultaneous “sense of touch” determined not by mental, conscious awareness, but by a constantly fluid bodily

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<sup>53</sup> Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz: Gesammelte Schriften Band 10* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2009); p. 154.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 154 and 565.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Lisbeth Exner, “Mynona: A Grotesque Humorist,” *Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870-1940*, ed. Kort (Munich: Prestel, 2004), p. 142.

<sup>56</sup> Friedlaender, *Schöpferische Indifferenz*, p. 503.

<sup>57</sup> Mynona, “Die Groteske,” *Der Verliebte Leichnam* (Hamburg: Verlag Am Galgenber, 1988), p. 149.

extension within a universe of which that body is, after all, only a part.<sup>58</sup> If the core idea is “to see and to feel at the same time,” then such feeling has to be understood as wrapped up in the materiality of a body that is ultimately nothing but sensation.<sup>59</sup> These senses are never purely themselves, instead translating themselves across each other in constant movement, one that overcomes the gap between individual consciousness and active universe. Hausmann’s encounter with this text came at the moment he was differentiating himself from the various factions within Berlin Dada and his reference to it in his essay, “Die Neue Kunst,” reveals both a break in his thought as well as an essential continuity from prior concerns. While Marcus would emphasize sight as well as the limits of the body’s senses, Hausmann took things much further, connecting Marcus’s “Empfindung” to a materiality beyond the human organism—indeed, it is in this essay that Hausmann emphasizes the importance of “barber’s heads,” “mannequins,” “the grotesque, caricature, the clown and the puppet.” Such beings indicated that “eccentric feeling” was not limited simply to human senses, but could be embodied in a host of objects. Perhaps the crucial meta-form for expressing this synaesthesia was the cinematic. Hausmann’s unpublished novel, written between 1928 and 1933, is a good case in point: first titled *Heute und übermorgen* [Today and the Day after Tomorrow], but changed to *Hyle* “because we are all only matter [Stoff],”<sup>60</sup> Hausmann wanted the book to be “a film of all feelings, the events within not a description, but rather the furling and unfurling of waves of touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight and the movement between things.”<sup>61</sup> This passage also suggests how Hausmann made Marcus and Friedlaender’s ideas even more eccentric, not only divorcing synaesthesia from the Kantian

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<sup>58</sup> Ernst Marcus, *Das Problem der exzentrischen Empfindung und seine Lösung*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Raoul Hausmann, *Hyle* manuscript. Accessed at the Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie. See also Eva Züchner, “Hyle—weil wir nur Stoff sind: Hausmanns morphologischer Roman,” *Wir wünschen die Welt bewegt und beweglich’: Raoul-Hausmann-Symposium der Berlinische Galerie*, ed. Züchner (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> Hausmann, “Heute und übermorgen.” Accessed at the Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

subject, but also extending the possibility for primitivist perception by producing it in a montage of contemporary, international phenomena.

Each of these phenomena appears within Hausmann's oeuvre, as, on the one hand, mechanical, technological or industrial and, on the other, medial sensation. Hausmann's interest in the automaton is based not on unsettling shock, but on an indifferent non-subject balancing between individual consciousness and unconscious reality. In an unpublished essay entitled "Theater," Hausmann describes the preeminent form for this non-subject: "Pantomime is the most consistent expression for the time-spatial, parallel functioning of the movements of sound and body and of the physio-plastically purest theater."<sup>62</sup> This space-time was synonymous with that sixth sense of movement, a sense actualized as much by the sound-poem as by cinema's "movement between things":

...life is at once funny, at once sad nonsense—and the cabaret is a kind of greater pocket mirror. Everything is reflected within—one could quite well and almost mechanically depict the concept of the human as a cabaret number. The "Kabarett zum Menschen," that would be a kind of iron cage in two levels, with a home-trainer, a motorcycle on the first level and a engine lathe and punch press on the second level. In addition there would come still a hair-dryer and a wash basket with a very, very tiny note, on which is printed: Soul [*Seele*]<sup>63</sup>

Although there is here an emphasis on existential nonsense, the sheer complexity of this stage suggests that such nonsense, while both funny and sad, is also "fantastic" and is produced, via these various machines, as "words, forms, colors, noises." As insane as such a cabaret sounds, Hausmann did indeed create some version of it, in which the revving of a motorcycle shot out thousands of leaflets with the words "Dada siegt Dada siegt Dada siegt." As the contemporaneous sound-poem "Seelen Automobil" likewise demonstrated, the concepts of soul or human have not only "not the least bit of sense," but are themselves mechanical extensions of reality itself.

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<sup>62</sup> Hausmann, "Das Theater." Accessed at the Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

<sup>63</sup> Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, p. 92).



The image of Hausmann's cabaret allows us to return to Keaton, whose *The Navigator* provoked the following claim in a German newspaper: "His comedy...comes from the opposition between the ego of the actor and his environment. Buster's face...is the truth-telling mirror, in which the torn image [*Zerrbild*] of our grotesque time is shown in its entire madness."<sup>64</sup> It is difficult when imagining Hausmann's cabaret not to be reminded of a whole series of two chambered, motor dependent and constantly mobile nonsense-spaces in Keaton's films: the pulley system between backyards in *Neighbors* (1920), the spinning, two-story Build-A-House in *One Week* (1920), the booby-trapped, hypermodern mansion in *The Electric House* (1922) or the four-chambered chase of *The High Sign* (1921). Aside from these shorts, there are the many nonsense contraptions in Keaton's features, which are most often defined by Buster's initial failure to navigate the logic of a particular machine and his eventual re-functioning of himself and the machine to achieve a desired goal. German reviews found in Keaton's acrobatic failures and successes a satirical undoing of technology's ends-mean logic. Roland Schacht's essays in *Das Blaue Heft*, which discusses *Our Hospitality* (1923), *One Week* and that veritable "Freudian" "*Wunschtraum*," *Sherlock Jr.* states that Keaton comes "close to the Eccentric," "a slim, shy humanoid [*Menschlein*], who becomes ensnared in a grand but satirically handled technological affair. The human in him rebels against the all-majesty of technology."<sup>65</sup> Yet Schacht's choice of words betrays the profoundly inhuman element in this ensnaring, which more often than not dominated critics' understanding of Keaton, who, in the comedian's own estimation, was a nothing more than a "human mop, dishrag, beanbag, or football," "a human projectile."<sup>66</sup> Keaton continually emphasized in his films this object-like status: playing a

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<sup>64</sup> *Weltspiegel-Anzeigen*, 1071 (1926), p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> Roland Schacht, *Das Blaue Heft* 18 (6/15/1925).

<sup>66</sup> Keaton and Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (New York: Da Capo, 1982), p. 13 and 37.

scarecrow in *The Scarecrow* (1920) or hiding from the police by pretending to be a statue in *Hard Luck*. Rather than acting as evidence of some dehumanization or embodying utopian celebration of a Fordist or Futurist “all majesty,” this “Menschlein” instead demonstrated a host of vertiginous sensations founded on a basic in-distinction of the human and the technological.

Ultimately, this projectile performed the very same balancing act between individual subject and animated object world that Hausmann developed from the notion of “creative indifference.” Keaton himself seemed to be the poster-child for such “indifference” and critics used almost identical language to describe his deadpan face—Friedlaender’s humorous, “divine disinterest [*Gleichgültigkeit*]” is perhaps even intentionally echoed in the critic M.M. Gehrke’s account of Buster’s “phenomenal disinterest.”<sup>67</sup> In *Seven Chances*, his character, according to Gehrke, “is absolutely nothing...he is the form of nobody [in English], the No-one [*Niemand*]... He is nothing, can do nothing and has nothing...”<sup>68</sup> Yet paradoxically it is this emptying out of human qualities that allows him to perform his puppet-like acrobatics: “the less he becomes, the more often one rejects [*abweist*] him, the ever stronger he emerges. The more he reveals his nobody-ness, the stronger he grips, I have never seen something so analogous to a demonstration of *ex negativo*...If making something out of nothing is the criterion of real creation [*Schöpfung*], then this Nobody of Buster Keaton’s is truly the most creative film actor of the present.” For Kracauer, *The General*’s Johnny Gray “is the allegory of absent-mindedness [*Geistesabwesenheit*]” while in *Seven Chances* Keaton’s “gait is that of an automaton.”<sup>69</sup> Finally, Willy Haas links Keaton’s comic body to the immobility of a statue from antiquity as well as to that most modern concept of “time-space” from which Hausmann drew on for his “physio-

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<sup>67</sup> M.M. Gehrke, *Die Weltbühne* 22:36 (9/7/1926).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Kracauer, *Kleine Schriften zum Film 1921-1927*, p. 338 and 250.

plastically purest theater”: “Buster Keaton is the man of passivity. He is not only this face, which is positively animated with so much lifelessness; it is the entire body. Good marble statues have movements within although they stand on their pedestals; Buster Keaton is absolutely immobile, even though he perpetually moves. When he stirs only a finger, it is in itself paradoxical, unbelievable, full of contradiction. He is an optic exemplum of the theory of relativity.”<sup>70</sup> It is not surprising that Haas begins with Keaton’s face, which is impossibly “animated” with “lifelessness” as it was this feature of the slapstick star’s body that was at the forefront of both German advertising for the films as well as their press reception, which consistently drew attention to this feature—in Herbert Ihering’s words, this face, with “the mask-like rigidity of [its] gaze within the whirling rapidity of limbs,” was a “tragic calm in the great vortex” of the films’ chaos.<sup>71</sup>

Writing only a few years earlier, Ihering would use almost identical language to review the first published volume of Berlin Dada’s writings, *Dada-Almanach*, stressing above all the comic nature of Dadaism’s own “vortex”: a “chaos of jokes [*Witzchaos*],” “Dadaism is a *perpetuum mobile*—what comedy, when this tempo, this mere acrobatics suddenly takes itself seriously and is instructively wrapped.”<sup>72</sup> When the Dadaists start attacking themselves the reader “begins again to laugh, if one has humor,” a difficulty for many since this sense is so “seldom known” in Germany. What Germans seemed to lack, Keaton provided in spades, perpetually mobile both within the confined spaces of the house or across the rapidly edited, precisely timed landscapes of a chase. Often he moves furiously just to stay in the same place, running atop a moving train in *Sherlock Jr.* or sprinting hamster-like in a steamboat wheel in

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<sup>70</sup> Willy Haas, *Film-Kurier* (18.10.27).

<sup>71</sup> Ihering, *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht: Band II*, p. 497.

<sup>72</sup> Herbert Ihering, *Berlin Börsen-Courier* (3/20/1921).

*Daydreams* (1922). Keaton's paradox is provoked, as critics like Ihering noticed, in his relationship with objects, machines and things, from which he is no different. Keaton's character is very much a synaesthete, his conscious mind, acrobatic body and surrounding space ever permeable in response and reaction to one another. This eccentricity defines Keaton's proprioception. Like the "primitive human or child" of Hausmann's "Die Neue Kunst," Buster navigates his films, in Erik Bullot's words, "through a patient study of space; it is learned by feel, step by step, as if he were relying on knowledge of the body itself."<sup>73</sup> As Bullot goes on to argue, this relying is also a relaying, one that makes up both the narrative momentum and mise-en-scène of so many sequences, which are premised on translating messages and movements.<sup>74</sup> Aside from these very literal forms, one could define Keaton's reality as composed entirely of breaks and relays between or across highly material levels of mediating sensation. In the hurricane of *Steamboat Bill Jr.* Buster finds himself in a wind-swept theater, which he takes to be real, jumping into the painted lake of a scenic backdrop. In *The Cameraman* (1928), his character's complete ignorance of cinematography produces a veritable city symphony, with upside down images, superimpositions and montage edits of urban life.<sup>75</sup> Later in that film a suspicious-minded police officer detains Buster, knocking on his knee to see if his reflexes are in order only to have the other leg kick up. In this way he corresponds to Hausmann's own re-reading of Marcus and the possibility for moving beyond sight as the primary sense for navigating space, so that one might, as Hausmann remarked of Chaplin, "se[e] with all limbs" and "sculp[t] in space." And like Hausmann's emphasis on Dadaism as a highly tactile "tactic,"<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Erik Bullot, "Keaton and Snow," *October* 144 (March 2006), p. 19.

<sup>74</sup> Bullot, p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> North provides an excellent analysis of this sequence, reading it with Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*. See North, *Machine Age Comedy*, p. 40.

<sup>76</sup> Hausmann, *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele*, p. 107.

Keaton's own sculpting was less an art and more, in the words of one critic, an "acting-tactic [*Schauspieltaktik*]." <sup>77</sup> Whether Keaton stumbles or succeeds, his relationship to machines is always already a self-relation, an enfolding of the world and body translating back and forth across the neutral medium of his face.

Like Ihering, Willi Wolfradt was intimately familiar with Berlin Dada and his essay on Keaton for *Die Weltbühne* suggests a Hausmann-informed reading of Keaton, one where eccentric indifference and mechanical mediation were felt as both liberating and pleasurable:

As a delightful, modest martyr Buster Keaton bolts dumbly, divinely through all the tests of ridiculousness and all the most hair-raising dangers, a helpless-handly conqueror and in his timidity alone a magnificent hero. For this fascination of form steps a special genius, to install the requisite, fantastic complications of absurd misuse and astounding possibilities of application, to liberate the paradoxical joke of an apparatus, of a technological arrangement... Not only the comic contumacy [*Widersetzlichkeit*] of things that all American slapstick films [*Grotesken*] are flavored with, but rather the most extreme humor of eccentric functioning taking pleasure in the tool, machine and mechanics. <sup>78</sup>

This pleasure is both "spatial" (Pringle) and "eccentric" (Marcus), a demonstration of what Hausmann called "the universal principle of functionality." <sup>79</sup> Wolfradt's earlier texts on Berlin Dada already suggest a host of shared forms, spaces and affects between Hausmann and Keaton. Reviewing one of the very first Dada evenings, Wolfradt emphasizes the "storms of laughter" provoked by the "fidgeting puppets" and their "cheeky mimicry" which reminded one less of an art exhibit and more of the "Variete." <sup>80</sup> In another review Wolfradt would reiterate the "clownery" of Dadaism, which "has no serious kernel, but rather babbles strange depths in its greed for sensation and desire for bluffing." <sup>81</sup> Such pleasure was likewise found in the "delightful" experience of Keaton's films, which distinguished themselves from other slapstick

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<sup>77</sup> *Film-Kurier* 304 (12/27/1924).

<sup>78</sup> Willi Wolfradt, *Die Weltbühne*, Jahrgang 12, Nummer 3 (5/1/1926), p. 117.

<sup>79</sup> Raoul Hausmann, "Die universale Funktionalitätsprinzip." Accessed at the Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

<sup>80</sup> Willi Wolfradt, *Die Weltbühne*, (4/25/1918).

<sup>81</sup> Willi Wolfradt, *Der Friede* 18, (5/24/1918).

films, not by separating the human from the machine in satirical struggle, but by making both equally eccentric to themselves, mediating delightful motion within the “time-space” of cinema’s montage. Wolfradt’s analysis thus suggests a supplement to the operationalist aesthetic proclaimed by Tom Gunning (and adopted from Neil Harris) to be in effect in Keaton’s films.<sup>82</sup> We might call this a *functionalist (syn)aesthetic*, located somewhere beyond an ends-means logic revealed or satirized. Eccentric functioning and dysfunctioning would shift from operation to sensation, showing how machines can be built into experiences and feelings beyond the strictures of the anaesthetic human.

Perhaps the term “machine” may not be useful here. Following Gilles Deleuze, it is better to approach both as *machinic*, a concept or better yet a “sense” that undermines the essential distinction undergirding scholarly approaches to both Keaton’s slapstick and Hausmann’s Dadaism: the dichotomy between, on the one hand, human, life or organism and, on the other, the technical, mechanical or automated. Ironically enough, this distinction is central to one of Deleuze’s greatest inspirations (especially regarding cinema’s own “machinic vision”), Henri Bergson.<sup>83</sup> Bergson’s vitalist philosophy and specifically his essay on laughter have been crucial for scholars in approaching both Hausmann and Keaton.<sup>84</sup> Yet in another turn of the screw, the former was not only inspired by Bergsonian art critics like Carl Einstein, but closely read the philosopher’s *Laughter* in 1915 while the latter has not only been interpreted by scholars as the virtual embodiment of Bergson’s theory, but was even explicitly connected to that theory in the Weimar period, the lyrics to Friedrich Hollaender’s song “Meine Schwester liebt den Buster”—

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<sup>82</sup> Tom Gunning, “Buster Keaton or the work of comedy in the age of mechanical reproduction,” *Cineaste* 21:3 (Summer, 1995), pp. 14-16; Tom Gunning, “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy,” *Classical Hollywood Comedy*.

<sup>83</sup> See John Johnston, “Machinic Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* 26:1 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 27-28.

<sup>84</sup> See Gunning, “The Work of Art” and Timothy Benson, *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).

to be discussed in more detail in the following section—given a new verse by a critic in *Die Literatur*: “Henri Bergson / Liebt den Buster / Liebt den Keaton Und er zieht’n /Chaplin vor.”<sup>85</sup>

The article precedes these lyrics with a claim that Bergson himself was planning on expanding his essay to take account of Keaton’s films, “which contain completely new clues for his system of laughter.” While this announcement was no doubt facetious it does suggest that Keaton’s comedy did not confirm for critics or audiences Bergson’s theory, but rather suggested something unexpected both within and against its parameters. And what is Bergson’s dichotomy? Nothing other than that what we have already seen in so many of our contemporary accounts—a division between vital human life and mechanical rigidity. Specifically in *Laughter* this binary is famously used to clarify the phenomenon of the comic as an “encrustation of the mechanical upon the living” and laughter as a kind of satirical censure that regulates all “eccentric” instances of inelasticity, immobility and inflexibility.<sup>86</sup> Keaton and Hausmann turned to and turned into automata not to merely produce a laughing-at, but rather to produce laughter beyond Bergson’s central distinction. The “clues” both offer then is that the world is as such machinic, with forces, motions and matters at times rigid, repetitive and at times graceful, balletic, acrobatic and comedy comes not simply with the latter, but with both, indeed with their constant confusion. Keaton and Hausmann pass through the “tool, machine and mechanics” not to reclaim their humanity nor to reduce themselves to machine, but to rather mediate themselves and their audiences beyond this binary. Both thus assume Bergson’s theory, but only to suggest an essential surplus effect, not only humans acting as machines, machines acting as humans, but in this very permeability producing a machinic logic that encompasses all worldly sensation. According to Deleuze, writing with Felix Guattari, “Desiring-machines...continually break down

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<sup>85</sup> Lutz Weltman, *Die Literatur*, Heft 1 (1930).

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Benson, p. 194.

as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly: the product is in fact always an offshoot of production, implanting itself upon it like a graft, and at the same time the parts of the machine are the fuel that makes it run.”<sup>87</sup> Although Deleuze does not refer to this concept in his Dadaist reading of Keaton in *Cinema I*, he elsewhere links Keaton’s machine-gags to Duchamp, Picabia and Hausmann’s one-time friend Schwitters.<sup>88</sup>

Returning to the question of the spectator and, in particular, the Weimar spectator which is our primary interest, how does Deleuze’s machinic reading of Keaton help us understand the responses of critics and audience members who, like Jakobson in his 1921 essay, were subject to constant deterritorialization of sense, body and space provoked by both the reality of *Amerikanismus* as well as that reality’s particular form in Hausmann’s media and Keaton’s films?<sup>89</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari seek to explain the concept of “schizophrenic laughter,” which would originate neither in Bergsonian correction nor in psychotic breakdown.<sup>90</sup> It is rather provoked by a desiring-machine that “makes the most of an irreducible factor of nonsense, which will develop elsewhere and from without...”<sup>91</sup> Here semiotics transmutes into

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<sup>87</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> For Deleuze’s reading of Keaton, see *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, pp. 173-177. For further discussions see Deleuze and Guattari’s “Balance-Sheet Program for Desiring-Machines,” *Chaosophy*, translated by Hurley (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995), pp. 123-150.

<sup>89</sup> Although Deleuze referred to Dadaism rarely there are important connections between Jakobson’s seminal text and the philosopher. In 1969’s *The Logic of Sense* one of the central claims is that nonsense and sense are not to be opposed, as if nonsense is negatively revealed whenever or wherever sense is lacking. On the contrary, for linguistic structure, which is a “machine for the production of incorporeal sense,” “there is always too much sense: an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself” (71). Nonsense is not sense’s lack, but rather its own lack out of which sense generates itself, which is why Deleuze connects it to a discussion of a “phoneme-zero” from none other than the first great theorist of Dadaism, Roman Jakobson. This phoneme, which Deleuze will variously characterize as “paradoxical element or *perpetuum mobile*,” “dummy,” and humorous “mime,” was first discussed by Jakobson in the late thirties, but given his interest in the word “Dada,” that “meaningless little word” that can like the sailor attach itself to any and all languages or senses, it seems especially apt to see Dada as paradigmatic example for thinking through this paradoxical phoneme. See *The Logic of Sense*, translated by Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) and Catherine Diehl, “The Empty Space in Structure: Theories of Zero from Gauthiot to Deleuze,” *Diacritics* 38:3 (Fall 2008), pp. 93-119.

<sup>90</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 317.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*



sensationalism. The laughter this world provokes is none other than that produced by slapstick film, the authors citing Michel Cournot on Chaplin's *Modern Times*:

The moment Charlie 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? For example, the question no longer applies at all, at this point in the film, of knowing whether the spectator must see the accident coming or be surprised by it. It is as though the spectator, at that very moment, were no longer in his 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 as he.... Chaplin...progressively *displaces* the reaction, causes them to recede, level by level, until the moment when the spectator is no longer master of his own circuits...After having suppressed the spectator as such, Chaplin perverts the laughter, which comes to be like so many *short-circuits of a disconnected piece of machinery*.<sup>92</sup>

We might do our own “perceptive gymnastics” to replace Chaplin with Keaton here, who committed his body to far more repeated acts of violence and danger and did so, much more than the former, with incredible gymnastic ability. What provokes this laughter is not shock nor is it mockery; in fact, the spectator is not really itself in that moment—it as if Bergson's laughter perversely turned in on itself, transforming the laughter into a tiny “circuit” within the film's machinic flow. The spectator here does not empathize with the character Buster, whose deadpan effectively severs all possibilities for emotional identification. Instead, laughter is perverted by a suppression of distance, bringing the spectator, through the film's montage, *mise-en-scène* and performances, into the film's space so that it laughs as it experiences the habits, resistances and surprises of the clown on screen, eccentric to its own body. Just as the reality of Keaton's filmic universe is highly synaesthetic, so too could his films provoke a synaesthetic relation on the part of audiences, converting perception into a gymnastic activity, merging corporeal sense with filmic space, “schizophrenic laughter” with “spatial pleasure.” Just as *Sherlock Jr.* presents Buster as precisely this kind of audience member, one where the distance between screen and spectator is acrobatically eliminated, so too does the film itself provoke a gymnastic echo-effect, what

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<sup>92</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 318.

Jessica Barker calls, in the only scholarly account to address Keaton's synaesthesia, "muscular empathy," our "bodies identify[ing] with his body's attempts to 'fit in'" so that during a chase scene, machine gag or particular feat of acrobatic skill or luck, "we feel the film's world—its particular configurations of gravity, speed, depth, for example—because we have thrown ourselves up there..."<sup>93</sup>

While Barker's analysis remains on the level of the phenomenological we can return to our analysis of Keaton's Weimar reception to find historical manifestations of this gymnastic spectator.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, perhaps the most consistent feature of reviews of Keaton's films in Germany was how much they dwelled on audiences' laughter. This was not a laughter provoked by Keaton's failing to satisfy some norm, but came from the reduction of the spectator into a moving part of the film's sensorial circuit. Such "schizophrenic laughter" was not cognitively distant but produced on and by the body: *Der Montag* found a "sea of laugh-spasms and hurricanes of squealing,"<sup>95</sup> another newspaper observed that "one laughs the whole evening long, one laughs so that one's diaphragm hurts,"<sup>96</sup> while Kurt Pinthus likewise emphasized the particular physiognomy of this laughter, a "laughing until sickness, health or death."<sup>97</sup> The sheer physicality of this laughter was no doubt provoked by the physicality of Keaton's films just as their frequency was determined by the film's comic rhythm: for *The Navigator's* audience

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<sup>93</sup> Jessica Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 96-7.

<sup>94</sup> One of the most important texts in the history of phenomenology as well as one of the key intellectual documents of the Weimar period has been linked explicitly to Keaton's films—Martin Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time*. Stanley Cavell was the first to make this connection. Noel Carroll has also intimated this link in his own phenomenological analysis. In contrast to these readings, I stress neither the "necessary limits of human awareness" (Cavell) nor "bodily intelligence as a human norm" (Carroll), focusing instead on a surplus effects and sensations that move away from norms and limits to reveal new modes, capacities or materials for experience. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by Staumbaugh and Schmidt (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), pp. 68-75; Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, pp. 2-3; Noel Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 5-11.

<sup>95</sup> *Der Montag* (7/5/1926)

<sup>96</sup> Uncited review, accessed at the Deutsche Kinemathek Schriftgut Archiv.

<sup>97</sup> Pinthus, "Keatons Kuh," p. 220.

“approval tak[es] on almost storm-like forms, just like the tempo of the work”<sup>98</sup> while in *Sherlock Jr.*’s rapidly edited motorcycle sequence “Buster Keaton drives so that the tracks and the audience both bend themselves.”<sup>99</sup> Ultimately, this laughter, matched in rhythm to the film’s montage and physical enough to rattle the whole body, was itself gymnastic, provoked by the sheer movement of Keaton’s films, whether it be his body’s contortions within an ever-moving *mise-en-scène*, the tracking/dollying of a mobile camera or the heightened frequency of cuts in chase sequences. Ultimately this laugh is, in Willy Haas’s words, “a strange, shocking [*erschütterndes*] laugh that one otherwise does not find in American slapstick films.”<sup>100</sup> Perhaps the best account of Keaton’s gymnastic spectator comes from the satirist Erich Kästner in his article “Buster Keaton gehört neben Chaplin” [Buster Keaton belongs next to Chaplin], which likewise emphasizes the word “erschüttern”: “It is spectral. And you laugh in a shocking way. You laugh not at the man. Whoever doesn’t start just once to do senseless [*sinnlos*] things like he has seen, missed something...[Keaton and Chaplin] amuse us and shake us [*erschüttern*].”<sup>101</sup> Watching Keaton’s film, Kästner observes that “the cinema bounces from laughter” and that “Keaton simply throws the audience around.” In fact, it is the one that produces the other—one laughs because one enjoys the “perceptual gymnastics,” the spectatorial “suppression” and mediatic translation of oneself into a part of the space Keaton both sculpts and is sculpted by. As in Kiesler’s *Raumbühne* or Hausmann’s *Kabarett*, this pleasure is founded on a body that is mobilized, its “machinic vision” caught up in sensations beyond sight.

#### **IV. From Radar Type to Dancing Da-Dandy...**

“Men...should begin to dismantle the ‘form’ they have always wished to be...” Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*.

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<sup>98</sup> *Film Kurier* (1926).

<sup>99</sup> *Das Stachelschwein* 20 (1.5.1927).

<sup>100</sup> Willy Haas, *Film-Kurier* (10/18/1927).

<sup>101</sup> Erich Kästner, *Gemischte Gefühle Band I*, pp. 379-381.

“It states in our Dada Manifesto, one must let one’s self be thrown by events. In this sense I was always dada. The other [Der Andere]. In my case the FEMININE Other [DIE Andere]. Mishap [Malheur], that women always are.”  
Raoul Hausmann, *Hyle*.

The machinic logic we find in Hausmann and Keaton’s answer to the question concerning technology can be found in even more radical forms when it comes to the media and materiality of gender during the Weimar era. Or perhaps better said: it is the recurrent thematic of gender which reveals an essential stake of that logic, that the automaton, the robot and the engineer are also a mannequin, “fashion-puppet,” and dancing marionette. Rather than adhering to dichotomous codes of gendered conduct Keaton and Hausmann achieved the continual cross-wiring of these codes, engaging embodied and/or commodified forms of gender imposed or inherited and re-functioning them. The comedy they achieved was a translation of the fashionable stuff, the dancing sensations and the acrobatic embodiments of *Amerikanismus*, ignoring anxiety for the sake of androgynous play.

Hausmann’s relationship to both gender and sexuality was particularly vexed. On the one hand, he rebelled against the masculine shame that dominated his contemporaries and which has been so well analyzed in Helmut Lethen’s account of the culture of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>102</sup> Hausmann identified shame as an affliction particular to German men, writing in his essay “Scham und Erziehung” [“Shame and Education”] that this “repression complex” and “protective image” [*Schutzbild*] rules the “generation of young men,” producing self-hatred out of a fundamental anxiety of “the exposure of the man to the woman.”<sup>103</sup> Shame is an “emergency-construction,” one designed to protect the masculine ego from feminine encroachment. Although this late essay would, with its call for a “technically experience-able” education, reflect Hausmann’s increasing interest in functionalism, the terms of his analysis are

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<sup>102</sup> See Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*.

<sup>103</sup> Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen, Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, pp. 150-155.

here no different from earlier demands for a revolution in gender relations from the heady Dadaist days of 1919. These terms were adopted from the anarchist psychoanalyst Otto Groß, who identified this construction in a 1914 essay as a “conflict of self and other,”<sup>104</sup> one by which the masculine is defined by its presence and importance as “absolute something” and the feminine as mere property, the “absolute nothing.”<sup>105</sup> Rather than challenging philosophies of misogyny like those of Nietzsche or Otto Weininger, Hausmann would take such essentialist views as the ideology of bourgeois society, claiming that if one wants to overthrow that society one must make the revolution of traditional gender relations the starting point—he would not only define bourgeois marriage as “the projection of rape as right,” but would go on to call for a matriarchal revolution by which the “Vaterrechtsfamilie” is overthrown and “the principle right of every form and kind of sexual relationship” established.<sup>106</sup> In contrast to other contemporaneous calls for revolution, Hausmann stressed the importance of radically re-altered relations and definitions of gender, arguing that “mere economic justice” would lead to “the fiasco of masculine spirit” if it ignored “sexual justice,” a justice that both accepted homosexuality and was premised not on the “right of the father” but on the “right of the mother” and “the creation of a feminine society.”<sup>107</sup>

Despite the radical nature of Hausmann’s claims, it is impossible to deny the conflicted and at times outright contradictory ideas and actions on his part. Although he demanded a revolutionary “feminine society” Hausmann sometimes staked the power of such a society on the biological capacity of motherhood while elsewhere identifying feminine traits in decidedly traditional terms. Hausmann’s novel *Hyle* is a mixed riot of, on the one hand, proto-feminist

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<sup>104</sup> Otto Groß, “Vom Konflikt des Eigenen und Fremden,” *Die freie Strasse* 4 (1916); pp. 3-5.

<sup>105</sup> Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, p. 62.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-38.

<sup>107</sup> Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, p. 50.

radicalism and, on the other, intense misogyny, expressed primarily by his alter-ego, Gal. Even more problematic there is Hausmann's notorious treatment of Hannah Höch, which included physical and verbal abuse not to mention patronizing manipulation. Hausmann's behavior here has not only suggested a hypocritical gulf between his professed opinions and his actual conduct, but has, for some, invalidated anything the artist ever did or wrote in regards to the question of gendered difference.<sup>108</sup>

One less remarked facet of Hausmann's views was the way he merged Otto Groß's theory of self and other with Friedlaender's concept of creative indifference—rather than totally embracing either the controlling masculine ego or the primitive yet modern feminine other, Hausmann sought an indifferent middle ground, an equilibrium between markers of difference. The same balancing act performed with technology would be performed with that technology's perpetual accomplice—the dancing vamp, the commodified body, the gymnastic automaton. Gender would be not a dichotomous destiny, but a historically constituted continuum, one overcome in the middle-point of the Nobody. In an unpublished essay entitled *Die Sexualität*, Hausmann would clarify that sexuality is nothing more than media: “Sexuality is only the medium in the soulful conflict of nothingness.”<sup>109</sup> *Hyle* emphasizes that against bourgeois society's “family order,” which is premised on the tragic heroism of the patriarchal dictator, Hausmann resisted being either “hero or dictator,” hoping to instead “portray life as communication [*Mitteilung*].”<sup>110</sup> Just as the machinic is based not an aesthetic practice, but a synaesthetic circuit, so too does sexuality as “medium” translate experiences across bodies and spaces typically and tyrannically opposed. Against that opposition's repression, Hausmann aims

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<sup>108</sup> Maria Makela, “The Misogynist Machine: Images of Technology in the Work of Hannah Höch,” *Women in the Metropolis*, p. 122.

<sup>109</sup> Hausmann, “Die Sexualität,” Accessed at the Raoul Hausmann Archive, Berlinische Galerie.

<sup>110</sup> Hausmann, *Hyle*, p. 354.

to be both “a shameless child”<sup>111</sup> and masculine mother: “And, although certainly I am a very masculine man, not as dictator, but rather as—how should I express this? I want to almost say: motherly! I institute all my feminine qualities on the outside, effectively my parturient principle, which discharges itself not in artworks, rather precisely in human deeds!”<sup>112</sup> We are a long way here from Weimar Germany’s traditional, shame-bound masculine corpus, which is exemplified by the film star Emil Jannings, the “last man” whose gigantic, dictatorial physique tragically struggled against emasculating threats such as the femme fatales of *The Blue Angel* or *Variete* or the change in uniform in *The Last Laugh* (1924). Hausmann despised both Weimar’s anxiety-bound cinema as well as predominant German forms of masculine embodiment, which he, no doubt following Höch, defined by its “beer belly.” This bulbous body part was a common target of Dadaist satire, especially when it came to the newly installed republican government of the rotund Friedrich Ebert, who Hausmann imagined grotesquely dancing to “waltz melodies” and the “sayings of Goethe and Schiller.”<sup>113</sup> Ridiculing this long line of patriarchs, Hausmann would go on to claim more generally that he “has learned nothing important from men.”<sup>114</sup> Rather it was from figures like the fashionable, sporty and vampish New Woman that he learned “the whole intensity of every moment of life.”<sup>115</sup> Although he flirted with naturalist understandings of such “feminine qualities” throughout his works, he found them most present in highly historical phenomenon of jazz dancing, fashion and, of course, American cinema.

To suggest that the slapstick cinema of Buster Keaton not only influenced Hausmann in this regard but also took part in similar androgyny beyond the “Weimar Beer-belly culture” may

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<sup>111</sup> Hausmann, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, p. 15.

<sup>112</sup> Hausmann, *Hyle*, p. 355.

<sup>113</sup> Hausmann, p. 39 and 46. On the topic of the bulbous beer belly in Dadaist considerations of the body, see Brigid Doherty, “Figures of the Pseudorevolution,” *October* 84 (Spring, 1998), pp. 64-89.

<sup>114</sup> Hausmann, *Hyle*, p. 146.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

seem far-fetched. Aren't the women of both his shorts and features invariably either passive objects of affection, foolish distractions or beside the point of the film's pleasures, narrative, gag or otherwise? In Keaton's own words, the role of the woman "was never important," serving only as an excuse to initiate narrative momentum.<sup>116</sup> Yet some scholars have argued that in fact the female characters have far more autonomy than one might think and display acrobatic grace and mechanical intelligence at times equal to Keaton's character. In *The Navigator* or *The General* (1926) the comic logic whereby Buster is transformed from klutz to success applies as much to those films' heroines, who start as objects of "passivity," but then become active subjects participating in the film's events.<sup>117</sup> Lynne Kirby has argued that the pratfalls of Annabelle in *The General* upsets Buster's ability to maintain his masculine supremacy as she is essentially repeating, both physically and narratively, the same actions the latter performed during the film's symmetrically paired first half.<sup>118</sup> This would seem to confirm Peter Krämer's diametrically opposed reading, where Buster's own transformations from feminized positions of indolence and incompetence emphasize a "restored" masculinity.<sup>119</sup> What both accounts ignore is the immanent androgyny in Buster's own identity, an androgyny that overdetermines his behavior and his actions, the failures and successes with machines, things, women and, above all, himself—all things which are objectified only to the extent that they become objects indifferent to traditional use or understanding. Rather than presupposing some masculine kernel to the Buster character to be exposed or reasserted, what if it is an essential, dandified ambivalence in relation to the *Stoff* of gender that defines Keaton's performance and publicity?

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<sup>116</sup> Keaton, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*, p. 130.

<sup>117</sup> See, for instance, Barbara E. Savedoff, "Reconsidering Buster Keaton's Heroines," *Philosophy and Literature* 21:1 (1997), pp. 77-90.

<sup>118</sup> Lynne Kirby, "Temporality, Sexuality and Narrative in *The General*," *Wide Angle* 9:1 (1988), pp. 32-40.

<sup>119</sup> Krämer, "Derailing the Honeymoon Express," p. 112.



Such ambivalence would avoid presupposing passivity or inertia as feminine, activity or ingenuity as masculine, instead short-circuiting such oppositions into an amalgam where Buster's passive element is essential to his mobility and vice versa. What Kirby names "the union of male and females as non-gender specific active/passive principles recoded by the machine" would thus be implicit to Keaton's corpus, a turn of the machinic screw whereby Deleuze's desiring-machine anonymously translates gendered media as part of its nonsensical montage.<sup>120</sup> While Kirby connects this "desire as bio-mechanics" to Duchamp and Marinetti, another avant-gardist would directly contrast Keaton's corpus to Weimar Germany's exemplum of male anxiety. In a 1927 review of *College*, Luis Bunuel compares Keaton's mode of performance with "the Jannings School" which is defined by "sentimentalism, antiquated notions about art and literature, tradition, etc."<sup>121</sup> While Jannings wrings sentiment out of every anxious gesture, "Keaton's expressions are as modest as...a bottle's: the dance floor of his pupils is round and clear, but there his aseptic spirit does pirouettes."<sup>122</sup> Although Bunuel was well on his way to surrealism his reading of Keaton has a certain Dadaist ring to it, with Keaton a kind of ready-made and like the Dadaist obsession with machines, achieving "comic effect though direct harmony with the tools, situations, and other means of production."<sup>123</sup> Keaton's "American style," his "vitality" was, for Bunuel, defined both by this comic dancing among machines as well as the kind of humanity paradoxically put forth by this flying bottle: "a fashionable

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<sup>120</sup> Kirby, p. 37.

<sup>121</sup> Luis Bunuel, "Buster Keaton's *College*," *An Unspeakable Betrayal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 110-111. Willard Bohn has argued that the Spanish surrealists were attracted to Keaton's "stoic personality and manly bearing" (413). With regard to Bunuel at least, this does not seem to apply. See "Lorca, Buster Keaton, and the Surrealist Muse," *Revista Hispanica Moderna*, Año 53:2 (December, 2000), p. 413-424. This is especially clear in Bunuel's first film (co-directed with Dali), *Un Chien Andalou*, which was directly influenced by Keaton.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

humanity.”<sup>124</sup> Keaton’s particular corporeality is defined not only by its reduction into comic object, but also by the dancing and fashion by which this male Olympia both dressed and danced. This contrast was an implicit part of movie-going experience for German audiences in this era. Consider a single page of the *Reichsfilmblatt* from 1925: on the top half of the page an article celebrates the New York premier of Janning’s most famous performance, *Der letzte Mann*, a film “taken from every day life” and one “which the German film industry can be proud of,” while on the bottom half we find a review of *Our Hospitality*, recently premiered at the UFA-Palast am Zoo, with Keaton described as “not so much a portrayal of people and much more an acrobat.”<sup>125</sup> Keaton’s film in fact begins in New York on the very Broadway where Murnau’s film premiered, albeit a Broadway of the nineteenth century filled with antiquated bicycles and rustic farmhouses. Still, this film already suggests the particular approach to masculinity found in many of Keaton’s films—hailing from a city but thrown into a situation far from an urban setting, Buster already meets the essential criteria of the dandy, which, according to Sima Godfrey, is a certain “urbanity,” not to mention his often being “an eccentric outsider.”<sup>126</sup> Part of this eccentricity comes no doubt from Buster’s attention to his physical person, both his attire and his manners, well demonstrated in the first sequence of *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, where Buster, like his previous character from *Hospitality*, arrives in a quasi-barbaric American South dressed in the most fashionable, even avant-garde of ensembles: baggy pants, striped shirt, beret, baseball mustache (with nine hairs) and a ukulele. If Buster’s clothing recalls the nineteenth century French usage of “dandy” to describe “an eccentric manner of dress,” his mustache and demeanor recalls the term’s American cousin, documented in Mark Twain’s 1852 story “The Dandy

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Reichsfilmblatt* 5:1 (3/1/1925).

<sup>126</sup> Sima Godfrey, “The Dandy as Ironic Figure,” *SubStance* 11:3 (1982), p. 26 and 24.

frightening the Squatter,” which relates an incident that one could easily imagine transpiring between father and son in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*: on board a steamboat, “a spruce young dandy, with a killing moustache” tries to prove himself a hero by scaring a hillbilly squatter, only to end up punched in the face and “floundering in the turbid waters of the Mississippi.”<sup>127</sup> Watching *3 Ages* (1923), a film where Keaton acts the dandy as caveman, Roman and modern New Yorker, one German critic tellingly claimed that only Twain could properly explain the content of a film like this.<sup>128</sup>



**Figure 4: Keaton as Dandy in *Steamboat Bill Jr.***

This American spin on the dandy perverts what Charles Baudelaire, in his well-known 1863 essay on the subject, described as “that cold exterior resulting from the unshakable

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<sup>127</sup> Re-published in Fred Lorch, “A Source for Mark Twain’s ‘The Dandy frightening the Squatter,’” *American Literature* 3:3 (November 1931), p. 311.

<sup>128</sup> Uncited review, Listing film as “Der Film der Woche” (14.9.1925). Accessed at the Deutsche Kinemathek Schriftgut Archiv.

determination to remain unmoved”<sup>129</sup> Keaton retains this stasis only at the price of a constant motion. The comedy here is only minimally about knocking the patrician into the river, ocean or wherever. Certainly this was an aspect to the basic narrative structure of films like *Steamboat*, *The Saphead* (1920), *The Navigator* and *Battling Butler*, all of which feature wealthy, urbane and highly sensitive dandies faced with the enormity of complicated machines, chaotic thunderstorms or the violent intricacies of sport. Yet Buster, whether failing or succeeding in such settings, retains his grace, his delicacy and his indifferent demeanor. The films do not narrate a transformation from feminine diffidence to masculine success—rather they “re-code” markers of gender like fashion, mannered gesture and dandified remove into hybrid union. Buster retains his highfalutin air throughout all his triumphs and tribulations, scrambling passivity and activity beyond gendered recognition—indeed it is this very dandiness that explains his uncanny ingenuity. The final image of *Battling Butler* (1926) perfectly produces this amalgamation: after successfully beating a boxing champ, Buster walks down a busy street in New York with his wife, wearing, on the one hand, top hat and cane and, on the other, boxing shorts and gloves. While the Baudelarian Dandy is defined by its tragic struggle to remain distant from the laws of the world Keaton’s “Da-Dandy,” to evoke the title of one of Höch’s Hausmann-themed montages, humorously achieves distance only by virtue of continual interruption from those laws and their repressed underside.

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<sup>129</sup> Baudelaire, “The Dandy,” p. 422. In his *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell departs from Baudelaire’s book to suggest a typology of characters commonly found in the cinema, with the “Dandy” and the “Military Man” personifying two primary male types familiar to fans of both screwball comedy and the Western. It could be said that Keaton effectively merges both these types, playing both the ineffectual or effete character as well as “men doing the work of the world.” Deleuze also intimates this connection in arguing that Keaton’s innovation lies in making the “small form” of the burlesque within the parameters of the “large form,” which is most commonly found in genres like the Western. See Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 47-48; Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 173.

If Keaton reminded critics of anyone it was not the hysterical, tyrannical or traumatized masculinities of Jannings, but rather sexually ambiguous actresses like the Danish star of German silent cinema, Asta Nielsen. Hans Siemsen would detect Nielsen's ambiguity both in Keaton's recent features as well as his early shorts with Fatty Arbuckle, where Buster

was a still, dark little man with a round plate for a hat above a serious, immobile, beautiful Greek-face. Often covered in a frock, sometimes in women's clothes and a ballet skirt. He had the fastest, most mobile little body that one had ever seen in film...The strongest impression remains his unconquerably beautiful face, which he never abuses through mimicry. He is thus still more forceful and economical than Chaplin. He carries it like a mask. It is probably the most beautiful face which one can see in film at this moment. Of unshakeable beauty. It will, as the mask of Asta Nielsen does, outlast all those faces that appear to us today as "pretty."<sup>130</sup>

Siemsen, like many of his fellow German critics, was perfectly attuned to the strange hybridity achieved by Buster's body. It is when that body is dressed in feminine fashion and posing with immobile visage that it moves most quickly, indeed more quickly than any one ever in the history of cinema. In *Our Hospitality*, on the run from a revenge-seeking Southern clan, Keaton dresses up as a woman to hide and then dresses a horse in the same clothing to put them off his track. In *Sherlock Jr.*, he ups the comic ante, jumping through a window to escape a gang of thieves, immediately transforming from the dapper Sherlock Jr. into an old woman—he had placed this disguise in the window beforehand so that when he jumped through he would be instantly unrecognizable until, that is, one of the crooks spots his all too singular face. Unlike almost all other drag performances in slapstick, the comedy of these sequences has nothing to do with the disjunction between a hyper-masculine body being feminized, either emasculating the man or satirizing feminine traits. Keaton's transformations here reduce the material of gender, in both cases expectations of feminine fashion, into functionalist media. This is even more clear in the case of Keaton's face, "unshakeably beautiful," which seems to merge opposed qualities, thus allowing him to become dandy or acrobat, human or machine, man or woman. With regard

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<sup>130</sup> Siemsen, "Buster Keaton," p. 251.

to this final polarity, the two-reeler *The Playhouse* perfectly demonstrates the essential ambiguity of this face, opening with Buster, through a trick effect, embodying a jazz band, a dancing revue and an entire audience, the latter of which includes a fashionable lady, a Victorian mother and a grand dame, each of whom is paired with the proper (Keaton played) partner: stylish husband, little boy and distinguished gentleman. There is something ambidextrous about this face, one that allows it to become both men and women to such a degree that the comedy comes not from the disjunction across gendered bodies, but rather the repeated ease with which the indifferent, “great Stone face” inhabits and thus merges them. This is perhaps how and why Siemsen was reminded of Asta Nielsen who, over her career, played a variety of roles across genres, ages, classes and even genders, perhaps most famously in a 1920 film adaptation of *Hamlet*, a film that sparked a *Bubikopf* craze throughout Germany, with young women adopting a modern, boyish hair style. Not only would Keaton remind critics like Willi Wolfradt of “a Knockabout-Hamlet,” but Keaton in fact played Hamlet—in two well-known publicity stills he wears a wig and carries a sword and skull to play the unhappy Dane, looking uncannily like Nielsen.<sup>131</sup> Not only did both actors share a strangely similar beauty, but both also became popular through the publicity-aided idiosyncrasy of their faces. Yet unlike Nielsen, whose popularity was due in large part to her ability to use facial gestures to suggest a range of melodramatic emotions in frozen tableaux, it is Keaton’s unsentimental stillness that transmitted his eroticism, one defined by a face and body that were difficult to territorialize.

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<sup>131</sup> Wolfradt, “Buster Keaton,” p. 117.



**Figure 5: Keaton Times Two in *The Playhouse***

Perhaps the most famous publicity image of Keaton suggests this eroticism more than any other—it is the “Buster de Milo” photograph from 1927, where Keaton, wearing his trademark porkpie hat and black boots, is covered, at chest-level, in a white robe, posing on a pedestal as the Venus de Milo, his arms hidden by black stockings. A literal evocation of Siemsen’s “Greek face” the image connects the ancient statue to the modernity of photographic stillness. Yet in contrast to that ideology which covers over the frenetic, technological violence of modernity with a muse-like passivity, the “Buster de Milo” lays bare such violence since this still face is inextricably tied to corporeal motion and does so by converting the body, like the publicity image that captures it, into a desirable commodity for mass consumption. In this way it is a perfectly Dadaist moment in Keaton’s star-image: a desecration of the placid beauties of art, Keaton’s combination of modern fashion with antiquity is effectively a montage of high and low, European and American as much as it collapses opposed forms of gendered embodiment, recalling Hausmann’s appeal in his essay “Lob des Konventionellen” [“In praise of convention”]

to the tailor's dummy against German Expressionism's Golem/Somnambulist or the bourgeois "Venus de Milo in plaster."<sup>132</sup> This montage recalls those beautiful images of an ever stylish Keaton captured by giants of Hollywood portraiture like black and white photographers Clarence Sinclair Bull, Ruth Harriet Louise and Cecil Beaton or caricaturist Al Held Jr., which were a prominent feature of Keaton's German marketing, displayed in film magazines, newspaper advertisements, cinema marquees and poster displays.

In her "Portrait of Buster Keaton," Marieluise Fleißer explains the spectator elicited by this fashion forwardness.<sup>133</sup> Emphasizing the importance of his clothing, Fleißer starts her article with the question of what Keaton's German spectator desires: "the people want to see a gent," one stylishly dressed in an "English suit." Yet unlike the melancholic dandy, this gentleman, as with Bunuel's ready-made, "becomes in his lines something like a regularly used object." With a "head like a poster," Keaton may begin his films as "the gent," with the "aloofness of the English suit," but in his adventures this suit "fails" and like the Da-Dandy, masculine melancholy transforms into comic motion, the Gent becomes a "Gent under threat of life." Given this danger, it is a certain consciousness that is suggested by Keaton's body, so that "with walking, he thinks that he must shift each leg individually." While the audience derives pleasure from merely seeing this gentleman, even greater enjoyment is offered by the tactile vision such movement provokes, so that "if the spectator wants to keep advising him, he must sit across from him very alert and ready." Like Buster's comic shadowing of a suspected criminal in *Sherlock Jr.*, the spectator here follows Keaton step by step, less a passive observer and more drawn into the film's space as attentive double. This position is mandated by Keaton, who "doesn't let himself be seen if he is thinking." The other side of Deleuze and Guattari's "schizophrenic laughter," the pleasure here is

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<sup>132</sup> Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 49.

<sup>133</sup> Marieluise Fleißer, "Ein Porträt Buster Keatons," *Berliner Börsen-Courier* 569, (1927).



the necessary obverse of unconscious mimesis, the audience's gymnastic following requiring a heightened spatio-corporeal consciousness. Fleißer's spectator receives important instructions for negotiating the "the sweeping breath of the world city." By film's end Buster escapes this "disgrace [*Blamage*]" as a "gent in an idyll," united with his bride in portrait-like two-shot, but like so many of his publicity photos and advertising images, it is not the "subjective" that is emphasized, but that ready-to-be-used object.<sup>134</sup>

On the subject of this marionette, Tom Gunning has connected Keaton's passivity to Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay "On the Marionette Theater."<sup>135</sup> Yet it is important to emphasize that Kleist's interest is specifically the marionette who *dances*, those "puppets [who] possess the virtue of being immune to gravity's force. They know nothing of the inertia of matter, that quality which above all is diametrically opposed to the dance."<sup>136</sup> Kleist's formulation is paradoxical—what could be more materially inert than a puppet? Yet this is precisely what allows the "grace" of its impossible dancing, achieved only by "that human bodily structure that has no consciousness at all," "the mechanical puppet" that moves beyond intention, will or knowledge.<sup>137</sup> We know already how Keaton manifested this mechanical puppetry, but does it make sense to connect this robot-dandy's movements to dance?

From his earliest days in vaudeville right up to his sound features of the mid-thirties, Keaton often performed dances: exotic dances with Fatty Arbuckle (*The Cook* (1918)), chorus

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<sup>134</sup> Fleißer's reading shows the influence of then popular discourses of psycho-physical testing, especially the appropriation of such testing by her one-time friend, Bertolt Brecht, who was likewise a great fan of Keaton and especially of *The Navigator*. Brecht's collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann in turn translated for the leftist newspaper *TAZ* "Buster Keaton über Buster Keaton," a supposedly autobiographical recounting of Keaton's life and career. See Wolfgang Gersch, *Film bei Brecht*, p. 316 and Elisabeth Hauptmann, *Die Tageszeitung* (1929). Herbert Ihering, one of Brecht's most astute commentators, went so far as to argue that Keaton would have been a perfect choice to play Galy Gay in *Mann ist Mann* (*Von Reinhardt*, p. 534). For more on the topic of psychophysics in Brecht, especially as it relates to *Mann*, see Brigid Doherty, "Test and *Gestus* in Brecht and Benjamin," *MLN* 115 (2000).

<sup>135</sup> Gunning, "Crazy Machines," p.102.

<sup>136</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," *The Drama Review* 16:3 (September 1972), p. 24.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

steps in an Indian war circle (*The Paleface* (1922)), minstrel moves in *The Playhouse*, an eccentric jig for a cop or baby (*Neighbors* and *Steamboat Bill Jr.*) or a routine performed first for American troops during World War I, but also found in sound films like *Hollywood Review of 1929*, *Dougboys* (1930) and *Sidewalks of New York* (1931). While some of this dancing functioned satirically, Keaton was seriously skilled in his imitations. As a boy he learned “soft shoe and tap dancing” from Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and his own father, Joe Keaton, was well-known as an “eccentric dancer.”<sup>138</sup> Keaton’s dance education was for the most part modern, syncopated and popular.

Not only does Keaton’s dancing suggest a modality of his comedy as well as a particular legacy of theatrical arts by which he was influenced, but it also allows us to re-read the more well-known aspects of his slapstick as a kind of dance. Like Kleist’s marionette, it is Buster’s status as unconscious object that conditions his acrobatic grace, a grace encouraged by the stylish, sporty clothes covering his body. We laugh in those moments when Buster reaches gravity’s limit and is avenged by the physical laws of the world, but something akin to Kleist’s marionette is evident both in those impossible acrobatics by which Keaton runs across a landscape, conquers a machine or eludes catastrophe as well as in falling itself, which in its precise movement offers an inverted image of Kleistian grace. It is also important to remember that Kleist’s argument is not that the marionette escapes the laws of gravity, but rather that it actually embodies such laws and does so more perfectly than the soulful human, its “dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity, an outstanding quality that we look for in vain in most dancers.”<sup>139</sup> Keaton as “Gent im Lebensgefahr” is also the dandy who dances, whose movements overcome the gap between living subject and dead object in a comic yet graceful

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<sup>138</sup> Keaton, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*, p. 15 and 26.

<sup>139</sup> Kleist, p. 24.

degradation. This is all too fitting in a world where objects themselves are more mobile than the conscious human agent. Such grace forms a circuit with that most static of pendulum—the “poster” of Keaton’s face. It is here where Keaton’s sexual ambiguity becomes all the more intriguing. If women and machines were equally “part of the scheme of things” and if we add Buster himself to that scheme, then dancing, whether partnered with a woman, train or his own body, converts sexuality into a continuum, one where the desires, movements and sensations of fashion, machine and body circulate both within the film’s space and with the audience, who, like Buster, becomes both attentive observer and dancing gymnast. In contrast to the hypnotic, destructive power of dancing staged in film like *Metropolis*, Buster’s dancing provokes a curious, playful observer, one intent on observing and counseling the actor in a virtual animation.

If we are to scrutinize the “adjustments and modifications under different circumstances” of Keaton’s “comic persona,” such circumstances would have to include various sites and spaces for this audience’s reception. Indeed, the linked phenomena of fashionable dandy and dancing marionette is revealed by Weimar Germany’s own jazz-infused spin on Buster, a revelation most clear in Friedrich Hollaender’s song, “Meine Schwester liebt den Buster.”<sup>140</sup> The song’s lyrics are, like Fleißer’s essay, a veritable cipher for understanding the libidinal dynamics of Keaton’s German public. The composer would even go on to meet Keaton in 1930, when he saw in person the latter’s “roman profile” and “beautiful, serious-as-a-stone face.”<sup>141</sup> A knowing stereotype of Weimar’s New Woman, the sister is “gefühllos, --oh wie modern!” and like the androgynous, often explicitly queer desire of that Woman, “Sie int’ressiert sich für tausend Sachen, / Bloß

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<sup>140</sup> According to a contemporary article on Keaton, the song was premiered by Ilse Bois at the “Revue des ‘Künstler-Theaters’”: “To date, no film actor has been sung about in such a charming way, and the song bangs every night like fireworks [zündend]. Buster Keaton, who also comes from vaudeville, would have been delighted.” See *Film-Magazin Berlin*, 37 (9/9/1928), pp. 6-7.”

<sup>141</sup> Friedrich Hollaender, *Von Kopf bis Fuß* (München: Kindler 1965), p. 247.

nicht für Liebe und nicht für Herrn.”<sup>142</sup> If the sister has endless interest in material things but no care for sentiments of love and especially love of men, one thing does get her going: “denn nur die Leinwand / die regt sie auf.”<sup>143</sup> This is the final line of the first verse, leading into the song’s wonderfully perverse chorus: “Meine Schwester liebt den Buster, / Liebt den Keaton / Und sie sieht’n / In jedem Mann. / Alle Männer sind nur Nieten / Gegen Keaton, / Und sie sieht’n / sich täglich an. / Alle Männer sind nur Rester / Gegen Buster...”<sup>144</sup> Keaton is both projected onto all men, but simultaneously reduces them to “Nieten” and “Rester,” reflecting an excited gaze, trained by daily screenings of Buster films, that both desires and “inspects” Keaton everywhere yet cannot seem to find him among German men, suggesting something profoundly unmasculine in him that becomes all the more sought after. The contradictions of this gaze escalate in the song’s second verse: “Sie werden lachen, / Ist melancholisch, / Bloß weil der Buster / Melancholisch ist! Sie kauft sich / All seine Photos / Die sie mit Salz und / Mit Pfeffer frißt!”<sup>145</sup> Loving this exceptional male seems to involve a kind of transvestism, whereby the sister wants to be melancholic like Buster’s dandy, to effect the pose of his mask. Yet, at the same time, “she will laugh/smile,” a rather unmelancholic response more characteristic of slapstick’s spectator than of the stone-faced Buster. Things get more perverse when another response is suggested—the sister’s excitement with the cinematic image becomes animalistic when confronted with Keaton’s publicity, posters she buys but also, in a surplus enjoyment beyond mere consumerism, devours. The final verse ends where the song began, reflecting on the sister’s paradigmatic status

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<sup>142</sup> Translation: “callous,--oh how modern!” “She’s interested in a thousand things / Just not for love and not for men.” On the topic of queer spectatorship and performance in Weimar cinema, see Alice Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 21-56.

<sup>143</sup> Translation: “because only the movie-screen / excites her.”

<sup>144</sup> Translation: “My sister loves that Buster, / loves that Buster / and she sees him / in every man. / All men are only rivets / against Keaton / and she inspects him / every day. / All men are only leftovers/ against Buster...”

<sup>145</sup> Translation: “They will laugh / is melancholic / simply because Buster / is melancholic! / She buys herself / all his photos / which she devours with salt and pepper.”

as youthful and modern, one who “Braucht zum Genießen keinen Genuß. / Die ist so krankhaft und so perverse, / Wie eb’n die Jugend von heut sein muß. / Gott, ist die düster / Und doch so sinnlich, / Und doch so trotzig / Und angeekelt von der Welt / Und doch so albern.”<sup>146</sup>

Enjoyment comes, like that combination of imitation and laughter, not from what is enjoyable, but rather from a kind of masochism, deriving from slapstick violence a “perverse” pleasure, gymnastically following Buster’s body, adopting his mask-like face and like all contemporary “youth,” whether masculine or feminine, displaying an almost contradictory combination of *Sachlichkeit* [objectivity] and *Sinnlichkeit* [sensuality]. The androgyny of the New Woman is not merely a mixture of genders, but also of contrary affects, a combination of the indifferent and the sensuous already indicated by the at once “sullen” at once “absurd” *Fressen* of Keaton’s star-image. This spectator is constructed by Hollaender within a song, implying Keaton’s own marionette-like performance as well as the rhythm of the audience who responds in kind. The laughter that punctuated this rhythm is schizophrenic, as it implies a split between the spectator’s actual body and its virtual place within the film, becoming both hyperconscious observer (Fleißer) and unconscious mimic (Cournot), joining in on a dance that is both stylish and gymnastic. Important here is Kleist’s emphasis that grace is only possible through the unconscious puppet *or* through some kind of “infinite consciousness,” thus implying two linked models for the dancer, one based on autonomist absorption into a world-movement and the other produced by a conscious distance between the body and a center of gravity.<sup>147</sup>

Buster navigates between both these poles, intuitive while at the same time distant from himself,

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<sup>146</sup> Translation: “needs no enjoyment to enjoy. / She is so morbid and so perverse, / just like the youth of today must be. / God is she dreary / and yet so sensual, / and yet so sullen / and disgusted by the world / and yet so silly.”

<sup>147</sup> Kleist, p. 26.

yet removed in such an inscrutably divine way that spectators had to themselves becomes conscious of how Buster and his world functioned.

If Hollander set the perverted desire of the Weimar spectator to the beat of the cabaret tune it was perhaps because Keaton's films were in fact already absorbed within the worlds of jazz and dance in their immediate reception in Germany. As with the dissemination of publicity photos, inspired songs and newspaper reviews, the actual showing of Keaton's films reflected an Americanized media spectacle. *The Navigator* premiered in 1926 at the UFA-Palast am Zoo in Berlin, the very theater where *The Last Laugh* premiered a year earlier, but whereas Murnau's film satirized the cruel surface culture of a specifically American capitalism, Keaton's film displayed the more "sensual" side to that culture. Ernő Rapee, a Hungarian orchestra leader imported by UFA from the Capitol Cinema in New York, preceded the film with a performance of Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody," then playing a "Jazz Carnival" featuring the "exotic and acrobatic" dancing of Peggy White before setting *The Navigator* itself to jazz accompaniment.<sup>148</sup> Critics could not care less about Liszt, instead fawning over Rapee's carnival, which so "agitated the audience that the unleashing of the jazz-band transplanted itself in an unprecedented way among the three thousand listeners."<sup>149</sup> Rapee's music, animating everything "in a great maelstrom, flogging the nerves," seemed to have a particular affinity with American slapstick as his premiere performance at the Palast was Harold Lloyd's *Girl Shy* (1924).<sup>150</sup> Such music was only a part of an evening's entertainment. At one of its Berlin screenings, *Our Hospitality* was preceded by eccentric dancers, who, like Keaton in *The Paleface*, performed a "little Apache

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<sup>148</sup> *Der Kinematograph* N4. 986 (1925), p. 17.

<sup>149</sup> *Das Tage-Buch* 2 (1/9/1926). Rapee writes about his move from New York to Berlin in *Deutsche Filmwoche*, Heft 19 (7.5.1926), p. 1. For a general account of Rapee's career see Jeanpaul Goergen, "Prolog Von der zusammengeflickten Musik zum Tonfilmschlager," *Wenn ich Sonntags in mein Kino geh'*, hrg. Rother und Mänz (Bönen: Kettler Verlag, 2008); p. 10-33.

<sup>150</sup> Olinsky, *International Film Kurier* (undated), p. 87.

scene.”<sup>151</sup> For *Three Ages*, audiences were amused even before entering the theater, which was “provided with the head of Buster Keaton in illuminated letters on the front of the Marmor-House, the lobby with jungle Ichthyosauruses and cavemen.”<sup>152</sup> Entering the theater itself, the audience was treated to both a jazz-band and a Keaton two-reeler which “put them in the mood” for the feature. The use of Keaton’s deadpan as a marquee decoration was all too common, at times converting static advertisement into proto-cinematic animation, as on the façade of the Marmorhaus which featured “the Buster-Keaton-Head, with a couple hundred little flames, with blinking eyes and turning ears, the bold straw-hat on the forehead.”<sup>153</sup> Even here Buster as dancer is evident, the movement of his eyes recalling Bunuel’s pirouettes. Perhaps the most extreme example of exhibitionist spectacle was another Berlin screening of *Our Hospitality*, one which included popping paper revolvers that reduced the sophisticated Berlin audience to “big children.”<sup>154</sup> After this, the audience is “thrown on one’s head or at least on the ceiling” by a “novel combination of flashlights, an overture of a colorful, brilliant furioso.” Keaton’s Berlin spectators were reduced to a primitive, child-like state, thrown this way and that by special effects, ornamental display, eccentric dancers, jazz music and, not least, the films themselves, *Amerikanismus*’s own *Gesamtkunstwerk*, one that, far from anaesthetizing or traumatizing the audience, activated an intense set of visceral pleasures.

Raoul Hausmann was a witness to these spectacles. We know, for instance, that Hausmann frequented the UFA theaters where many of Keaton’s films premiered and given Hausmann’s references to Keaton both explicit (as in his essays on film) and implicit (as in the manuscript for *My Engagement*) it is none too hard to imagine Hausmann happily tapping his

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<sup>151</sup> Kracauer, *Kleine Schriften zum Film 1928-1931*, p. 150-1.

<sup>152</sup> *Reichsfilmblatt* 38 (1925).

<sup>153</sup> *Film-Kurier*, 211 (9/8/1925).

<sup>154</sup> Olimsky, *International Film Kurier*, p. 87.

feet throughout their exhibition. *My Engagement* already suggests the shared dandiness of Hausmann and Keaton, with the former's script specifically focusing on a "fashionable humanity": one of the key sequences involves the main character's desire to be, like the sister of Hollaender's song, a "Gent," one who wears an English suit likewise desired by Fleißer's fellow audience members. Yet Kasimir wears a "too narrow frock" and is laughed at by the salesman, the comedy escalating later when "K bends himself over a tureen and lets his cuffs fall in." He then "takes his cuffs out" and "brushes them backwards with a clothes-brush," a comic image that evokes Keaton's torn tuxedo in *The Saphead* as well as various images of him restricted or enabled by his ensembles. Hausmann's most explicit essay on fashion, titled "Mode" and appearing in Hans Richter's journal *G* the very year—1924—Keaton's features were first shown in Germany, further emphasizes this relationship between comic cinema, American dandiness and androgynous subversion. Bemoaning the German attitude towards male fashion, Hausmann wishes that his clueless contemporaries would go to the cinema to learn something from those most fashion forward of films: "If those gentlemen would just for once go to any American film of their choice in order to free themselves from the conceit that they have any ability at all... Cap makers of Berlin, off to an American film with you! Shoe manufacturers, off to the cinema!"<sup>155</sup> What is it that German men lack when it comes to fashion? Specifically, it is a sense for clothing as constructive, motional and functional, that sixth sense of movement impossible to develop due to the German prejudice of fashion as merely decorative, form fitting or "stupid nonsense."<sup>156</sup> Aside from American films where might one find displayed in Germany a proper approach to fashion, that is, as "the function of the body made visible-and to be dressed means to have a consciousness of the body"? According to Hausmann it is, perhaps not surprisingly, Weimar

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<sup>155</sup> Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 102.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.



Germany's New Woman, who, when seen on the bustling main boulevards of Berlin, "functions, does gymnastics—they are the single opposing pole to German inwardness, which finds its highest expression in clodhoppers and beer bellies."<sup>157</sup> The only way to remove this "inwardness" is to externalize it through the photographic image, for example, in Hausmann's own fashionable posing for photos accompanying his article, first showing the proper length and width of a sleeve and second, standing like a mannequin to demonstrate the proper cut of a coat. Even better would be a kinematic example of how one functions or dysfunctions according to one's manner of dress: "Sometime I'd like to film the Tauentzienstrasse in slow motion."<sup>158</sup> In such a film, one might observe the inelastic, restricted and militarized body of the German beer-belly male or one might, as "opposing pole," find the capable movements of young German women.

In her analysis of "Mode," Brigid Doherty has suggested that Hausmann's text and accompanying images reveal that the artist "was happy to serve as a mannequin for modern fashion. He did not suffer from those psychosartorial afflictions of modern masculinity, the repression of narcissism and the erosion of exhibitionism," afflictions which were likewise avoided by the New Woman, whose association with the related realms of fashion and commodity revealed a pleasure of both seeing and being seen.<sup>159</sup> While Doherty focuses primarily on the figure of the "fashionable lady" she leaves aside Hausmann's many references to American film, references that imply continuity between male dandies like Keaton and *Bubikopf*-styled New Women like Asta Nielsen, a continuity that was, as we have seen, more

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>159</sup> Brigid Doherty, "Fashionable Ladies, Dada Dandies," *Art Journal*, 54:1 (Spring, 1995), p. 49.

than apparent to Weimar observers. Hausmann's desire for a fashion-focused film is one that, like *My Engagement*, would combine slapstick motion with the functionalist sensations of style.

This desire was more than a mere hypothetical. Hausmann's only other documented film project reveals this combination of American comedy and American style: it is a script for an instructional film entitled *A Clothing Film*.<sup>160</sup> Suffice to say, Hausmann's idea, which sadly never came to fruition, is within the history of silent film highly idiosyncratic, a combination of documentary instruction, comic stunt, special effect and sartorial display. In an opening section, two men are filmed on Tauentzienstrasse, one in a "common dress-suit" and the other wearing a "newly cut suit," the question for the audience, raised in an intertitle, "Have you already considered how you fit [*stecken*] in your suit?" Clearly the goal of Hausmann's film is to utilize those forms and techniques he so valued in cinema to make his audience start thinking about how their bodies not only appear when dressed, but how they function, how they move according to the stressful situations of, using Fleißer's formulations, "Blamage" and "Lebensgefähr." Recalling the kinematic experiments of Etienne-Jules Marey, where various athletic exercises were photographed using black backgrounds and black-suits with white lines drawn on as a skeletal frame, Hausmann lights and films the two men from behind, "so that only silhouettes are visible, in which the skeletons become visible through dissolve." After asking the audience if they notice a difference in the way each clothed skeleton moves, the film focuses in, using the same x-ray effect, on the arm, displaying its movements when each man is attacked. The man in the too typical suit encounters a "resistance of motion" when trying to fight back because of nothing other than the sleeve that covers his arm. Moving to the same bodies thrown surreptitiously into water, Hausmann's narrator comments in an intertitle, "If you don't drown

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<sup>160</sup> Raoul Hausmann, "Ein Kleidungsfilm." Accessed at the Raoul Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

now, your tailor is innocent!” We have already remarked on Hausmann and Keaton’s shared interest in bodies in aquatic motion, especially those wearing different outfits: diving suits, sailor’s uniforms or even those “newly cut suits” that Hausmann so valued in his own film. The link to Keaton becomes even more pronounced in the film’s second part, to be titled “Die Tücke des Objekts” [the maliciousness of objects], one of the mantras of German film critics when describing Buster’s comic relationship to the world of objects. It is this ever-eccentric relation that fashion best reveals and in Hausmann’s approach to this “maliciousness” he concentrates on the functional materiality of clothing, the way certain bits and pieces obstruct or allow motion. This time our two test subjects “must dress themselves posthaste” in order to catch a train, with the one doing so quickly and without complication, while the other “doesn’t find his collar, cannot get his suspenders on, rips off buttons, safety-pins step into action.” As with Keaton’s minorating logic, the smallest things have the capacity to affect or transform everything: while the dandyish first man makes his train one second before departure, the second “becomes, due to the maliciousness of objects, quietly insane [*irrsinnig*], must still first take a Kukirol foot-bath (or drowns inside the bath) in another trap.” The film’s final intertitle—“All this comes only from the normal cut!”—has a Dadaist wit to it and likewise recalls the comic ease with which Keaton treats the death of both others and himself in shorts like *Daydreams* (1922), *The Frozen North* (1922), or *Cops*. And of course death, or at least its threat, is closely associated with machines like the train.

Inspired by American cinema and perhaps by one of that cinema’s most stylish yet androgynous of stars, Hausmann’s own cinema here elicits the same combination of attention and intuition: it asks its audience to follow these motions yet, in its use of special effects, comic interruptions and close-ups, it also emphasizes an embodied viewer, one who feels the

resistances of both the clothing on screen and that which they are wearing as they watch, a virtual innervation achieved on levels both cognitive and tactile. In a contemporaneous essay, “Männerkleidung” [“Male clothing”], Hausmann would even use the highly Keatonesque examples of the “Wallstreet man” and the “sport athlete” for the re-functioned German male,<sup>161</sup> with the former found in *The Saphead* and the latter in *College*, a film explicitly promoted in its German propaganda materials as a “Sportfilm” that is not just funny, but also “very interesting with regard to sports.”<sup>162</sup> Fashion is thus a medium for translating motion, sensation and rhythm, which is why Hausmann will not only link it to the “Tücke des Objekts,” but also to machinic realms he elsewhere found in the cabaret, montage and cinema: a suit is “like a house” shoes are “work-tools of locomotion,”<sup>163</sup> the tailor must be simultaneously “like an engineer” while the dressed man must likewise be “an anatomist and do gymnastics.”<sup>164</sup> All of these items refuse the passive beauty of the “artwork,” acting instead as “objects of practical need.”<sup>165</sup> As with his montage self-portraits, Hausmann was not only unafraid of demonstrating such “need”—he clearly enjoyed displaying himself, designing, throughout the twenties, nine of his own suits and posing in them for photographs.

Yet Hausmann’s most famous display came in his performances as a solo dancer. Eva Züchner is one of the few scholars to have written about these performances and this omission is perhaps not surprising given the lack of any proper record of performance, with the only real documentation assorted reviews, a few photographs and Hausmann’s own programmatic essays, letters and descriptions from *Hyle*.<sup>166</sup> Starting in the late teens, Hausmann toured salons and

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<sup>161</sup> Raoul Hausmann, “Männerkleidung.” Accessed at the Raoul Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

<sup>162</sup> United Artists Presse und Propagandabuch: *Der Student*.

<sup>163</sup> Hausmann, “Männerkleidung.”

<sup>164</sup> Hausmann, “Mode.” Accessed at the Raoul Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

<sup>165</sup> Hausmann, *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele*, p. 251

<sup>166</sup> Eva Züchner, “Dandy und Tänzer: Ein Spiel der Gegensätze in Hausmanns Antiroman Hyle,” *Raoul Hausmann*,

galleries throughout Germany, performing solo dances and obtaining enough avant-garde notoriety to receive two portraits in photographer August Sander's landmark project, *Antlitz der Zeit* [Portrait of our Time], one as representative of the Dadaist and the other of the dancer. Hausmann's celebrated status as a solo male dancer is unique within Weimar dance culture, which was dominated primarily by women and partner dancers and was often based on theories of embodied movement more or less antithetical to the Dadaist's highly idiosyncratic views on the subject. A rare photograph suggests that the dandy is not to be opposed to the dancer, but rather joined in union. Taken in 1926 for the *Neue Berliner Zeitung* Hausmann here dances wildly in stylish, baggy "Oxfordhose," white-collared shirt and black tie and is directly facing the camera. This performance was a dedication to these "Oxford pants" and took place at the Sturm gallery run by Hausmann's "old enemy," the expressionist Herwarth Walden.<sup>167</sup> Here fashionable exterior functions not as armor, a restrictive concept of dress that Hausmann continually viewed as a ridiculous legacy of medieval culture, but as *enabling* motion so that dancer and dandy become one and the same. The polarity Züchner draws between consciousness

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ed. Bartsch und Koch Graz: Literaturverlag Droschl, 1996), p. 77.

<sup>167</sup> Hausmann, *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele*, p. 132.



**Figure 6: “The Oberdada dances ‘Oxford trousers’**

and unconsciousness is in fact of an essential feature of both figures, which link “active form and passive element at the same time” in the same manner we have already detected in Keaton’s films.<sup>168</sup> Fashion is thus made not for stylish pose, but rather for space-sculpting acrobatics perhaps best embodied for Hausmann in dance and above all, in his very own dancing, an extension of the shameless pleasure already evident in his exhibitionist posing.

As with fashion, *Amerikanismus* would be an essential resource for Hausmann’s developing ideas on dance. Like so many European artists and thinkers, Hausmann was enamored with jazz and ragtime music, detecting in these uniquely new, uniquely American forms both the modernity of the machine age as well as a primitivist pulse antithetical to what he called, in his essay “Tanz,” the “plaster-cast culture“ of the “white race.”<sup>169</sup> In contrast to this race, both “Indians und Negroes” move not according to the expression of the soul or the erotics

<sup>168</sup> Züchner, “Dandy und Tänzer,” p. 84.

<sup>169</sup> Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 110.

of the body, but rather “from the space,” the dancer becoming and shaping that space. We are quite far from similar celebrations of primitivism among contemporary German dance figures like Mary Wigman, Rudolf Laban or Valeska Gert. For Hausmann, all three privileged the expression of “the idea, the soul and the erotic,” poured like plaster into an imitated mold of the ancient statue, an aesthetic connection made explicit in the 1925 film *Wege zur Kraft und Schönheit* [*Ways to Strength and Beauty*], where Wigman’s company animates from Greek friezes into expressionist dancers. Against that film’s conception of dance as what one of its intertitles calls “an elemental instinct of humanity,” Hausmann’s own dancing emphasized that the Greek statue was a model of gymnastic functionalism before it represented eternal truths and beauties. Tellingly, one critic would call Hausmann’s dancing “disgusting, cretinous”<sup>170</sup> while another would compare it to the grotesque prose of the comic writer Ringelnatz.<sup>171</sup> For another, Hausmann’s “dada trot” gave off the impression of someone with an intense stomachache.<sup>172</sup>

If Hausmann’s dancing was grotesque then it was in the same sense as the German phrase for slapstick films, *Groteskfilme*, with the only dancer specifically eliciting his praise none other than Charlie Chaplin. What’s more, of Hausmann’s known dances only one specifically references a living person, *Charlie tanzt Collowoo*, which he performed with several sound-poems as well as a reading of his “Presentist” manifesto in Prague in 1921. In the program for this “Antidada” soiree *Charlie* was advertised as an “eccentric dance.” In drawing a connection between dance and slapstick, Hausmann was not alone. His one-time compatriot, the Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck, detected in Chaplin’s films a “more material desire” evocative of jazz’s

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<sup>170</sup> Fond Doucet, Unidentified Publication in Karlsbad (5/320), re-printed in *Dada and the Press*, ed. Watts (New York: Thorndike Press, 2004), pp. 104-105.

<sup>171</sup> Karl Schodder in the journal *Stortebeker*, quoted in Erlhoff, *Raoul Hausmann, Dadasoph*, p. 165.

<sup>172</sup> *Bohemia* (Prag) (3/2/1920); re-printed in *Dada and the Press*, pp. 103-4.

“Black-Bottom-Dance,” a kind of dance that Hausmann likewise enjoyed.<sup>173</sup> In his recollection of a Dada-Soiree in 1919 the Berlin correspondent and future Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht would describe George Grosz, then at the height of his projective Chaplin fandom, performing “what [Grosz] fancied was a Negro jig” while wearing blackface.<sup>174</sup> While one could easily suspect Hausmann of a similar projection, his later writings evince a studied admiration of Chaplin’s presentist gesturality. Calling him a “Mozart with artificial flatfeet” Hausmann would go on to interpret Chaplin’s movements as a kind of dance: “Charlie Chaplin raises himself, makes a dance step and finishes: ‘After that I’ve gotten thirsty’.”<sup>175</sup> Thirst here is not an emotional expression nor is it a sign of beauty, but rather it is a movement that transmits an internal sensation via clear, direct body movements.

Although Keaton would never receive reference in Hausmann’s writings or performances, there is a shared logic that once again links the two figures. Hausmann’s essay “Die Absichten des Theaters ‘Pre’” [The intentions of the Theater ‘Pre’] conceives the dancer as “a being who feels itself completely as center and periphery of the stage-given space.”<sup>176</sup> Both “carrier and mover of space,” the presentist dancer plays with invisible forms of space, its body necessarily following the laws and logics of both geometry and gravity, expressing not an interior emotional state, but rather the cubist dimensions of the “vertical, diagonal and quadratic.”<sup>177</sup> There is thus no possibility for improvisation here and it is this that separates Hausmann from the grotesque dancing of Gert, who herself performed with the Dadaists in the late teens. As Züchner has suggested, we are here not too far from Kleist, with the dancer

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<sup>173</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck, “Charlie Chaplin und die Amerikanerin,” *Die Weltbühne* 23.1 (1927); 305-6.

<sup>174</sup> Ben Hecht, “DADAFEST,” *The Drama Review* 18:2 (June, 1974); p. 125.

<sup>175</sup> Hausmann, *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele*, p. 164 and 345.

<sup>176</sup> Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, p. 58.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*



submitting itself both consciously and unconsciously to an inhuman, relativist physics. Body parts are thus “inert” pendula, “which must all be weaned on a human mechanics.”<sup>178</sup>

Perhaps the best evidence for this with regard to Hausmann comes in a review written by Roland Schacht, himself one of Keaton’s German admirers. Schacht suggests Hausmann’s legendary status as one of the greatest of dancers when describing the mood of the audience, gathered together in an apartment: “Full of expectation. Hausmann will dance.”<sup>179</sup> Accompanied by a violinist, Hausmann begins with an “Apache scene” of his own, dancing the *Indianer auf dem Kriegspfad* [Indian on the war-path] dressed stylishly in “white sportshirt, blue pants, white beach-shoes,” while wearing on his face “a enigmatically bright, unreal mask with blowing paper-beard strands.” Ever interested in masks, Hausmann refers not to the imagined face of an Indian hunter, but instead evokes an unsolveable riddle. Rather than imitating the movements of a hunter, Hausmann here is clearly following his contemporaneous claim that the Indian, in contrast to the “white race,” demonstrate a basic functionalism even in the simplest of activities: walking. After dancing like a “chain” by moving mechanically forwards, Hausmann “stands a moment in front, then turns himself back, beginning from scratch. And one has the artistic theme: the movement in the silhouette, the perpetuum mobile in the tightly constricted frame. Everything remains two-dimensional, not a pose, not a gesture, which with every opulent change, strays ever in to the cubist. Everything precise, without flowery speech, without filler, clearly arranged and constructed in a great line.” This two-dimensionality is cinematic, evoking both the flatness of the film screen as well as the perpetual mobility of masterful, comic walkers like Keaton. We also detect in this silhouette the movements of the marionette, never a static pose, but rather a constant, precise changing of geometric body-forms, movement made possible

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Roland Schacht, “Raoul Hausmann tanzt,” *Das blaue Heft* 3 H. 40/41 (1922); p. 887-888.

only by the restrictive frame that Hausmann virtually imposes on himself, becoming an “eternally and unceasingly moving chain of lawfulness [*Gesetzmäßigen*].” Hausmann’s next dance, *der betrunkene schottische Matrose* [*The drunk Scottish sailor*], shifts from horizontally moving chain to “closed circle,” from perpetual motion machine to drunk beating heart acrobatically playing a “counter-barrel [*Gegenfaß*] between balancing on the toes and falling on the heels,” a motion that converts his feet into a seesaw. Like Keaton’s sailors Hausmann corresponds to a world that shakes like a boat at stormy sea, his body “acting ever new, like a fountain, out of the dancing center, which circles a closer path around the empty middle.” Hausmann relied on unconventional, far flung figures like the Indian, the Drunkard and the Sailor to not only move away from European dance culture, but to produce a functionalist space, Schacht avoiding descriptions of emotions, representations or ideas and instead focusing on the trajectories, centers and laws of motion relayed by dancing.

It is a final dance that evokes the most surprising response from Schacht with his own prose becoming excited, forcing the critic to succumb to the dance if he wants to understand it at all. Likewise sailor-themed, *der Matrose und sein Weib* [*The sailor and his wife*] is the “most remarkable” of the dances, a duet between Hausmann the sailor and a “white-striped chair” meant to be the wife. An indifferent medium evoking contradictory associations and sensations, Hausmann’s sailor wildly orbits around the stool-woman, “now like a jumping jack, now corporeal, now thinly torn aloft, now clumsy-dull, now stamping, now wooing, now taunting.” Here time is constantly flowing, but also punctured by various nows, a constantly changing set of positions where the only thing that remains the same is the “no one” of Hausmann’s face. At the dance’s climax, the division between man and woman, human and object, periphery and center dissolves, with Schacht’s prose chasing after the dance in an increasingly montage-like,

breathless review: “the movement becomes bolder, more urgent, more palpable, closer, more concentrated and suddenly the dancer and center are one, ensnared, turning around one another, fusing, blazing on, flaring lower, Hausmann sits on the chair, kicks out still a few more, the movement is calm, the circle a clump, the space, filled through with lines, has compressed itself into statue.” Whereas the previous dance kept a drunken distance between dancer and invisible center, here the center is present, embodied by an immobile, ready-made wife joined by her fluctuating male partner, who converts both himself and the entire space into a frieze. Yet this statue vibrates with intensities, suffusing Schacht’s own writing as he evokes the dance for his readers. His final words are all too telling in suggesting this excited translation across media of dancing body, accompanying music, spectatorial vision and written word.

The purpose of the “quiet” that ends this dance is to overcome the dichotomies aligning passivity or encrustation with reified immobility, activity with vitality or human agency. In a further twist, Hausmann links this overcoming to the question of gender, with man and wife converted into mechanically minded, geometrically-bound abstractions. Hausmann refuses the erotics of union in a way that recalls the conclusion of *Sherlock Jr.*: Buster, awakened from his dream, learns from the still-running film how to seduce and propose to his beloved, but when the film cuts from happy couple to happy family, Buster looks puzzled, at a loss to explain how children were produced. Yet rather than implying an anxious denial of the sexual in either Hausmann or Keaton’s Dadaism, this is an autoeroticism of partial, machinic objects, a convergence of pleasure and media that the whole dream section of *Sherlock* thrillingly performed. Androgyny for both artists has only minimally to do with some perceived physical or biological resemblance and more with the way mediatic demarcations of gender as well as their repressed, anxiety-inducing underside become liberated.

Hausmann and Keaton's synaesthetic tactics recalls both the hay-day of modernist machine mania while also pointing to alternative, anarchic and primitivist modernisms, ones that convert Bergsonian satire into a liberating translation beyond the borders of the human, in prosthetic media drawn from the rhythm of *Amerikanismus*. In contrast to dominant modes of responding to this modernity, Keaton and Hausmann demonstrate a third way beyond the poles of traumatic desubjectivation and armored consolidation that defined the Weimar ego. Engaging the world as machinic meant for both a productivist anarchism, suggesting modes of vision, sensation and cognition where pratfalls were the very points of translation across worlds and bodies, surfaces and depths, geometries and causalities. By connecting to objects, actions and affects tied to Weimar's New Woman, their media produced new forms of sensation and cognition.

In contrast to Thomas Elsaesser's account of Dadaist cinema, the particular Dadaism that interests us has nothing to do with the "shift from an environment experienced through all the senses to one increasingly dominated by the eye," nor is its central paradox "that the real is the material, but that this irreducible materiality has no reality other than as a sign or a representation..."<sup>180</sup> Rather this materiality unlocks a new environment mediated by all senses, including but not limited to sight. Instead of remaining mere sign, the materials of Keaton's cinema and Hausmann's highly cinematic projects—from *My Engagement* to *A Fashion Film*, *Hyle* to the "Kabarett zum Menschen"—are, to use Deleuze's term, "signaletic," including "all kinds of modulation features, sensory (visual and sound), kinetic, intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal, and even verbal (oral and written)."<sup>181</sup> They revel in the absurd not to fly in the face of logic, narrative or meaning, but rather to translate for audiences these structures' a-signifying

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<sup>180</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Dada/Cinema?" *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996), p. 16 and 21.

<sup>181</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, p. 29.

supports. German audiences' desire to see these well-dressed automata dance reveals a synaesthetic circuit, where diverse objects and rhythms enjoined at the very edges of this era's anxious delineations of gendered difference.

## CHAPTER 5

### “A GERMAN HAROLD LLOYD”: CURT BOIS’S WHITE COLLAR SLAPSTICK

#### I. Introduction

*“That was Curt Bois when interviewed. Now he goes to get the whiskey, whiskey soda. In a dark blue corduroy suit, in a yellow shirt, a thin silk scarf around the neck. He has something American about him.” Die Zeit.*

In the spring of 1924 a gathering was arranged for some of Berlin’s leading film industry publicists and reporters. The occasion was an afternoon tea with one Bud Pollard, introduced to the audience as an American director of slapstick films. Although Pollard spoke no German, his *Vita* impressed, having worked with both Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, not to mention his background as part of an unspecified “acting dynasty.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this impressive pedigree, Pollard came across as “unusually modest,” ingratiating himself by “laudingly explain[ing] with much beautiful talk about German studios and about possibilities that he was absorbed with for already fifteen years.”<sup>2</sup> Acting as Pollard’s translator was the head of Trianon-Film, the Rumanian-American David Schratter, who had purchased the firm two years previously with the desire of transforming it from one of hundreds of small German film production companies into producer and distributor of high quality, internationally successful movies. This meeting represented an important step in Schratter’s plan, with Pollard announcing a two-year contract at Trianon to produce slapstick shorts. What’s more, Pollard would be conducting an open contest to find a star for these films, specifically a “German Harold Lloyd,” a task for which Pollard was seemingly well qualified. Running back to their respective papers, journalists had decidedly exceptional copy, with *Der Kinematograph* announcing “Someone searches for Harald [sic]

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<sup>1</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 908 (1924).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Lloyd! Though not him personally. Rather his type. And also one not in appearance, but to a certain extent, in quality.”<sup>3</sup>

That Trianon would later claim, in a publicity announcement, “[ausgerechnet] seven hundred and forty two people” intent on becoming Pollard’s star speaks both to the firm’s canny self-promotion as well as to the popularity and financial promise of American slapstick and especially Harold Lloyd, its most prolific and profit-minded star.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the use of the double-meaning word “ausgerechnet” (meaning both “calculated” and “of all things”) here is far from coincidental given the German title of Lloyd’s *Safety Last* (1923), *Ausgerechnet Wolkenkratzer* [*A Skyscraper of All Things*], which had been released in Germany only a few months before Pollard’s introduction, competing in its release date with Fritz Lang’s *Kriemhild’s Revenge* (1924). The German success of Lloyd’s film helps explain Schratter’s motivation to find a vernacular replacement of Lloyd’s glasses-wearing go-getter. More than most American or even German films, *Safety Last*’s premiere was a media spectacle, its Berlin run at the Mozartsaal organized by respected theater impresario Hanns Brodnitz. The film’s German exhibition included all the signs of Weimar’s obsession with things American: slapstick, jazz, dance, big business and the metropolis. The spectacle included a foyer plastered with images and models of fantastical American skyscrapers (Willy Haas: “one believes oneself in some grotesque, hyper-American city of the future”), a grotesque dance performance, a prelude by the London Sonora Jazz-band (who also accompanied the main feature), ushers dressed in comic costumes (perhaps wearing Lloyd’s horn-rimmed glasses) and most successfully, a comic dialogue featuring cabaret humorist Willy Schaeffers and, in the part of Harold Lloyd’s little brother, a rising star of stage,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Der Kinematograph*, 909, (1924).

screen, and virtually every other venue Berlin had to offer, the twenty-three year old comic *Wunderkind* Curt Bois.<sup>5</sup>

Whether David Schratter attended this premiere is not known, but only a few months later rumors were circulating that Bois had already been chosen to be the “German Harold Lloyd” of Pollard’s slapstick series, well before the promised contest had even begun. Reporting Pollard’s afternoon tea, the *Neue Illustrierter Filmwoche* implied that the films’ future star was a foregone conclusion: “As it has come to my ears by the way, the solution to the slapstick puzzle has been found in Kurt [sic] Bois.”<sup>6</sup> Only a few weeks later, *Der Kinematograph* would report with some sarcasm that Trianon had picked that “young Berliner comedian” before the films’ announcement, a duplicitous stunt that “spiteful people could thus hold the search for Harold Lloyd or Chaplin as an old American trick.”<sup>7</sup> Seeking an American director (Pollard) for an American genre (slapstick) so as to achieve success abroad (i.e. in the American market) the whole contest seemed not surprisingly to the German press a uniquely American business tactic, one whose youthful chicanery required getting ahead, overcoming obstacles and utilizing any and everything, moral considerations be damned. The irony (or rather lack thereof) escalates when one considers the all too fitting “quality” and “type” being pursued by Schratter, Pollard and now Bois, the persona of Harold Lloyd’s glasses character, the very icon, for Weimar Germans, of what *Die Lichtbild-bühne* called the uniquely “American mentality” of *Safety Last*.<sup>8</sup>

Bois, already familiar to Berliners as Lloyd’s German little brother, was a natural choice to represent this mentality considering that he was himself praised throughout the Weimar era as embodying an America-inspired generation of the young, urban and economically insecure.

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<sup>5</sup> Willy Haas, *Film-Kurier*, 104 (5/2/1924)

<sup>6</sup> *Neue Illustrierter Filmwoche* 29 (1924).

<sup>7</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 909 (1924).

<sup>8</sup> *Die Lichtbild-Bühne* 49/50 (5/3/1924).



Having started on stage at the tender age of eight in Leo Fall's comic operette *Der fidele Bauer* [*The Happy Farmer*], Bois would over the course of the teens and twenties, become one of the great comic actors of the German-speaking nations, living and working primarily in Berlin, but achieving success in tours and performances throughout Europe. Whether acting in the most contemporary of plays, musical revues, cabarets, salons, dance halls, film premieres or films themselves, the German-Jewish Bois would come to typify the modern schlemihl, which would be the title of one of his best loved films—*The Schlemihl* (1931). Something of a Zelig, Bois performed with nearly every major star of Weimar Berlin's heady performance culture, from Heinrich George to Marlene Dietrich and he befriended or worked with many of the great artistic icons of the era: Max Reinhardt, Erwin Piscator, Heinrich Mann, Ernst Lubitsch, Friedrich Hollaender, Arnolt Bronnen and many others. Whether in works great or mediocre, as star or supporting player, Bois was almost always singled out for praise by astute writers like theater critic Herbert Ihering, poet Max Hermann-Neisse and satirist Erich Kästner. It was Kästner who best characterized both the appeal and contemporaneity of Bois, writing in a 1928 review of Bois' most successful turn on stage, title character of the cross-dressing English farce *Charley's Aunt*,

In the pure culture of acting Bois is the representative of a generation that only now graduates from its youth. He is with them in age and represents on stage how he and they are the same as far it concerns the comic side of the generation. He is the Harold Lloyd of the birth-year 1901, twenty years old as inflation came and at twenty earned, with a telephone conversation, a villa along with a car. He has impudences inherited from their time and an elasticity, which looks out for every stock market crash and every revolution in order to undertake resistance. He has their anxiety, their haste, their unsentimentality, their salesmanship. And he sublimates these qualities in his performance so that every evening the hundreds who see him think they see themselves. Bois knows his essence and his timely sources. He knows how he is and knows besides that he must be this way.<sup>9</sup>

Kästner did not know how right he was in his comparison of Bois with Lloyd, not being aware of the former's opportunity, four years earlier, to semi-officially become the German

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<sup>9</sup> Erich Kästner, "Bois de Berlin," *Neue Leipziger Zeitung* (5/25/1929), re-printed in *Gemischte Gefühle II*, p. 194.

latter.<sup>10</sup> He did not know this because these films were never completed and never released, because Bud Pollard was not who he said he was and because Trianon was not the company David Schratter wanted it to be. Yet there remains an inextricable link between Curt Bois and American slapstick, something pointed out in nearly every review of Bois on both stage and screen, which intimated in his elastic, androgynous body, unsentimental demeanor and go-getter character-type some vague yet necessary bond with Chaplin, Keaton and, above all, Lloyd. Aside from whatever influence this unholy trinity had on Bois' performance style, he also performed more than once with these actors at premieres like that of *Safety Last*, having also given a comic monologue in 1926 before Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* at the Capitol am Zoo Cinema.<sup>11</sup> Yet the "German" before "Harold Lloyd," like Kästner's addition "of the birth-year 1901," suggests much more than a mere echo or copy of Lloyd's comedy, instead implying a complex set of transformations. Shifting across registers economic, national and cultural, this brief, exceptional moment linking the German film industry and the genre of American slapstick offers an opportunity for understanding another feature of Weimar culture's obsessive and always ambiguous *Amerikanismus*: the business obsession of Bois's contemporaries, that new, dynamic and foreboding class known as the *Angestellten* or white collar employees.

While Lloyd offered a decidedly sympathetic version of this figure, his German critics, like Bois, had little interest in perceiving or promoting such identification, instead focusing on the nervous energy, ruthless business-sense and lazy indifference lurking behind the star's trademark glasses. The "typical" "American mentality" embodied by Lloyd and fleshed out in a

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<sup>10</sup> This unintentional omission has recurred in contemporary accounts of Bois's career, including not only the actor's own writings not to mention his biography. See Gerold Ducke, *"Humor kommt aus der Trauer": Curt Bois, eine Biographie* (Berlin: Bostelmann & Sibenhaar, 2001); See Curt Bois, *Zu wahr um schön zu sein* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1980); *Curt Bois* (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1983); *Ich mache alles mit den Beinen...Der Schauspieler Curt Bois*, ed. Solchow and Muscheklnautz (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2001). See also an interview with Bois in English in *Griffithiana* 53-54 (1990).

<sup>11</sup> Olinsky, *International Film Kurier* (1926).

variety of settings by Bois, involved less some accurate image of American business, having much more to do with Germany's confrontations with its own antagonisms, specifically the class instability produced by new economies developing beyond traditional venues of proletarian labor, in the very settings on display in so many of Lloyd's films: offices, department stores and city streets. Perhaps most important was that typically American of arts/industries, the cinema, which not only catered, with its fantasies of upward mobility and romantic hijinks, to the tastes of the *Angestellten*, but was in and of itself a site of struggle and competition between Hollywood and Berlin. No more was German cinema lacking than in slapstick and if it would be fruitless for the German film industry to try to imitate films like *Safety Last*, best to hire an American with proven experience directing the genre's greatest comedians as well as a rising star who could properly reflect a cosmopolitan generation's "anxiety, their haste, their unsentimentality, their salesmanship." Bois could play Lloyd's German variant, his "younger brother," not only because of his obvious familiarity with the American star, but because, as Kästner argued, he was uniquely able to sublimate the "essence" of a generation's desires and anxieties. This was not only because of his immense talents as a comedian, but because he intersected in his career with so many of the forces and sites at work in the post-inflation, pre-fascist period (1924 to 1933), playing characters who were Jewish, cross-dressing, neurotic, cynical and always on the look out for a quick and often dishonest Mark.

In what follows, I will first relate Lloyd's reception within the culture of Weimar Germany's white-collar worker, reading film critics tickled by Lloyd alongside the speculations of sociologists nervous about the taste and politics of the *Angestellten*, not quite bourgeois and not quite proletarian, but increasingly important economically and politically. Shifting to the figure of Pollard, I will discuss the broadly felt lack of German physical film comedy and how

and why Trianon secured the services of what turned out to be an American charlatan, one whose lack of talent doomed Bois's chances of a stardom comparable to Lloyd. Turning to Bois, I will discuss how and why he came to be Germany's best chance for such stardom, analyzing his Weimar career through an examination of the basic features of his persona: energetic employee, dancing cabaret comic and modern schlemihl. While Pollard's films were never properly completed or released, Bois's one directorial outing during the Weimar era, a great comic short entitled *Scherben bringen Glück*, invites a concluding discussion.

## II. Harold in Weimar

*"Harold Lloyd is a man of no tenderness, of no philosophy, the embodiment of American cheek and indefatigable energy. His movements are all direct, straight; the shortest distance between two points he will traverse impudently and persistently, even if he is knocked down at the end of each trip."* Gilbert Seldes.

Harold Lloyd first arrived in German cinemas in the early twenties, appearing in shorts before the debut of his features in 1924. Prior to the extraordinary success of these latter films and their accompanying attack of publicity and advertisement, Lloyd's glasses character was known among Germans simply as "Er." Avoiding the particularity of a proper name while also subtracting all descriptive or nominative content, this "He" suggests, as Lloyd himself bemusedly said of it, "third person, singular number, masculine gender."<sup>12</sup> "Er" would eventually be given up as Lloyd grew in popularity to the point that one critic would hyperbolically state in 1924, "Who Harold Lloyd is, everyone in the world knows, knows more than they know who Napoleon or Mussolini is."<sup>13</sup> As with his biography, Lloyd's commercial success in Germany seemed of a piece with the success of his pictures' plots as well with his character's appeal: "Volatile [Sprunghaft] is the development of his fame with us in Germany. Volatile are his films

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<sup>12</sup> Harold Lloyd, *An American Comedy* (Toronto: Dover, 1971), p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> Uncited article by Kurt Pinthus, p. 106.

and volatile is the man himself...”<sup>14</sup> Still, one understands why “Er” was German exhibitors’ first choice for a name, one lacking any detail or quality, suggesting instead simply an agent for action, or more literally, for jumping. “Sprunghaft” is an apt descriptor precisely because it captures the essential nature of his character’s disposition: “There is no law of gravity for Harold Lloyd.”<sup>15</sup> Certainly this resistance to the world’s physical laws was most famously displayed during the skyscraper sequence of *Safety Last* yet it also suggests a broader understanding of the glasses character. This disposition is already well known: aside from his horn-rimmed glasses, Lloyd wore a straw boater for a hat, a light-colored and average cost suit and seemed, even in standing, always on the verge of motion, of taking off. Unlike the twitchy Tramp or stoical Stoneface, Lloyd’s whole body was both unified under the command of indomitable intention to succeed and constantly on the move for the sake of executing that intention. Unlike most slapstick stars, “neither the face nor body of this Harold Lloyd is especially expressive, rather what the man does, how he does it, is alone effective.”<sup>16</sup> Hence the attribution, in the name “Er,” of a basic ego behind all this doing, an agency that had little to do with expressive capacity and more with actions, which are the measure by which he comically succeeds or fails.

The comedy of so many of Lloyd’s gags lies in the testing of this limitless will to succeed against various obstacles, which may be physical, romantic or social. Indeed, this will, like Lloyd’s identity itself, could not exist without these limits, which define the very structure of his shorts and features. When Harold needs to get from point A to point Z—usually at the last minute, usually against a series of escalating obstacles, distractions and enemies—audiences do

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<sup>14</sup> *Berlin Lokal: Anzeigers* (1925).

<sup>15</sup> *Film-Kurier* (11/1927).

<sup>16</sup> Kurt Pinthus, “Ausgerechnet Wolkenkratzer,” *Das Tage-Buch* 19 (10/4/24), p. 645-6.

not attribute his ridiculous and death-defying arrival, whether on a horizontal or vertical axis, car or bus, sidewalk or skyscraper, to mere chance or luck. Rather, it is Harold's doing, his accomplishment which he, unlike the lazy Tramp or inhuman Keaton, quite literally owns. Ownership is indeed often the goal of these last minute, death-defying rescues, usually ownership over some woman, business or promise, one that Harold stops at nothing to achieve. In his mournful review of *Safety Last*, Frank Aschau suggests, with much hyperbole, a kind of arrogance against the laws of God and Nature in these sensational achievements: "When in this film the dignified father of our lives becomes mocked, when one plucks on the beard the primal forces of nature, for example gravity, and thereby feels a metaphysical pleasure in making fun of these forces, that is a frivolity which has the status of atheistic temerities."<sup>17</sup> More important than the supposed dignity of divine or natural law is the dignity of this frivolous hero, which can only be won after a series of trials and conquests, embarrassments and shame-inducing degradations. He can only mock the metaphysical after exposing himself to mockery, after transforming himself from diffident, arrogant, hypochondriacal or cowardly, into a success, one who "readies life for a thousand obstacles and who stumbles through all embarrassments with unshakeable equanimity."<sup>18</sup> In *Girl Shy* (1924), where Harold plays a stuttering tailor's assistant who dreams of becoming a famous expert of seduction, he is, in the words of *Der Kinematograph*, "an American Parsifal" "the eternally modest young man, who goes through life without consciousness of complications and therefore knows to overcome the difficulties where others fail."<sup>19</sup> The gendered aspect of Lloyd's questing—his status as "Er"—is important here, since success in business or in love is also success in proving his masculinity after an initial failure to

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Aschau, *Die Weltbühne* 22 (5/29/1924).

<sup>18</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 911 (1924).

<sup>19</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 994 (3/7/1926).

live up to norms of the capable and immodestly successful American man. As one early article, entitled “A modest, young man,” put it: “he blushes like a young girl—if a young girl stands before him. Under these circumstances he is even insipid, embarrassed, helpless...”<sup>20</sup> Yet Lloyd’s achievements over the course of the film not only ensure him romantic success on screen; his trademarked face offers a “triumphant smile, which no woman’s heart can resist.”<sup>21</sup> As *Girl Shy* makes clear, it is this transformation from emasculated boy to confident hero that defines much of his star-image. At film’s end, Lloyd reaches success as an author—not of advice for seduction, but of an unintentionally comic book revealing his basic ignorance about sex—while saving his romantic interest from marrying a bigamist, reaching the altar at the last minute after a hair-raising car chase. Doing so proves Lloyd’s masculine worth in the appreciating eyes of women both on screen and off.



Figure 1: According to the *Lichtbild-Bühne*, Lloyd is one of the “masters of American slapstick”

<sup>20</sup> *Filmland* 1 (11/1924).

<sup>21</sup> *Deutsche Filmwoche* 9 (no date).

Laughter was an obsessive thematic among the German critics who attended and praised Lloyd's films. As one critic stated of *Dr. Jack* (1922), "The plot is quite incidental and appears constructed, without the model of a manuscript, only out of 'gags,' as the Americans name sudden incidents [plötzlichen Einfälle] with which they try in comedies to affect the diaphragm of spectators."<sup>22</sup> In the case of this film this highly physical effect was more than coincidental since its meager plot concerns Lloyd's country doctor curing a young invalid by turning her house haunted—her medicine is the danger of a thrilling gag. There was an innate relationship between the structuring of Lloyd's features and the responses of many of his audiences, who moved from one *Einfall* to the next with an optimum amount of tension between each surprising confrontation with Harold's drive for success and whatever obstacle that drive encountered, resisted and inevitably overcame. As one critic for *Der Tag* commented on the climactic boxing match of *Grandma's Boy* (1922), "Our hero, who weakens and feints, is hit to the ground ten times, twenty times, thirty times. Always stands up again. At the beginning it is moderately interesting. Later it gets boring. Still later however it becomes exciting. This standing-up-once-more and always-standing-up-again receives a provocative pathos. A particular heroism of willpower appears here and something like an American ethos becomes apparent to us."<sup>23</sup>

The heart-racing tempo of sequences like this boxing match—saved as a rule for the final reels of every Lloyd feature—seems to bear some essential relationship to not only the motivation and unflappable energy of Lloyd's protagonist, but also to some essentially "American ethos." This "American Parsifal" is nothing more than the modern American individualist, one who cannot say no to any challenge. This tempo was suited perfectly, in German eyes, for the big city life of that individual and "Harold Lloyd is by Jove [in English] the

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<sup>22</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 911 (1924).

<sup>23</sup> *Der Tag* (2/29/24).



best relaxation for the tired business man [in English]...Whoever has previously laughed now jolts themselves. Whoever has never learned to laugh learns it here.”<sup>24</sup> The explosive, rhythmic nature of the laughter provoked by Lloyd, each “chuckle” or “screech” timed by an explosive gag, offers the best remedy for the nervous exhaustion of the urban employee, testing concentration, revealing one’s distraction and shocking with each sensational exploit. The push and pull of that almost subliminal wavelength of cognitive cause and effect and corporeal energetics, unmoored from the temporal concerns of plot, seemed fitting for the United States’ particular kind of capitalism. More important than plot are the conditions and situations in which Lloyd’s glasses character is thrown, a context, by and large, defined by the modern concerns of the American on the go. Having little to do with the culture of “Eckermann and Goethe” and more to do with the mass culture of the “Lunapark” these are films “without literary ambitions,” not requiring that their audience be “graduated from university.”<sup>25</sup> More important is a kind of vitalist thrill mixed with technical virtuosity: since Lloyd “is an American, he must also box and drive a car...The Americans are a robust people and affirmers of life.”<sup>26</sup> That affirmation comes from an indomitable will to get up after being knocked down, to keep driving no matter what the car hits and in this mixture of inertia and explosion, entropy and violence Lloyd’s character unites a particular *Amerikanismus* in his character, milieu and the very structure of his films: “But when not only the scenes, which are packed with the most surprising incidents, but also from himself come the attraction of the unusual, this is because Harold Lloyd is the purest embodiment of the type of the modern American. Lloyd appears in [*Dr. Jack*] as if driven by a

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<sup>24</sup> *Film-Kurier* (11/1927).

<sup>25</sup> *Berlin Lokal Anzeiger* (1925).

<sup>26</sup> *Reichsfilmblatt* 45 (1924).

motor.”<sup>27</sup> The logic implicit in this and so many other Lloyd-centered articles is curious, but revealing: there is a necessary link between the gag-driven structure of the films and the body of the “modern American” which is not so much a human corpus as a Ford-designed engine. This was indeed fitting since the automobile so often motors these films’ events while also providing the perfect metaphor for an American “ethos” or “mentality” of inexhaustible drive, ambition and motivation. With this analogy, German critics joined their American colleagues who likewise saw the automobile as the very image of gag-driven narrative—here is one critic on *Why Worry?* (1923): “Another one of the special bodies built on a Harold Lloyd chassis. Same old engine, same excellent tires, and it speeds along like any good car should.”<sup>28</sup>

Unlike Keaton’s machine gags, Lloyd’s own agency never fully disappears from his most energetic and devilish gags—his ego is not only in full evidence but becomes more pronounced through the dangers it encounters. According to Kurt Pinthus, these “obstacles” were “essential” to a “new feeling” of combined “terror and gaiety [*Grauen und Lustigkeit*]” in a film like *Safety Last* not to mention Lloyd’s “defense of dumb cleverness against the people and fixtures of the metropolis. He remains the victor because he defeats the city with its own means, as he completely uncovers them and by doing so uncovers their insubstantiality.”<sup>29</sup> Pinthus would claim that this thrilling victory over the “reality” and “meaning” of the modern world “is unspeakably beneficial for nerves, mind and brain.” Yet just because Lloyd privileged such gags over narrative does not mean that these gags have purely an anarchic relationship to principles of bourgeois order or lawful behavior. As Karen Beckman has argued apropos of Lloyd’s car gags, “The automobile in these films works against those critical paradigms that view all narrative as

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<sup>27</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 911 (1924).

<sup>28</sup> *The Film Daily* (2/2/24) quoted in Adam Reilly, *Harold Lloyd: The King of Daredevil Comedy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1977), p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> Kurt Pinthus, “Ausgerechnet Wolkenkratzer,” *Das Tage-Buch*.

politically regressive and all disruption as necessarily radical...”<sup>30</sup> Aside from Beckman’s important point that car gags can aid the movement of plot as much as hinder it, there is a larger issue at stake here: It is precisely because they so often operate behind the back of narrative, on that level of the subliminal or psychotechnical, that gags could be placed in the service of broader ideologies and agendas. This is ultimately how and why Lloyd’s Weimar critics could show such little interest in plot, such great love for gag, and nonetheless see in the latter a very specific ideology of American capitalism. Lloyd’s films moved like the cars that were their thematic obsession, with stops and starts, thrills and bellyaches, and thus they were the perfect entertainment for those German-imagined Americans driving in their Model Ts, moving from country to city, exhausted from looking for a dollar and in need of a bit distraction in the cinema: “The little rural town lives off farmers, who come hurrying many kilometers on their Fords to enjoy the ‘big city air’ [‘Großstadtluft’] just once. But before the car, and with it the beautiful country roads in America, became popular, everything but prosperity ruled in such settlements. No wonder that their young generation pushed out in the populated cities, in which it was easier to get a dollar and if not that, still moderate amusement.”<sup>31</sup> Like the cars they drove, these “tired business men” needed a quick rest and a bit more gas before they earned the next dollar and what better “amusement” than Lloyd’s films, which staged an optimism of will perfectly fitting the concerns of this upwardly mobile urban earner.

*Speedy* (1928), Lloyd’s final silent feature, was in many ways the culmination of this “average” American. It is also, in its plot and sensationalism, a perfect summation of Lloyd’s silent comedy, released before both the standardization of sound as well as the Great Depression,

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<sup>30</sup> Karen Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 62-3. This runs against the analysis of Tom Gunning in his “Mechanisms of Laughter,” *Slapstick Comedy*, p. 148.

<sup>31</sup> *Film Magazin* (1926).

the latter nullifying much of the relevance and contemporaneity of the character's optimistic pluck. Directly acknowledging Lloyd's nickname throughout the twenties, the film's title hints at a basic tempo in plot and gag: Speedy is a young New Yorker on the go, working odd jobs as as soda jerk and taxi driver in an energetic, if ever distracted way. The primary distraction is provided by the New York Yankees: in an early gag, he updates his fellow restaurant employees about a game by writing the box score with donuts and half-eaten pretzels. After quickly realizing that he will not be able to stay on with this job after a delivery snafu, Lloyd immediately quits in the most care-free manner, transforming himself into a taxi driver. After a series of hijinks involving many disastrous fares, he picks up slugger Babe Ruth (playing himself) only to provoke in Speedy both awe and comically distracted driving. Filmed on location in New York City, *Speedy*'s plot is very loosely organized around Lloyd's protecting his future father-in-law's horse-drawn carriage from being put out of business by greedy businessmen intent on building a modern streetcar. Yet the film is ultimately powered not by this rather tame story, but by several comic set-pieces: first, Lloyd's odd jobbing, second, leisure time with his fiance at Coney Island's Lunapark and finally, his organized resistance to the film's villains (a street brawl involving Civil War vets and various ethnic stereotypes plus an inevitable race against the clock). While the film bears all the sentimental elements one might expect from Lloyd—a loving fiance, expectation of bourgeois security not to mention the film's happy ending—it is important to emphasize that the film restrains from sentimentalizing either the antiquated business of the carriage against the rising tide of urbanization or the business's neighborhoodly semi-rural milieu (imported from the more explicitly rural settings of many other Lloyd pics). The film does not end with the old-fashioned business saved, but rather with Speedy negotiating for his father-in-law an exorbitant pay-out from the film's villains, who will still get

to build their street car and undoubtedly transform the neighborhood and displace its elderly, ethnic inhabitants. Speedy's get-rich-quick scheme here is not entirely above board, as he engineers the deal with his father-in-law completely unaware. Out with the old, in with the new the film seems to say, with Speedy's crafty, high tempo negotiation of this very real New York City—its busy streets and amusements park rides fundamentally identical in shock and sensation—the motor of a comic saga of upward mobility. While Lloyd has been hailed by critics like Walter Kerr as the very emblem of the “virtuous American,” he might better be called the cunning American, one who consistently resorts to bribery, cheating and deception to get ahead, his good-natured smile and horn-rimmed glance smoothing over lapses in morality. From the perspective of so many Weimar critics, the virtues of the modern or normal American were nothing more than a flexibility with regard to virtue itself, a quick-witted pragmatism that knew how to bend, alter or ignore the rules for the sake of personal or more often professional advancement. Even with Lloyd's earliest shorts, when he was still only “Er,” this flexibility was already discerned: “The mathematical manner of the American business man, for whom every human is only an entry in his calculus, here became, in some measure, an artistic method. Coldly, uninvolved this comedian looks around at the swarming, crawling, racing, snarling, encircling world of people somewhat like gold-fish who cavort in an aquarium.”<sup>32</sup>

As with his other features, the German press celebrated *Speedy*—given the rather stupid name *Kampf um die Pferdebahn* [Fight for the Horse-Drawn Carriage]—as well as the many accompanying attractions and amusements at its big city premieres. One critic, however, was not uniformly positive. Siegfried Kracauer would characterize the film as a “big business [Großunternehmen] of incidents and tempo,” going on to say that it was “too bad that the many

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<sup>32</sup> *Die Filmwoche* 17 (1924).

funny tricks harm themselves through their abundance. Too much Lunapark, too much clobbering [Keilerei].”<sup>33</sup> This dismissal of the Lunapark was not a surprise given Kracauer’s critique of Berlin’s own imitative version of the Brooklyn landmark, built in 1904, where “the masses” visited a “painted New York,” a “metropolitan illusion” that offered Berliners a reprieve that was simultaneously a reinforcement: “The workers, common people and employees who are quashed by the city on weekdays, now surmount by air a New York that towers above Berlin.”<sup>34</sup> The ride, like that of Lloyd’s film, is thrilling but all too brief, a false redemption from urban life when they “are no longer workers, common people, and employees. They are people who exist in the moment...”<sup>35</sup> Against the simulacral nature of the rollercoaster and its recuperative thrills, Kracauer preferred the film’s more documentary-like images of a bustling New York City, stating “the excellent shots of New York street life touch sympathetically above all.” Kracauer’s preference for slapstick’s montage of contemporary, Americanized life is as well-known as his dismissal of that life’s more superficial, ornamental qualities, yet perhaps the most intriguing element of his review—the only one written explicitly on Lloyd—is his characterization of the glasses character: “Harold Lloyd, the model and simultaneously the optimistic caricature of the vital, young employees, sweeps through [the film] to the happy ending robustly, impudently and innocently.”<sup>36</sup> The review points to an important and developing constellation of concepts and phenomena. Only a year after *Speedy*’s release, Kracauer would begin publishing parts of a forthcoming study, *Die Angestellten*, a groundbreaking “mosaic” and “construction” of the reality of a new class of young, urban and salaried employees.<sup>37</sup> Celebrated at the time by

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<sup>33</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Kleine Schriften zum Film 1928-1931*, pp. 297-8.

<sup>34</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Roller Coaster,” translated by Levin, *Qui Parle* 5:2 (Spring/Summer 1992), pp. 58-60.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Kracauer, *Kleine Schriften zum Film 1928-1931*, p. 297.

<sup>37</sup> Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, translated by Hoare (New York: Verso, 1998). “A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all

progressive intellectuals and journalists as an all too timely dissection of the opinions, cultures and identities of this pseudo-class, Kracauer's study has more recently been upheld by scholars as an innovative mode of impressionistic yet sociologically precise miniature as well as a prescient understanding of both the distractions of an American-coined culture industry as well as the political dynamics of a group soon allied with National Socialism.<sup>38</sup>

Kracauer's book is only one entry in a long list of important German-written studies published between 1910 and 1933 devoted to this dynamic yet slippery group, which grew out of an increasingly service-based, consumerist and Americanized capitalism. Neither petit-bourgeois nor proletarian in their values or aspirations, the *Angestellten* earned their often scant income neither in traditional middle class professions nor within the increasingly managed factories of the working class. "Spiritually homeless" in Kracauer's Lukács-inspired words, they worked in government bureaucracies and at department store counters, as office typists and bank tellers. With shorter working hours than their contemporaries on the factory floor (plus a yearly salary) they sought shelter in the superficial world of the metropolis, constructing their fluid, fashionable identities with the surface armature of commodities taught to them by advertisements, illustrated newspapers and the movies. Although Emil Lederer would write on this class as early as 1912, the stabilization of the German economy in 1924, aided in large part by American assistance under the Dawes plan, would bring a veritable boom in white collar employment and psychotechnical training and with that an intense sociological interest among writers like

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eternity a hundred views of the factory. Reality is a construction. Certainly life must be observed for it to appear. Yet it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather, it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning. Reportage photographs life; such a mosaic would be its image" (32).

<sup>38</sup> For two complimentary discussions of Kracauer's study see Axel Eggebrecht, "Vom Inventar des Kleinbürgers," *Die Weltbühne* 26 (6/24/1930) and M.M. Gehrke, "Romanze vom Stehkragenproleten," *Die Weltbühne* 48 (11/29/1932).

Lederer, Kracauer, Erich Fromm and Hans Speier.<sup>39</sup> There were political and economic stakes too, with the *Angestellten* increasingly viewed as the means to ends both commercial and political for parties, unions and businesses of all kinds. Adamantly resistant to the class politics of the proletariat yet suspicious of the ossified traditions of both the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, this new class was always on the move, usually upward with hopes for material stability and luxury, seeking “prestige” in the newest fashions and trends. In Sabine Hake’s words, “Afraid of downward mobility, the majority of employees believed in modern (and decidedly American) values such as self-reliance, self-determination, and self-fashioning, which made them resistant to the collective experiences forged in labor struggles and class solidarity. Young, educated, liberal, and cosmopolitan, they embraced Weimar mass culture and consumer culture with a vengeance and resroldcd to the consequences of modernization with a mixture of enthusiasm, pragmatism, and quiet resignation.”<sup>40</sup>

Hake’s parenthetical—“decidedly American”—serves as an important reminder for understanding Weimar Germany’s encounter with *Amerikanismus* and helps explain the particular understanding of Harold Lloyd and his comedy. Although much has been said and written about the intense German debates on the principles of Taylorism in the teens and Fordism in the twenties, much less has been written about the “decidedly American” ideology of upward mobility, consumerist leisure and amoral cynicism driving so much of the behavior and culture of the *Angestellten*. While Henry Ford’s autobiography was a massive success in

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<sup>39</sup> See Hans Speier, *German White-Collar Workers and the Rise of Hitler* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Emil Lederer, *State of the Masses: The Threat of the Classless Society* (New York: Norton, 1940); Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study*; Jürgen Kocka, “Marxist Social Analysis and the Problem of White-Collar Employees,” *State, Culture, and Society* 1:2 (Winter, 1985), pp. 137-151; Jose Brunner, “Looking into the Hearts of Workers, or: How Erich Fromm Turned Critical Theory into Empirical Research,” *Political Psychology* 15:4 (December 1994), pp. 631-654.

<sup>40</sup> Sabine Hake, *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 69.



Germany (200,000 copies sold), provoking intense debates across the political spectrum about new modes of labor and economic efficiency, it is Ford's own story that was perhaps most appealing to this new segment of the population. As Mary Nolan has argued, many "may have been fascinated by how unEuropean and untraditional Ford was. Here was a modern hero whose reputation and fortune were gained through victorious battles on the field of production and sales."<sup>41</sup> Beyond debates about the assembly line, there were in such stories a fantasy, for some, of success achieved through purely modern means and for others a nightmare of the dangers of a purely calculative *Weltanschauung* unmoored from tradition, morality or taste. In the hugely influential *Decline of the West* Oswald Spengler warned of "the fitness-moral which is the beacon of American business men" while others like publisher Rudolf Kayser praised *Amerikanismus* as "a method of the concrete and of energy, [completely] attuned to spiritual and material reality," its (masculine) manifestation "beardless with a sharp profile, a resolute look in the eyes, and a steely, thin body."<sup>42</sup> Adolf Halfeld wrote of the *Angestellten* of New York in a way that seems directly inspired by the "model" of Harold Lloyd: "[The little man] is in the position to exchange ... a bowler hat for a straw hat and to travel with his girl [in English] as a true gentleman in a car."<sup>43</sup> Halfeld, who published an entire monograph critiquing *Amerikanismus*, elsewhere characterized this "law" as a "business idealism," its overriding question, "how can I get rich the quickest?"<sup>44</sup> While some feared this calculative, materialist reduction of life and culture into the ends and means of dollars and cents, others detected in the

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Perspectives of World-History*, translated by Atkinson (London: George Allen, 1928), p. 309; Rudolf Kayser, "Amerikanismus," *Vossische Zeitung* 458 (9/1925), reprinted in *The Weimar Sourcebook*, p. 395.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Helmut Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924-1932*, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> See Adolf Halfeld, "Amerika und die Neue Sachlichkeit," *Der Diederichs-Löwe* 2 4 (1928), reprinted in *The Weimar Sourcebook*, p. 407-408. See also Halfeld, *Amerika und die Amerikanern*.

“Zivilization” of *Amerikanismus* a distinctly modern, distinctly democratic *Lebensphilosophie*, one unburdened by the heritage of the German past and its *Bildungskultur*. For avant-garde critic Adolf Behne, this well-known distinction between American *Zivilisation* and German *Kultur* was the difference between “dictatorship” and a “simpler, plainer more modest and hopeful” democracy “constructed on the hearts and senses of the masses.”<sup>45</sup> And what kind of art best lent itself to this construction? For Behne it was the cinema, with Thomas Edison hailed as “the new Gutenberg” and American slapstick praised as the genre most in tune with the Germany’s masses of Americanizing employees.

It is worth taking Behne’s claim about cinema’s sensorial and emotional proximity to the new masses seriously, especially with regard to the sensational mixture of sped up tempo, cognitive distraction and energetic acrobatics at work in Lloyd’s films, hailed as “the best relaxation for the tired business man.” What was so relaxing about Lloyd’s character and his adventures? More importantly, why was it this particular audience that responded so well to it? The first answer to this question is obvious—Lloyd’s character was, in attitude, image and outlook, the very embodiment of the optimistic, class-climbing American, offering a point of identification for America-obsessed employees who found themselves constantly subject to the fickle whims of Weimar’s rollercoaster economy and distracting mass culture, designed to appeal specifically to their *Neue Sachlichkeit* tastes and scant pocketbooks. The stop and start of Lloyd’s films, their reduction of plot into a “chain” of increasingly death-defying gags, was matched in energy and ambition by Lloyd’s stop-and-start body, which proved the glasses character’s “will power” and justified his optimism for a happy and, more importantly, lucrative end. Endless energy and enthusiasm could only be proved against inhibition, distraction and

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<sup>45</sup> Adolf Behne, “Die Stellung des Publikums zur modernen deutschen Literatur” *Die Weltbühne* 20 ( 5/18/1926).

endless obstacle, the greater the force—the resistances of a woman, an office’s hierarchy of bosses, the fickle motor of a car or the gravity imposed by skyscraper—the greater the the payoff when Lloyd eventually came through, proving to himself and his audiences an inexhaustible energy of ego and laboring body united. Kayser’s understanding of energy clearly recalls the celebration of the “motorisch” Lloyd, reflecting a well-known conception of labor aimed at reducing entropy or exhaustion for the sake of a maximally efficient corpus, a “human motor” that would, as Anson Rabinbach has argued, overcome mental or physical wear and tear.<sup>46</sup> In twenties Germany, that motor would be increasingly evaluated according to the standards of psychotechnics, which would measure the amount of energy utilized or wasted in various professional tasks, the task of such “aptitude tests,” in Kracauer’s words, “study[ing] [the employee] physiognomically and graphologically.”<sup>47</sup> With Lloyd, reducing entropy implied not merely reducing physical inefficiencies, but also cutting corners, ignoring rules and finding the quickest path to a goal, natural or social conventions forgotten. Lloyd eschewed the humanist critique of Chaplin’s man-trapped-in-the-machine as well as the avant-garde anti-humanism of Keaton’s marionette, linking through his buoyant ego and even more buoyant body the managed energy of Fordism with the ideology at stake in Ford’s personal story. Indeed, Ford counted himself a fan of Lloyd’s comedy, going so far as to consider using the short *Get Out and Get Under* (1920) to sell his cars.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Here is Rabinbach, recalling Kracauer, describing the popularity of psychotechnics in Germany in the mid-twenties: “psychotechnical aptitude testing became a virtual craze in the immediate postwar period. Two distinct trends of pre-World War I academic psychology fused in the psychotechnical movement: the testing of the capacities of the human motor-fatigue, trainability, and performance (via Kraepelin and Münsterberg)- and William Stern’s “differential psychology,” the classification of occupational aptitudes and inclinations” (278).

<sup>47</sup> *The Salaried Masses*, p. 35-36.

<sup>48</sup> Beckman, p. 62.

Paradoxically, it was precisely because German white collar audiences lacked such energy that Lloyd offered such a clear wish fulfillment, why the tempo of both body, setting and montage, provoked such overwhelming and highly physical laughter. In her reading of *Safety Last*, Merrill Schleier has recently argued that the film was, in its production, narrative and advertising, an ironic allegory of capitalist success, with “Harold the hero and Lloyd the actor and publicist both subscribed to the individualist credo that exhorted men to create themselves, through ingenuity and instrumental action, one of the prevailing precepts of capitalist discourses on success, which in turn supported the same regime he meant to subvert.”<sup>49</sup> Although Schleier restricts her reading to the American context—linking the film to larger discourses in twenties literature, sociology and sciences of work as well as the popularity of daredevil-ism—she turns to none other than Siegfried Kracauer to explain the subversive appeal of slapstick, highlighting Kracauer’s already noted dislike of the ornamental spectacle of American mass culture.

Expanding on Schleier’s point, the heroic struggle between entropic distraction and willful energy at stake in a film like *Safety Last* operated directly on the bodies and minds of audiences, its mixture of thrill and pratfall, pause and shock, a jolt to its already nervous audience. Less driven by the happy ending experienced by the glasses character, German audiences were powered more by the physicality of Lloyd’s body, by the energy of his comic acrobatics and the optimism of his bifocaled smile. Jumpstarting this audience’s overtested bodies, Lloyd’s cinema directly appealed in both ideology and affect to an Americanized audience well disposed for the “laugh effects” of its “model” and “optimistic caricature.” Turning now to the career of another comic *Angestellte*, Curt Bois, we will see how this caricature could be both followed and re-functioned, achieving like Kracauer’s study far more

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<sup>49</sup> Merrill Schleier, *Skyscraper Cinema*, p. 4.

critical ends. Yet before Bois, one must understand how Lloyd's success in Germany, so representative of an encroaching yet bewitching American capitalism, provoked within the German film world a crisis about its own ability to compete with Hollywood and its most inimitable genre, slapstick. The solution for Trianon Films and its half-American head, David Schratter, lay in the maxim: "If you can't beat them, hire them."

### III. Bud Pollard, David Schratter and the Quest for German Slapstick

"Yes, we have a dream of a magnificent synthesis: European art united with American technique [Technik]." Bela Balazs.

Bud Pollard died laughing. Watching a comedian perform at a nightclub in Culver City in 1952 he got a heart attack post-punch-line, dying on the spot. Obituaries in local and trade papers offered only a scant biography. Dead at the age of 65, Pollard's primary achievement was having been the first president of the Screen Director's Guild, but was otherwise said to have "spent 42 years in the pic industry as actor, writer, film editor and director."<sup>50</sup> Friends present during his death explained that Pollard began working in the film industry at the age of fifteen, starting out as an actor in "the silent days."<sup>51</sup> Beyond these obituaries, Pollard's American career reveals little about those days, with his first recorded credits starting in the late twenties as a director and producer of B-films on the east coast. An independent studio run out of New Jersey, Pollard's Astor Pictures was best known for an early version of *Alice in Wonderland* (1931), but earned most of its income from re-released studio flicks, so-called "race films" featuring jazz musicians, Italian- and Yiddish-language films for New York's immigrant audiences and, most notoriously, exploitation films. Describing Pollard's work at Astor, Kyle Westphal—the only writer to have said anything about Pollard at all—gives a good sense of the director's character: "Pollard's

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<sup>50</sup> *Variety* (2/24/52).

<sup>51</sup> *Los Angeles Times* (12/18/1952).

long, not-nearly-fully-understood career suggests multiple, often simultaneous, dimensions of hucksterism...”<sup>52</sup>

The history of Astor’s most tawdry exploitation film—the white slavery-centered *Girls for Sale* (1930)—points one in the direction of Pollard’s murky German career. Pollard had in fact already made *Girls for Sale*, only it was in Germany in 1927, under the title *Das Frauenhaus von Rio*, an adaptation of a novel by Norbert Jacques, author of the *Mabuse* novels upon which Lang’s films were based. Pollard’s co-director was Hans Steinhoff, who that same year helmed the landmark Jewish comedy, *Familienstag im Haus Prellstein* (1927), but would go on in 1933 to direct one of the first explicitly National Socialist films, *Hitlerjunge Quex*. How Pollard came to direct *Frauenhaus* is unknown, as are the larger questions of how he came to Berlin, met David Schratter or signed a contract to make American slapstick films featuring a contest-winning “German Harold Lloyd.” Certainly his “hucksterism” had something to do with it as even in his first meeting with the German press, he put several whoppers over on his gullible Berlin audience. Promising a success in German studios on par with “the images which he directed in America with the Original-Chaplin and the authentic Harold Lloyd,” Pollard knew that these reporters could never know that these were lies.<sup>53</sup> Even with his name, very possibly a fabrication, Pollard was on the make, using it to suggest that he “came from an acting dynasty,” presumably the Australian vaudeville troupe, Pollard’s Lilliputians.

The only scholar to have mentioned Pollard’s German career, Thomas Saunders, has given an overview of the history of Trianon, which was representative in its financial ambitions and failures of so many small German firms angling to compete with outfits like UFA,

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<sup>52</sup> Kyle Westphal, “Excavating *Beware*,” (4/15/2011), [www.northwestchicagofilmsociety.org/2011/04/15/excavating-beware-2](http://www.northwestchicagofilmsociety.org/2011/04/15/excavating-beware-2).

<sup>53</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 908 (1924).

specifically between the tail end of the inflations years (1921-1922) and the era of stabilization in the mid-twenties.<sup>54</sup> Having worked as an importer of German goods in the United States, David Schratter felt himself uniquely situated to improve Trianon's financial prospects, engaging in a variety of tactics in both production and distribution to make his firm profitable in Germany as well as on the international market, in particular, in France, England and the United States. Schratter himself comes across as something of a Lloyd-like figure, in Saunders' words, "energetic entrepreneur who quickly became knowledgeable about the business of film," filled with an "unbroken optimism" that one associates with his generation's hopes of America-inspired success.<sup>55</sup> Saunders even goes so far to suggest that Schratter's canny publicity and marketing, aimed at the "business world," were no different from "the relationship between images projected on the screen and the audience," thus indicating a publicity savvy that merged cinematic spectacle with business success, a combination already detected in Lloyd's unified persona on and off screen.<sup>56</sup> For Schratter, as for the easily embarrassed Lloyd, image was everything, which explains his ceaseless efforts at proving Trianon as a rising force in German film production and distribution, contracting internationally successful directors (Swedish Moritz Stiller and Italian Gennaro Righelli) and stars (Harry Liedtke, suave veteran of Lubitsch's early comedies, and a fledgling Greta Garbo) while establishing a distribution point in London, a sales office in Paris and American contracts with the Selznick Film Corporation in New York. As Saunders has shown elsewhere, this final goal—breaking into the American box office—was a long cherished dream of the German film industry, especially since the global artistic and

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Saunders, "Film and finance in Weimar Germany: the rise and fall of David Schratter's Trianon-Film, 1923–1925," *Film History* 23:1 (January 2011). Saunders discusses the contest though is not clear whether Bud Pollard is *the* Bud Pollard or instead Snub Pollard.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

financial achievements of Wiene's *Caligari* and Lubitsch's *Madame Dubarry*.<sup>57</sup> Yet it was a dream that never actualized since the stabilization of the German economy carried the benefit of spurring film production while also ensuring American interest in exporting its films to a country that could finally afford to support their exhibition. More broadly, American film capital infiltrated the German market at a number of levels: hiring away a mass of German film talent, loaning cash to many German film companies, securing exhibition contracts for mutual distribution of each nation's films, starting their own production companies on German soil and flooding the market with short films, free from the quotas that otherwise required parity in American feature film release. Most successful among these shorts were, not surprisingly, the many great slapstick one- and two-reelers made in the teens and twenties, but released in Germany willy-nilly throughout the decade. The culmination of this consistently feared "Americanization" was the notorious "Parufamet" agreement reached at the end of 1925 between Paramount, MGM and a cash-strapped UFA, which had overstretched its coffers on a series of ventures. One of the many results of Parufamet was that UFA's advertising, distribution and exhibition network, the largest of its kind in Germany, were immediately required to run fifty American features a year. Among these films were Lloyd's *The Freshman* and *For Heaven's Sake*. Indeed, Lloyd's films were at the heart of debates about this Americanization: an article from *Die Lichtbild-Bühne* entitled "The Americans are a business!" complained that *Girl Shy*, "a notorious world-success and one of the most amusing films ever shown on screen," could not be obtained for German distribution "without other Harold Lloyd productions, which were not good

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany*. See also Saunders, "'Wer nimmt die Komik ernst?' Das Filmlustspiel nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg," *Spaß beiseite, Film ab: Jüdischer Humor und verdrängendes Lachen in der Filmkomödie bis 1945*, ed. Bock et al (Hamburg: Cinegraph/text + kritik, 2006), pp. 72-84.



enough for the price demanded.”<sup>58</sup> Suffice to say that given this success in both dollars and audience amusement, German distributors and exhibitors no longer wanted to be excluded from Lloyd’s adventures, paying such fees with a mixture of excitement, resentment and envy, especially given German cinema’s difficulties in producing successful comedy stars or series.

A 1926 article in *Die Filmwoche* would crystallize the many differences between German and American film comedy. While miming Chaplin is “almost child’s play”—contests for imitating the Tramp were conducted in Germany as they were all over the world—“Harold Lloyd is difficult to hit because he works without a mask.”<sup>59</sup> Although “imitations can have a certain success,” the author dreams of a collaboration between a director and producer seeking a “new type” for German slapstick, one who might achieve success beyond Germany, with the latter offering the following deal to the former: “I will give you four weeks’ time to make me a good suggestion for a new German slapstick type [Grotesktyp]. I don’t expect a manuscript from you, but I expect that you bring me an actor who acts funny and strange, that he also provokes laughter in a slapstick comedy film. I, the producer, have realized that we need only a genial person, who forms a new human type out of nothing...”<sup>60</sup> What were the author’s opinions of previous efforts at creating such a “type”? Too often falling under the category of “imitation” he is especially hard on one effort to replicate the car comedy of Lloyd: “I was excited when Harold Lloyd tried to push a baby carriage through a swarm of cars, dancing forwards and backwards and feigning an unbelievable cold-bloodedness. But I was terribly bored when a small German

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<sup>58</sup> *Die Lichtbildbühne* 22 (1925).

<sup>59</sup> Focus, “Grotesken,” *Die Filmwoche* 26 (1926).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

firm imitated this trick with absolute precision and then appeared proud to have produced an ‘American’ film.”<sup>61</sup>

While it is impossible to know for certain which film is being referred to here, the emphasis on a “small German firm,” an imitation of Lloyd and an appeal to Americanization leads one to suspect that it is none other than Bud Pollard and David Schratter’s attempt to create a German slapstick type two years prior. Yet as the article intimates, this effort was to fail completely. Of a projected ten part series of shorts, only three of these films were made yet the quality was deemed so poor that they were never released, having cost Trianon roughly 100,000 Marks. Trianon itself would not survive much longer, consumed by debts, lawsuits and various failed projects, all of which combined to sink Schratter’s firm in a few years time. Almost an anticipatory parody of the wished for director and producer from *Die Filmwoche* article, Schratter requested a “German slapstick type” while Pollard promised that American method of disregarding script in favor of improvising out of the “the humorous situations on the spot.” This hypothetical conversation undoubtedly took place, both during that high tea with Berlin’s press and in private discussion, and the goal of these conversations was identical: developing a German slapstick star combining American comic know-how and German talent with the explicit intention of launching it on screens throughout the world, secured by Trianon’s ambitious if fragile distribution network. Starting with shorts rather than features, Trianon would emulate the American construction of similar types in the teens, when comic actors experimented with various looks, settings and styles before finding the figure best suited for their talent and the audience’s enjoyment. Lloyd himself had already gone through two such types (Willie Work and Lonesome Luke) before discovering the glasses character and the form of the short no doubt

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

indicated, for Trianon, a perfect means for developing this kind of character while also pedagogically instilling the tempos and methods of slapstick production.

The only article to cover the production of the Trianon slapstick shorts further confirms that *Filmwoche*'s "American film" was none other than the Trianon series.<sup>62</sup> Three months after his initial meeting with the German press, Pollard invited reporters to a film shoot in the heart of Berlin, a Friedrichstadt filled with "sun and traffic," where "the people push and chug, street car drivers grumble, chauffeurs curse."<sup>63</sup> Yet this typical metropolitan tumult comes quickly to a close because of the appearance of something truly new and unexpected—an American slapstick director bringing a bit of Harold Lloyd's comedy to German streets and actors. Berliners are "powerless against their most basic characteristic: curiosity. Curiosity? What for? For a banana cart. [Ausgerechnet] bananas."<sup>64</sup> This "banana wagon," part of a gag Pollard sets up for his "German Harold Lloyd," carries one of the most commonly used tools in slapstick's comedy arsenal. It seems a pale imitation of Lloyd's oft-used stunt of placing dilapidated forms of transit (horse cart, ancient automobile, wagon) amidst the speedy traffic of Ford's newest cars. Hinting at Pollard's heavy weight—his status as a "'weighty' personality"—the author calls his approach with his actors "pedagogic," laughing as he watches them "exercise over scaffolds and roofs like climbing monkeys" in a way that directly recalls *Safety Last*, "or at least 'Safety Almost Last ['Beinahe Ausgerechnet Wolkenkratzer']".<sup>65</sup> After watching the American at work, this reporter reminds the director of their first meeting, "where Pollard promised us to be as American in Berlin as in Hollywood and where one was doubtful. Maybe even thought it a trick [Bluff]....

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<sup>62</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 919 (9/21/1924).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Whether the success of Harold Bois will be as successful as that of Harold Lloyd, the public will decide.”<sup>66</sup>

Before I turn to this mysteriously hybrid figure of “Harold Bois” it is worth dwelling on this singular instance of American collaboration for the production of German slapstick. That Pollard’s efforts amounted to little more than money spent and ambition wasted should not discourage further questions about the seeming failure for Weimar cinema to produce marketable, specifically slapstick comedians. We know, in part, how and why Lloyd resonated among his German audiences. The question to now answer is why Curt Bois was, for Pollard and Schratter, the perfect choice for embodying Lloyd while simultaneously offering his own original contribution to that desperate search for Germany’s “new slapstick type.” As with Lloyd, Bois’s comic persona would appeal precisely to one category of this “new type of human”: Weimar’s *Angestellten*, who would along with the German economy exponentially grow in ambition and importance the very year in which Pollard’s ill-fated “Harold Bois” project was announced, filmed and, finally, shelved.

#### **IV. A Modern Schlemihl...**

*“The phone rang: ‘Here’s Mr. Agent so and so, please, Mr. Bois, come tomorrow afternoon to the [Hotel] Adlon, it concerns a very big film offer, filming here, Paris, London and Hollywood, a role like you have never played, salary is not an issue!!!’ And I appear at the appointed time, shaking like a novice when he goes to his first engagement, full of God, of film, of money, of the role; and there is [my sister] in the spot where the great American agent had promised to sit. And as if it were nothing, we talk quietly over something or other, don’t pursue the affair, drink tea and when it’s done, she goes in her theater and I go in mine.”* Curt Bois.

While Bud Pollard was too overweight to directly demonstrate the ins and outs of slapstick, Curt Bois was more than up to the task and this is made clear in *Der Kinematograph*’s coverage of the Americanized film shoot, where Bois, along with his female co-star Uschi Elleot, turns the urban setting into a jungle gym, a space of work and traffic into a space of frenetic fun.

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Bois was already known to be the rigged winner of Trianon's contest and the reference to this "young Berliner comedian" suggests his basic qualities: youthful energy, a cosmopolitan yet sarcastic temperament for which his *Heimatstadt* was famous and his status as a comic actor, a category that seems, given the overwhelming journalistic kvetching provoked by American slapstick, almost oxymoronic. Indeed, seven years later, on the heels of his first truly starring role in a film comedy, *Der Schlemihl*, a critic would call Bois the "most prominent German stage comedian."<sup>67</sup>

Bois offered throughout his career a new comic type defined by what Kracauer called the employee's "morally pink complexion" and which he would explicitly relate to types performed by Bois's German-Jewish and often androgynous peer, Reinhold Schünzel.<sup>68</sup> It is this that best explains why his success became so tied to Lloyd, who was, in his acrobatics, pragmatism and biography, the very model for reflecting this "complexion." In his study Kracauer quotes an "official in a Berlin job centre" explaining how and why this "nice and friendly" face is so privileged: "People who appear nice—and nice manners are naturally part of the appearance—are taken on even if their references are poor. The official says: 'We have to do things the same way as the Americans do. The man must have a friendly face.'" As with "window displays", "illustrated newspapers" and, Kracauer's primary interest, the cinema, it is the surface of an "appearance" that counts most. "Morally pink" means above all morally flexible, that capacity, so well demonstrated by Lloyd, to seem kind, friendly and helpful, while simultaneously being willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead, in personal realms as well as those professional. Curt

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<sup>67</sup> Uncited review (8/15/1931)

<sup>68</sup> Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, p. 38. In one of the few essays to examine German attempts at slapstick, Thomas Elsaesser focuses on Schünzel's career and especially his film *Hallo Caesar!* Elsaesser links Schünzel's comic performance to the culture of the *Angestellten* though misses the important reference in Kracauer's text where this link is directly evoked. See Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 296.

Bois was clearly considered by those in the know—on the American side, Pollard and on the German, Schratter—to best be able to embody this complexion, to bring it forth in a way appealing and understandable to his employee peers, the expanding and consumer-focused audience Trianon was hoping to win over. Winning the contest was only the *coupe de grace* of such suggested overlap, bridging, via Trianon’s publicity, the actor and the part in a manner identical to, in Kracauer’s words, Lloyd’s “model and simultaneously optimistic caricature of the vital, young employees.”



**Figure 2: Curt Bois embodying the flummoxed employee.**

That Bois’s turn as a German slapstick star in the vein of this “model” failed should not distract from a larger exploration of his career. By 1924 Bois had already been active on stage and screen for fifteen years, working as child, teenager and adult in respectable theaters, tawdry salons, innovative cabarets, girl-packed revues as well as in supporting and starring roles on screen and radio. Through a combination of cabaret-derived energetics, Jewish humor and contemporary “Sachlichkeit,” Bois offered a satirical “caricature” that both adopted and undercut the fantasmatic optimism of Lloyd, reveling in the salaried masses’ superficial charms and

underlying amoralities. The same economic situation that both encouraged and dammed Trianon was responsible for an explosion of *Angestellten* in 1924: an influx of American capital, a stabilized currency and increasing rationalization across commerce, labor and culture. This last sphere was Kracauer's most oft trod beat as a journalist and his analysis of how spectacles like the dancing Tiller Girls, the vertiginous rollercoaster or the cinema of "shop girls" echoed and reinforced rationalization remains his greatest legacy as a feuilletonist of the era.<sup>69</sup> Kracauer recognized in these attractions a new mode of understanding class dynamics beyond the crude dialectics of Marxist orthodoxy, one that emphasized outward appearance, consumerist tastes and clearly defined psychological types. Yet unlike those peers, Kracauer's *Die Angestellten* is as much a study as it is a kind of satire, one infused, according to Walter Benjamin's review, with a "spirit of irony," "elements of the lively satire that has long since withdrawn from the realm of political caricature."<sup>70</sup> The bite of such satire was likewise pointed out in a review by Ernst Bloch, who describes its basic lesson as this: "Everywhere the same joke (even if enjoyed much more fully at the top), life as 'business': as tedium by day, as escape at night."<sup>71</sup> Curt Bois will not only be cast as the "morally pink" employee; his career will be nothing more than a virtuosic re-telling of this "same joke" in the very night-time sites where *Angestellten* sought this "escape."

To start, it suffices only to describe the specific kinds of roles the diminutive Bois consistently played: *Tanzmeister* in Lubitsch's *Die Austerprinzessin* [The Oyster Princess] (1919) and Michael Curtiz's *Der Goldene Schmetterling* [The Golden Butterfly] (1926), salesman of women's fashions and jewels (in films *Der Jungling aus der Confektion* [The Boy from the

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<sup>69</sup> See the essays collected in Siegfried Kracauer's *The Mass Ornament*.

<sup>70</sup> For Benjamin's review, see Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, p. 109.

<sup>71</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Artificial Centre," (1929) *Heritage of Our Times*, p. 24.

Confektion] (1926), *Der Fürst von Pappenheim* [The Prince of Pappenheim] (1927), *Ein steinreicher Mann* [A Stone-Rich Man] (1932) and *Der Schlemihl*) and drunken bank clerk in Arnolt Bronnen's controversial play *Die Excesse*. Why was Bois so often cast in these white collar roles? First, there was his size, short enough to produce comical contrasts, to suggest a pleasant, non-threatening nature while also evoking someone who might easily be doing something on the sly, out of sight or mind while behind his desk or counter. Important too was his energetic and perpetual motion, his clerk character in the right wing Bronnen's *Excesse* recalling a contemporary essay on "The Bankclerk" by Margot Stark: "The bank clerk has no time to be tired; he is steadfast. In perpetual motion, by sunlight or in nightly dreams, the little two-times-two circles the big two-times-two, onto which he hangs many, many zeros to make them heavier. And should this circling suddenly stop then he has stopped being."<sup>72</sup> Comedy enters precisely when Bois stops such circling, when he moves too fast, offers too much energy, takes the most unlawful, even lazy short-cuts in order to make sure this lack in being is never fully exposed. More important was Bois's talents as a mimic which were often related or favorably compared to the gesticularity of Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd. In interviews, Bois was reported to be no different in person than he was in performance, constantly mimicking Berlin's inhabitants without any discernible effort. Visiting Bois in 1930, Arthur Kahane reports to his readers: "There is a young man named Curt Bois: when you see him for the first time you believe he was picked up directly off the street for the play and improvises on stage his life from the street, from his home, from the society ..."<sup>73</sup> Here we find not only a demonstration of Bois's understanding of how to play grotesque, but also a crucial connection to Kracauer's satirical tone since imitation, the conscious highlighting of a person's appearance as a kind of mask or

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<sup>72</sup> Margot Starke, "Der Bankbeamte," *Der Querschnitt* (1923), re-published in *The Weimar Sourcebook*, p. 183.

<sup>73</sup> See Gerold Ducke, "*Humor kommt aus der Trauer*", p. 245.



performance, has an intrinsically comic effect. In Kracauer's work, Bloch writes, "The masks which the employees put on or allow to be put on them are shown and recognized as such."<sup>74</sup> The same could be said of Bois's mimicry and in this he offers a comic portrayal of the important physiognomic background for employees' required demeanor. Whenever something is standardized or typologized, as it was by the psychotechnically determined habits of offices, bureaucracies and large-scale commercial enterprises, "Speech, clothes, gestures and countenances become assimilated and the result of the process is that very same pleasant appearance, which with the help of photographs can be widely reproduced."<sup>75</sup> While Harold Lloyd's pleasant appearance and salaried occupations were offered up in magazines, cinemas and marquees as ideological and affective support for this assimilation, Bois utilized Lloyd's means to more satirical ends, thus placing his impact and image somewhere between the ironic pessimist Kracauer and artists far more sympathetic to the new youth.

In Erich Kästner's Lloyd-inflected appraisal of Bois, sparked by the Vienna premiere of the latter's most successful stage performance *Charley's Aunt*, there is a wonderful story that reveals the inherent link between the comedian's mimicry and the superficial milieu of Kracauer's "morally pink" *Angestellten*:

During that same Viennese guest performance Bois went, on a beautiful day, to a clothing store on Kärtner Street in order to buy gloves. He had to wait a long time. The store was full of customers. He watched for awhile. Then he attracted customers. He watched for awhile. Then he took off his coat, laid it and his hat on a stool and, without getting noticed, he found himself behind the store's counter. Then he began to ask the waiting customers what they wanted and serviced them, quickly, adroitly, with assiduous speech.... Finally his new colleagues noticed that he belonged not at all behind, but rather before the store's counter; the head of the store recognized him, applauded, everyone there got excited; the young actor again became a customer and was thoroughly happy that the short term change of job succeeded so well.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Artificial Centre," p. 24.

<sup>75</sup> Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, p. 39.

<sup>76</sup> Erich Kästner, *Gemischte Gefühle 2* (Zurich: Atrium, 1991), p. 194.

A gag set piece that one might easily find in *Safety Last*, here Bois earns the applause of the employees he so successfully mimics, a caricature that is easier for him than any other. The reason for such ease is likewise indicated: rather than waiting to be served, Bois shows the initiative of advancing his interests as well as those of the customer, who here are double: both those of the store and those of his own performance. The distinction between service and pleasure does not exist as both exist in spheres commodified and rationalized and those best suited to navigate them are those holding the “arsenal” of what Kästner here calls Bois’s “volatile [sprunghafte] way of thinking, his vigilance and his desire to provoke.” What Bois demonstrated in his fawning press coverage he likewise demonstrated for paying audiences as well as interested parties like Schratter and Pollard. Writing about Bois’ turn as a cross-dressing fashion salesman in 1927’s *Der Fürst von Pappenheim* [*The Prince of Pappenheim*] Kracauer himself would praise Bois in precisely the same terms as his later appraisal of Lloyd in *Speedy*: “Curt Bois shines as a small genius of business, who knows how to put himself right in spicy situations.”<sup>77</sup>

In *Die Angestellten* Kracauer returns to this superficial milieu of the clothing store and makes a surprising connection:

...buyers and sales staff in the clothes trade—and doubtless in luxury shops too—have the understandable inclination to treat themselves to the elegance they constantly purvey, and they also like to idle away their nights for the sake of contact with customers. ‘There exists a close connection’, the deputy explains, ‘between employees in the clothes trade and cabaret performers’. Both indeed have in common the fact that they work directly among the public, whereas technicians fashion their unsociable matter with their backs to the public. Entirely fitting, then, that the millionth visitor to the Haus Vaterland was precisely a buyer from a New York department store.<sup>78</sup>

Not only do the ostentatious salesmen like Bois’s unaristocratic “Prince” have no separation between their laboring and leisuring lives, but the very spaces of their shared existence

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<sup>77</sup> Kracauer, *Kleine Schriften zum Film 1921-1927*, p. 418.

<sup>78</sup> Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, p. 91.

emphasize appearance as the best means for success. Most tellingly, Kracauer relates this continuity between *Konfektion* and *Kabaret* to *Amerikanismus*, with an unspoken irony that “a buyer from a New York department store” would be in Berlin to adopt styles, attitudes and fashions themselves inflected by American tastes. The gender-bending Bois put these on display at the climax of *Der Fürst von Pappenheim*, adopting the most seductive gestures of Weimar’s New Woman, inadvertently earning the interests of a rich, lecherous man. This was a talent learned at the cabaret and suggests, more broadly, a crucial relationship between his career, white-collar employee culture and the musical stages of the cabaret and revue. Bois “knows how to put himself right in spicy situations” only because of a certain corporeal disposition, one that linked the frenetic paces of American jazz (both in music and dance) to the necessary energies of the department store or office building. Only two months after filming Pollard’s shorts, Bois would perform in the very first “Jazz band operette” ever put on in Germany, an American import entitled *Wildwestmädel* [Wild West Girl]. A year later, performing another such operette, *Monsieur Trulala*, theater critic Herbert Ihering would praise Bois as “a dance-comedian of the highest order. When he breaks down the words, the music in steps, in dance poses, when he accompanies, stiffens himself, buckles, turns hims, circles and jumps the development of operetta is signed: Knockabout of the Jazzband-Operette.”<sup>79</sup> One of Berlin’s most astute fans of Chaplin and Keaton, Ihering detected here a merging of American slapstick’s physical violence with the pacing of American jazz. Bois performed for many of the great musical figures of the Weimar stage: Friedrich Hollaneder, Kurt Robitschek, Mischa Spoliansky, Erik Charrell, Rudolf Nelson and others. In Charrell’s girl-laden revue *Von Mund zu Mund* [From Mouth to Mouth] Gershwin and Kern would be added to this list, with Bois playing a comic casanova who owned,

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Ducke’s *Der Humor kommt aus der Trauer*, p. 70.

as usual, a “fashion salon.” According to Ihering’s review, Bois “floats and jumps, climbs and dances, sways and breaks—in syncopes, in rolling melodies.”<sup>80</sup> Bois would perform with Marlene Dietrich in another of Charrell’s revues and the two would record several songs together. Tapping into racializing fears and America-derived fantasies associated with jazz, Bois performed as if every part of his body was moved by the music, employing each limb under the direction of success-oriented social climber. Feuilletonist Alfred Polgar would put it this way: “Curt Bois plays this role with the whole body...He is witty, also without words. A pantomime of the first order, of funny eloquence of limbs, in many surprising angles twistable, grotesque with grace. His mobility has style and musicality, the so-called joker sits not only on his neck but also on the knee and elbow.”<sup>81</sup> Among those who Bois pantomimed was, of course, Harold Lloyd, not simply in auditioning for Pollard, but during stage performances like that of a cabaret in Zurich: “Bois does not ‘act’ in the usual sense, he dances the roll, he places out each sentence in body gags. He is in a class of his own... Curt Bois as Harold Lloyd! Slaps in the face, laughter, mis-steps, exit.”<sup>82</sup>

This connection between the corporeal tempos of slapstick and cabaret performance was intentional. Certainly Bois was influenced by Chaplin and Lloyd, but, even more importantly did some German critics relate the plot-decentered gags of the latter’s films to the disjointed narratives of Berlin’s heady musicals. One critic described the quaking laughter provoked by *Safety Last* and Lloyd’s “acrobatic tricks” at Berlin’s *Mozartsaal*, where “all walls and screens are really bouncing. Precisely so *da capo* as when the blue canopy bed is sung in the Revue

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Ducke, *Der Humor kommt aus der Trauer*, p. 33.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Mast and Zolchow, p. 34.

‘Drunter und drüber’ of the Thalia-Theater.”<sup>83</sup> The psychotechnical jolt offered by Lloyd’s films was itself a concern and form likewise articulated by Bois’s antics at similar revues. As hinted at by Kracauer, the bodily training entailed by Americanized ways of doing business had as its best measure the energetic, pink appearance of helpful, kind and always on the move employees. Cabarets were simultaneously a site of distraction, an extension of the workplace and, in linking these two spaces, modes of entertainment that re-charged their neurasthenic audiences through an ever-changing assault of gags, jokes and songs. Like the French *fin-de-siecle* cabarets that inspired their name there was an inherent relationship between the vitalizing energies of Germany’s first cabarets and the work-related condition of an exhausted, entropic neurasthenia.<sup>84</sup> In the introduction to a landmark collection of cabaret songs, Otto Julius Bierbaum would write in 1900 that “the contemporary citydweller has vaudeville nerves; he seldom has the capacity of following great dramatic continuities, of tuning his senses to the same tone for three hours. He desires diversity-Variete.”<sup>85</sup> Echoing Bierbaum, the founder of Berlin’s first cabaret, Ernst von Wolzogen, would understand the popularity of such forms of entertainment as “a sign of our nervous, precipitate age, which finds no repose for long and prolix entertainments. We are all, each and every one of us, attuned to aphoristic, terse, and catchy titles.”<sup>86</sup> As Peter Jelavich has argued, the German cabaret directly reflected both the need for distractions against the hectic pace of the modern metropolis while also reinforcing or even amping up that pace. Echoing the well-known claims of sociologists like Georg Simmel, Jelavich suggests that the dispersed form of the cabaret, Variete, vaudeville or revue matched or even deliberately echoed the experiences

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<sup>83</sup> *Neue Illustrierte Filmwoche* 21 (1924).

<sup>84</sup> Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema*, especially pp. 1-27.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, p. 23. See also Alan Lareau, *The Wild Stage: Literary Cabarets of the Weimar Republic* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995); Klaus Völker, *Kabarett der Komiker Berlin 1924 bis 1950* (Munich: Text + Kritik, München, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

of the city street, the office desk or department store window. Such spaces privileged both physiognomic dynamism while also requiring a constant attention to the surface of how one looked, making sure that an active, laboring body was also a fashionable, timely one.

Like his “model” Harold Lloyd, Curt Bois’s style resonated both with critics interested in this world as well as audiences most attuned to the depleting commitments and diversions of such spaces. Friedrich Hollaender, whom Bois had befriended already as an adolescent, would describe the “secret of cabaret” and its de-structured pleasures in ways directly reminiscent of Bierbaum and von Wolzogen: “The aphoristic novel, the quickly burned down drama of our days, the two minute song of the time, sweetness of love, the heartbeat of unemployment, the bewilderment of politics, the uniform of cheap enjoyment—everything without the exhaustion of five acts, three volumes, a thousand kilograms of psychology—in the form of a pill permitted to be bitter from time to time.”<sup>87</sup> Traditional narrative structures are literally exhausting, they bore and tire an audience already subject to the stresses of navigating Berlin’s chaotic, fickle labor market. The “heartbeat of unemployment” was perhaps just as frantic as a “hear-beat” of employment, considering not only the incredible instability of the economy, but also the increasing emphasis on young employees, the psychotechnical requirements of testing enforced by firms in Weimar’s middle period and new modes of labor in commercial industries like the department store or bank. While “the hounded metropolitan person, who wants in the evening to turn off all at once, would like to be optically distracted,” the price of such distraction will require precisely no such turning off, will instead requiring a jump starting achieved through

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<sup>87</sup> Friedrich Hollaender, “Cabaret” *Die Weltbühne* (2/2/1932). See also Alan Lareau, “‘Du hast ja eine Träne im Knopfloch’: Friedrich Hollaender and the Kabarett-Chanson,” *Die freche Muse: Literarisches und politisches Kabarett von 1901 bis 1999*, ed. Bauschinger (Tübingen: Francke, 2000).

cabaret's frantic pace and constant movement from sketch to sketch.<sup>88</sup> Hollaender's primary concern, music and song, directly reflected these fears of exhaustion, with titles like "Wie werde ich energisch [How I become energetic]," "Ich mache alles mit den Beinen [I do everything with the legs]," or "Kinder der Zeit [Children of the time]." While the first of these was sung by his idol and teacher, the comic actor Max Adalbert, the latter two were premiered by Bois, with "Kinder" proclaiming absolute disinterest in anything past or future and "Beinen," written by Hollaender, suggesting an inexhaustible, replenishing energy akin to Lloyd's *Dr. Jack*: "Ich kann ihre Peinlichkeit mit meiner / Beinlichkeit vereinen. / Ich mache alles mit den Beinen."<sup>89</sup> While Lloyd offered, as I argued, a similar replenishment, his allegory was far more good-naturedly All-American, lacking the "mockery" characteristic of a Berliner's humor, especially in the rocky context of post-War Germany. As the last stanza of Hollaender's song goes: "Überall ist Krieg und ich mache sowas [Everywhere is war and I do such a thing]." While Berlin cabaret was not the hotbed of political dissent and satirical fury we assume it to be today, biting political elements like this were entirely common. More radical was the very formlessness by which such elements were organized, linked more to the modern rhythms and tempos of jazz and slapstick's knockabout than to the sedate structures of the German *Kunststück*. It is clear now that cabaret returned, after its initial turn of the century debut, in Berlin in part because it had a new audience, Kracauer's *Angestellten*, and few were as in tune with this reflecting this group than Curt Bois. Indeed, Bois was, like Lloyd, seen as an extension of his "sachliche" characters with the critic Paul Cohen-Portheim describing the comic actor: "He expresses today because he

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<sup>88</sup> Hollaender, "Cabaret."

<sup>89</sup> "Your embarrassment I can with my / Legginess unify. / I do everything with the legs."

knows nothing of yesterday or of the day before yesterday. This confused, broken, abnormal time, placed on its head, is his time.”<sup>90</sup>

The same can be said of another cabaret-inspired feature of Bois’s career: his cross-dressing. Bois’s first reported drag performance came about quite unintentionally. Raised without a father by a show business mother, Curt was not the only actor with the last name Bois. His sister Ilse likewise started out as a child actor and would soon become one of the best loved cabaret comediennes of the twenties, working especially at the *Kabarett der Komiker* and often with many of Curt’s own collaborators. Like her brother, Ilse Bois would earn many comparisons with slapstick cinema, even explicitly acknowledging the connection by performing Hollaender’s song “Meine Schwester liebt den Buster [My sister loves that Buster].” Something like a comic version of Fred and Adele Astaire, the Bois siblings began the Weimar era as a dancing act. When Ilse was too sick to dance Curt replaced her, wearing her clothes and performing her dances with such mimetic accuracy that, according to the latter’s reminiscence, “Neither the public nor the director noticed the small difference.”<sup>91</sup> Curt’s ability for pantomime knew no gendered bounds and his performances as a cross-dressing employee on screen in *Der Fürst von Pappenheim* and on stage in *Charley’s Aunt* offer two of the most iconic queer moments produced in that heady sexual atmosphere for which Weimar Germany is still famous. Yet Bois’s cross-dressing was singular among his contemporaries, given that the vast

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<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Ducke, *Der Humor kommt aus der Trauer*, p. 116.

<sup>91</sup> Bois, *Zu wahr um schön zu sein*, p. 31.





**Figure 3: Bois cross-dressing in *Der Fürst von Pappenheim***

majority of drag film comedy worked the other way, with women imitating men. This was most famously done in Schünzel's *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933), but other such performers included Asta Nielsen, Pola Negri, Ossi Oswalda, Elisabeth Bergner and Dolly Haas, who would play Bois's love interest in the sound comedy, *Ein steinreicher Mann*.

We can only understand the comic appeal of Bois's cross-dressing by recalling the important role of women in the culture and economy of the *Angestellten*. Nearly a third were women and the increasing visibility of professions of typist, secretary and saleswoman was mirrored in telling ways by mass culture. It is not surprising that Kracauer begins his study with an anecdote of an informal interview with a private secretary, who works for a soap manufacturer. Kracauer asks her if she hopes to marry her boss, but she flatly demures, admitting that although she is sleeping with him, she has a fiance who she still hopes to marry. The fiance works, like so many of Bois's characters, at a "lingerie firm." Kracauer's question was no doubt prompted by the many films designed on such employees. For male employees, on the other hand, there was an increasing fear of feminization, both in the kind of labor increasingly

privileged (neither manual nor intellectual, with fashion and youth paramount) as well as the increasingly feminine spheres where they worked. This is already familiar from Schleier's analysis of the American context of Lloyd's *Safety Last* where neurasthenia, the exhausted and nervous condition endemic to the urban, industrial world, became associated with a loss in traditional masculine identity and ability. Lloyd's character deals entirely with women customers and during one gag, is overwhelmed by a flood of women hysterically intent on purchasing fabric. At another telling moment he hides underneath the dress of a mannequin. As I have argued, this was noticed too in Germany, where Lloyd's transformative feats and financial success earned him the admiration of German female moviegoers. If Lloyd, as Schleier argues, fights back against this neurasthenia through a masculine form of physical accomplishment, one largely irrelevant as a professional skill set, what are we to make of the dancing, gender-bending Bois? Bois was never more energetic than when he masqueraded as a woman, both during a comic seduction at the end of *Pappenheim* as well as in *Charley's Aunt*, where "Bois not only played, he sang, danced and stepped the role, showed acrobatic feats, introduced an entire Variete program. Because *Charley's Aunt* is a young, agile student of sport."<sup>92</sup> Linking the already antiquated English comedy to the contemporary physiognomy of sport and cabaret, Bois twists Lloyd's solution to emasculation, re-gaining energy only by virtue of highly pleasurable, consciously chosen feminization. That is what makes his vamping so transgressive. While many fashion-themed German films were explicitly linked by advertising or credit to Berlin's most haute designers, *Charley's Aunt* was probably the singular instance in which modern women's fashions as successfully promoted by a male transvestite. Forgetting the Victorian get-up usually deployed for the character of the aunt, Bois got his dress from the salon

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<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Dücke, *Der Humor kommt aus der Trauer*, p. 101.

Grünberg and in turn “Berlin’s world of women copies his stage costume.”<sup>93</sup> While some of the comedy of Bois’s cross-dressing does come, as Alice Kuzniar argues, from the all too typical derision of the feminized man, he clearly appealed to both men and women increasingly confused by the androgynous tasks, environments and styles required of them in their new professions.<sup>94</sup> If Lloyd provided a fantasy of masculine success, Bois’s comedy in *Pappenheim* and *Charley’s Aunt* appealed as much to the increasingly important segment of female *Angestellten* as it might have sparked anxieties among men already threatened by the celebrated presence of their female peers and customers. As with his cabaret performances, Bois offered a mixture of fantasy and irony, both the pleasures and energies of transgression and masquerade as well as a biting sarcasm that in undermining himself always threatened to contaminate his audience. If the present time was “his time,” then that time was both “abnormal” and androgynous.



**Figures 4: Lloyd’s employee threatened by emasculation in *Safety Last*.**

*Charley’s Aunt* toured Germany, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland and it most definitely would have been adapted into a film if not for the election of Hitler as Chancellor in 1933 and Bois’s subsequent exile. While sympathetic to Leftist causes and having performed in

<sup>93</sup> Mast and Zolchow, ““Die Anderen amüsieren sich königlich’,” p. 26.

<sup>94</sup> Alice Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 45.

many satirical works anathemic to the Nazis, Bois was already in trouble simply by virtue of being Jewish. It would be easy to assimilate Bois to the Jewish type Lubitsch embodied so well in his early slapstick films of the teens, especially considering that each relies on the specifically German-Jewish milieu of the clothing shop. Raised as a child of immigrants, Lubitsch's social climbing was marked "Jewish" to such a degree that later appraisals have gone so far as to detect unintentional anti-Semitic caricature.<sup>95</sup> In his "Meyer" films this gap between Jew and German drove the humor, with Lubitsch's urban Jew comically misplaced among the Bavarian alps. Lubitsch's concerns were, as Sabine Hake argues, "petty bourgeois" and his characters reflected this, imparted as they were from the more rigidly structured, class-hierarchical Wilhelmine era.<sup>96</sup> Bois suggests a mixture of traditional Jewish types and jokes with a cosmopolitan temperament more in tune with the internationalism of Weimar Berlin. Far more of an insider to that city than Lubitsch, who was raised by illiterate immigrants in working class Prenzlauer Berg, Bois grew up in middle class Charlottenburg, where assimilation had been underway for generations. Another child of the neighborhood, Walter Benjamin, would find in the Berliner dialect an inherent cosmopolitanism, writing in a 1929 article on the city's particular humor, "Berliner—the dialect of a metropolis in which for a long time all German strains, for a short time all European nations, meet each other, admix and with rising speed of rotation rub each other away."<sup>97</sup> According to Benjamin the defining feature of this multi-ethnic, multi-national stew of a dialect was not its specific location (or worse, its relationship to the purity of German *Blut und Boden*), but rather that quality so important to great cities everywhere: "Since always and like that

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<sup>95</sup> Sabine Hake, *Passions and Deceptions: The Early Films of Ernst Lubitsch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 31. See also Jürgen Kasten, "Verweigerung der Korrekten Assimilation," *Spaß beiseite, Film ab: Jüdischer Humor und verdrängendes Lachen in der Filmkomödie bis 1945*, ed. Bock et al (Hamburg: Cinegraph/text + kritik, 2006), p. 33-47.

<sup>96</sup> Hake, *Passions and Deceptions*, p. 34.

<sup>97</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Wat hier jelacht wird, det lache ick" *Gesammelte Schriften* 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 537-8.

of other metropolises, Berlin is bound much less by location as by the tempo of existence.” Like a great industrial machine, the modern city functions the same everywhere, a great vortex in which differences are both accentuated and broken down when mixed together. There thus seems some essential connection between Berlin’s polyglot mixture and that metropolitan experience lived best by Americans. Tempo, movement and rhythm were after all the watch-words for Lloyd’s German critics and what Lloyd did in his chases and climbs Berliners did not only with their bodies, but in their very manner of speaking. For Benjamin, writing at the height of his own interest in *Amerikanismus*, Berlin had more in common with New York than it did with the German provinces, united by a dissolving union of customs and cultures dictating a certain “impudence [Schnoddrigheit],” one derived from “a wonderfully trained talent for observation.” Most relevant for understanding Bois, Benjamin references the figure of the “eccentric” as best displaying the gestures of such “impudence.” Certainly Curt Bois had this gift and it allowed him to imitate his urban peers to comic effect, but it also gave him a contemporary relevance that mixed, like his *Heimatstadt*, cultures German, Jewish and American, the last of these by its very nature hybrid.

If Bois “sublimat[ed] the qualities” of his contemporaries—navigating an always unstable present, concern with youthful, fashionable appearance and an interest in everything American—he did so in ways that were often ambiguous, confirming their fantasies as much as he mocked them with his Berliner *Schnauze*. Nothing indicated this ambiguity better than Bois’s status as a kind of modern day schlemihl, a term used constantly not only to understand his slapstick role models but eventually canonized as Bois’s essential type in the 1931 film *Der Schlemihl*. A term Yiddish in origin yet equally belonging to the German vernacular since at least the 1814 publication of von Chamisso’s *The Miraculous Story of Peter Schlemihl*, “schlemihl” became a

term to describe one who is stupid, awkward and comically unlucky. Certainly this describes Bois's character in the film, for which Bois not only starred, but also played a crucial role in its development and production. Playing yet another diminutive employee, Bois's character, Hartwig, is fired from his job as a salesman of men's fashion, but quickly gets his stylish suit caught in the door of a limousine, forcing him to run with the car at top speed, a gag worthy of Lloyd. Lloyd was himself often hailed as a schlemihl; as one critic said of the car chase in *Girl Shy*, "Let's take the lesson and learn with all this racing around from these American schlemihls."<sup>98</sup> Hartwig is mistaken as a former aristocrat friend by the car's owner, a prince. That aristocrat, in point of fact, doubles as nefarious thief and soon enough a famous American criminal from Chicago, one Jack Brilliant, escalates the mistaken identity, arriving in Germany to enlist Hartwig in a jewelry heist. Hoping to impress the beautiful Gerda Maro (played by dancer La Jana, who had an affair with Chaplin that same year during the star's Berlin visit), Hartwig plays along, taking part in the robbery and running from the police. Hiding in a house used for an practice drill by the local fire department, Hartwig is convinced that the villa is haunted, a gag already used to great effect in the climax of Lloyd's *Dr. Jack*. This connection to Lloyd's sensational comedy is affirmed at the film's climax when all is revealed to Gerda, who only "wanted to experience a sensation."<sup>99</sup> With gags clearly drawn from Lloyd's cinema, fashionable milieu of the struggling employee not to mention a musical number written by Bois's cabaret collaborator Mischa Spoliansky, *Der Schlemihl* is a synthesis of Bois's Weimar resume and one of the few star-driven slapstick comedies of the period. Ihering noticed this seemingly un-German quality: "The actor stands at the middle point, but the actor also determines the

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<sup>98</sup> *Der Kinematograph* 994 (1931).

<sup>99</sup> *Illustrieter Film-Kurier* (1931).

whole film. Preparation for a German slapstick cinema.”<sup>100</sup> Ihering focused not on the film’s silly plot, but on its set-pieces, and especially, as with Lloyd, on its climactic chase: “Curt Bois as store-window attraction. Curt Bois unwilling in a glamorous restaurant. Curt Bois as fake con-man.” With its “last third” devoted only to slapstick chases Ihering concludes his review by calling the film a “minor masterpiece.”



**Figure 5: A publicity still for Bois’s first starring role, in *Der Schlemihl***

Given its silly story, American-style gags and star performance, how are we to understand the film’s title? With its mixture of Hebrew, Yiddish and German “schlemihl” evokes the “Grotesktyp” that defined Bois, the type that was indeed so lacking in Germany’s film industry and which Ihering detected as the preamble to the missing genre of German slapstick. If Bois offered up in the eyes of directors like Pollard, producers like Schratter and critics like Kästner, a “German Harold Lloyd” there must be an implicit parenthetical marking the

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<sup>100</sup> Herbert Ihering, *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht 1924-1929* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1959), p. 373.

disjuncture between Lloyd's preeminent *Amerikanismus* and Bois's iteration: "the German(-Jewish) Harold Lloyd." On the one hand, Bois was entirely assimilated, more raised in show business than a religious or ethno-cultural tradition. In contemporary interviews and subsequent reminiscences Bois mentions his being Jewish only in reference to the tragic fact of his forced exile. On the other hand, he often inhabited Jewish roles, specified as such by their surrounding, humor or character type. So what does it mean for Bois to thereby represent an epochal generation's identity? This question requires asking because understanding Germany's class of *Angestellten* means understanding how this group came to disproportionately support the National Socialists in 1933. Those who first studied this class, a group of largely German-Jewish sociologists, would look back in American academic exile at Weimar's white collar class with regret and frustration, their much praised *Sachlichkeit* no match for what Emil Lederer diagnosed as "the insecurity of the life cycle, unemployment, loss of identity, the crumbling of traditional structures and loyalties-processes," factors all driving them towards the solid ideologies associated with a German *Volk*.<sup>101</sup> For those shaped by Marxism, like Kracauer, Bloch, Fromm and Speier, this was the price paid for the *Angestellten*'s increasingly fantasmatic refusal to place themselves in line with the interests of the proletarian, deluded by an intoxicating emphasis on their idiosyncrasy within a crowd of identically special peers. Putting this dialectic aside, more interesting is how a group defined and reflected by a cosmopolitan *Amerikanismus* would knowingly turn its back on those identical in its culture and concern yet different in some vague, unspecified way.

This question was ignored by these sociologists and critics yet it was raised again and again in various ways by Bois's *Schlemihltum*. What does it mean to name Bois a "schlemihl"?

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<sup>101</sup> Kocka, "Marxist Social Analysis and the Problem of White-Collar Employees," p. 147.



Writing in the early thirties in Berlin, Hannah Arendt would open her monograph on Enlightenment salonist Rahel Varnhagen with a chapter entitled “Jewess and Schlemihl.”<sup>102</sup> Describing the young Berliner’s attempt to escape these two fates she writes of a singular “aim”: “always, at any given moment, to be different from what one is; never to assert oneself, but with infinite pliancy to become anything else, so long as it is not oneself. It requires an inhuman alertness not to betray oneself, to conceal everything and yet have no definite secret to cling to.”<sup>103</sup> Perhaps because this “pliancy” of the present was ultimately dependent on “the absolutely unforeseeable, chance, luck” Varnhagen would eventually resign herself to being Jewish, not assimilating to her society’s prevailing anti-Semitism while simultaneously refusing the strictures of her first community, caught between roles of “pariah and parvenu.”<sup>104</sup> A decade later Arendt would elaborate on these roles in an essay written in exile in New York, “The Jew as Pariah,” her first example none other than the schlemihl as explained by Varnhagen’s friend Heinrich Heine.<sup>105</sup> The schlemihl is a fool, but its “hall-mark” is “innocence,” and in its lustful appreciation of the equality of what nature provides, it exposes the vain comedy of “the fabricated order of society”: “It is no longer the outcast who appears the schlemihl, but those who live in the ordered ranks of society...”<sup>106</sup>

The third example of “The Jew as Pariah” offers up a more recent version of the schlemihl: Charlie Chaplin. While Arendt will link him to the criminal, “suspect” status of the refugee person (one of the paramount concerns of her political philosophy), the reference to slapstick points us in the right direction of understanding Bois’s comparably modern take on the

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<sup>102</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, edited by Weissberg (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 85-102.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p. 94.

<sup>105</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Jew as Pariah,” *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, edited by Gottlieb (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 69-90.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72-3.

schlemihl. If Heine's schlemihl "turns... from the world of men and the fashion thereof to the open and unrestricted bounty of the earth," Bois's characters live a historical moment where such bounty no longer exists, a neurasthenic world of busy city streets and American distractions. The realm of the assimilating parvenu—of "those who must climb by fraud into a society, a rank, a class, not theirs by birthright"—has occluded the very possibility of Heine's schlemihl, the mockery-legitimizing standard of an equalizing nature withered away by the pressures and sensations of modern life. There is only the "second nature" of industrial, international capitalism and those born first into this world shared Bois's *Jahrgang*, 1901, "twenty years old when the inflation came" (Kästner). Knowing nothing of Heine and Varnhagen's fantasies of "the true realities" of a naturally good and equal "common people," this is the *Jahrgang* of the *Angestellten*, their culture of *Neue Sachlichkeit* a constant celebration of "the world of men and the fashion thereof." The pariah has given way entirely to the mask-wearing, social climbing parvenu and Arendt's description of the contingency-bound "pliancy" of Varnhagen reflects in its language the psychology mapped out by her contemporary Kracauer. What remains the same is the importance of luck, with the parvenu a con artist whose dissemblance relies as much on performance as it does on not being found out or unmasked.

If Bois is a schlemihl it is as a kind of secret agent within this generation, the parvenu who fails. Such misfortune is nothing more than what interrupts his masquerade, his attempt to enter realms and societies for which he is out of place. *Der Schlemihl* is the story of this faulty masquerade and its comedy departs not only from Bois being mistaken as an aristocrat by virtue of his fashionable suit, but from the ways each masquerade builds on top of a preceding imitation, all in a desperate search for jolting, reinvigorating sensations. Bois's mockery does not rest its authority on the standards of nature, but rather undermines the superficial standards of

society from within, not simply with an ironic dismissal, but by inhabiting them with excessive energy, like his drag-queen in *Pappenheim*, so exaggerative that the mask shines through. In his explicitly Jewish roles, Bois's schlemihl is a Jew stripped of these differences, his humor as much a mark of his urban origins as it is from some presumed cultural identity. Focused on a present defined by constant instability and contingency, Arendt's "absolutely unforeseeable, chance, luck," the employee gives up the depth of soul in favor of the outward-directed sheen of a complexion, the surface of a smile, the glamour of the most recent fashion. Out with the German old and in with the American new, which shared with a city like Berlin modernity and democratic diversity. Yet it also shared something with the Jewish parvenu, seeking economic success or stability within a society still reeling from the loss of hierarchies, values or roots. No one among this *Jahrgang* was not fraudulent and there was nothing behind their highly mobile masks. As an already assimilated Jew and unrooted Berliner Bois was uniquely able to expose this constant masquerade and this is what defined the particularity of his *Schlemihltum*: reflecting the psychology of this new class he showed the fraudulent ways the parvenu reached success as well as the limits to such success, the comedy of the masquerade being its constant failures, from man to woman, employee to aristocrat, pimp to professional. Like Heine, Bois exposed his society as schlemihl, but did so only as its most perpetually eccentric insider, revealing that no one there will ever successfully assimilate. And unlike Lloyd, this eccentricity was never overcome with the American happy ending, a sensational transformation of feminized, ethnicized schlemihl (*pace* Schleier's reading of *Safety Last*) into triumphant American businessman. While Lloyd represented, for employees, the optimism of will, ego and energy, Bois reveled in caricature that was likeable and charming, but always also manifestly dissembling, too fashionable, a conman whose cons never quite worked. Rather than acting as an American wish

image for the *Angestellten* Bois was far too much one of their own and in mirroring them so faithfully with his imitations, he satirized these wish images from within their appeal, playing a “German Harold Lloyd” without egoic victory, subject to an economic rollercoaster ride that was too real to be made optimistic. Bois combatted neurasthenic exhaustion through a combination of trickery, laziness and flexibility, the thrills provided as much by his jumping body as by its androgyny.

Before I turn to Bois’s exile I’d like to look at the exile of those who first studied this new class of urban employees. In their landmark 1929 examination of the average, normal American town, *Middletown*, the Lynds discover that across classes, groups and genders, one star is more popular than any other at the Indiana town’s movie theaters: “Harold Lloyd comedies draw the largest crowds. ‘Middletown is amusement hungry,’ says the opening sentence in a local editorial; at the comedies Middletown lives for an hour in a happy sophisticated make-believe world that leaves it, according to the advertisement of one film, ‘happily convinced that Life is very well worth living.’”<sup>107</sup> The popularity of Lloyd can only be understood against what the Lynds called “the background of the day-long preoccupation with getting a living and other routinized activities in this prairie city.” Recalling the German fantasy of Lloyd’s character and audience—going into town for a bit of “big city air” and “moderate enjoyment”—*Middletown* suggests Lloyd’s modern American go-getter offered the perfect distraction from the routines of work and business. This popularity can be explained further by looking at another important work in American sociology, Dave Riesman’s 1950 *The Lonely Crowd*—in John Belton’s words, “Lloyd is middle class not merely because he regularly plays salaried, white-collar workers...but also because his needs are dictated by his contemporaries.

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<sup>107</sup> Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, 1957), p. 266.

Lloyd does not struggle to survive, as Chaplin does; he struggles to succeed, to win the approval of his peers. Lloyd is an example of what David Riesman designates in *The Lonely Crowd* as ‘the ‘new’ middle class,’ a bureaucrat, a salaried employee in business, a consumer (rather than a producer). In terms of Riesman’s categories of typical American character types, Lloyd is an ‘other-directed’ individual.’<sup>108</sup>

Belton’s Riesmanian analysis is familiar—it perfectly describes the German employee’s culture of *Neue Sachlichkeit*: lacking an interior, consumerist surface oriented for external “approval,” a success and its prestigious signs fundamentally continuous, a focus on the contemporary present and, most importantly, new modes of employment premised on bureaucratic routine, constant evaluation and a lack of producing anything of value or traditional prestige. In the best account of this culture, *Cool Conduct*, Helmut Lethen turns to *The Lonely Crowd* as an antidote to the teleological arc of German scholarship, its central notion of a “radar type” given mechanical flesh in the novels of Irgard Keun and Erich Kästner, the architecture of the Bauhaus and the speculations of Benjamin, Kracauer and Plessner.<sup>109</sup> Lethen recognizes the important influence, for Riesman, of German thinkers Fromm, Simmel and Karl Wittfogel. Yet it is no exaggeration to say Riesman’s diagnosis was made possible only by a kind of transatlantic feedback loop. Each of the Weimar critics mentioned previously—Kracauer, Lederer, Speier and Fromm—would wind up in the United States and each would translate, revise or update their earlier speculations on the *Angestellten* for a new audience, all anxious to understand the dynamics of National Socialism. Yet the lessons offered by the *Angestellten* would circuitously become re-functioned by American sociologists seeking, like the Lynds before them, to

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<sup>108</sup> John Belton, “Harold Lloyd: The Man and His Times,” *Harold Lloyd: The King of Daredevil Comedy*, p. 194.

<sup>109</sup> Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct*, pp. 187-194. See also David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale, 2001).

understand American modernity. Working in this new context their writing and teaching influenced a whole generation of American scholars in the post-war period, who would brilliantly examine the increasingly white-collar, increasingly urban heirs to Middletown. Perhaps most famous was C. Wright Mills' *White Collar*, published in 1951, which, in its bibliography alone, reflects the influence of German sociologists Speier and Mills' teacher Hans Gerth, with whom Mills had earlier co-edited and translated a volume of essays by Max Weber.<sup>110</sup> Why and how were the insights of this generation of Weimar scholars so useful for the rising tide of American white-collar workers? The reasons are many, but no doubt one factor was the German employees' very own *Amerikanismus*, their culture a refraction of the energies and ambitions suggested by a movie star like Lloyd, their economy, however, far less stable and their nation, carrying far different political traditions. Perhaps the most intriguing afterlife of this loop is visible in American comic cinema touched by Weimar's *Angestellten*. Whether it be Kracauer's evocation of his earlier study in praise of Preston Sturges' *Christmas in July* (1940), an "escapist film intent on diverting white-collar workers from their predicament" that also functions as "social satire," or the former Berlin *Eintänzer* Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960), the cosmopolitan blend of American "business-sense" and Weimar wit would live on among academics and critics as much as it was detected and integrated within American comedies of the post-war era.<sup>111</sup> Sturges himself was a great fan of Harold Lloyd's, having tried to bring back the star for the ill-fated slapstick retread *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (1947). Both and Lloyd each in their own ways took the sociological norm of their contemporaries and made them eccentric, grotesque. Like a "German Harold Lloyd" the culture of the *Angestellten* was a mixture of

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<sup>110</sup> C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>111</sup> See Kracauer, "Preston Sturges, or Laughter Betrayed," *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings: Essays on Film and Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 111.

projected fantasies and very real anxieties, a transatlantic symptom of a modernizing society struggling in comedy and tragedy with its own self-definition, a definition made increasingly difficult considering how slippery the self became in Weimar Germany.

## V. Conclusion

In the final years of the Weimar Republic Curt Bois had little interest in the superficial fantasies offered up by increasingly popular musical comedies and military farces. He refused to work for the UFA, turning down one of its most successful comedies, *Die Drei vor der Tankstelle* (1930). Asked about the film's popular acceptance late in life, Bois remarked with dark humor, "The people also accepted Hitler."<sup>112</sup> After *Der Schlemihl* Curt Bois would star in another fish out of water comedy, *Ein steinreicher Mann*, in which he is forced to live with impoverished, hard-headed aristocrat Adele Sandrock after accidentally swallowing her family jewels. Like the slapstick stars before him, Bois's character takes his name from the actor playing him. Curt works behind the counter of a jewelry store, hence his coming into contact with members of the dying nobility. Paired with the sprightly Dolly Haas as his romantic partner, an actress likewise well-known for androgyny and cross-dressing, Bois sends Sandrock's household into chaos, an impoverished neurotic and superstitious klutz obsessed with avoiding omens of bad luck. Fresh after *Ein steinreicher Mann* Bois would borrow its motif for his directorial debut, a comic short made eight years after the unreleased Trianon series yet echoing its ambitious mission in a number of ways. *Scherben bringen Glück* [Shards bring luck] (1932), like his previous feature, takes an everyday expression and literalizes it, its comic MacGuffin an expensive and inevitably shattered Chinese vase sought by Trude Pirchan, who plays the imperious aunt of both Bois's character and of his love interest, played by Karin Hardt.

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<sup>112</sup> Gerold Ducke, "'Ich Versuche, nicht zu spielen': Über Curt Bois im Film," *Ich mache alles mit den Beinen*, p. 22.

Bud Pollard's films were considered so bad that they were un-releasable, abysmal failures in their stated goal to combine American and German talents for developing a global slapstick star on the level of Harold Lloyd. While the contest was simply another event in his crisscrossing Weimar career—forgotten in his memoirs, ignored by his autobiographer and missed by scholars—it takes on an added interest in light of *Scherben*, which offers a far more successful counter-factual image of what *could* have been had Bois been given opportunities to hone his comic craft to broadcast his *Schlemihltum*. Finally given the opportunity to direct himself like his heroes in Hollywood, *Scherben* is by no means a slapstick masterpiece and given the dominance of largely mediocre sound comedies, its emphasis on American-style gags flew in the face of public tastes as a deliberate anachronism. Yet like *Der Schlemihl* and *Ein steinreicher Mann* before it, *Scherben* offers culminating evidence of Bois's diverse talents and sublimating satire. As with Pollard and Schratter, Bois did not make a slapstick feature, but only a short, hoping to carefully find his way to a marketable slapstick persona stripped of sentiment and full of *Sachlichkeit*.

The film begins with a familiar image: Bois's character, Fritz, stands conducting over an unseen choir on the landing of an apartment building and is immediately interrupted by a woman walking by with flowers, ignoring both the conductor and the record player soon revealed beneath him. Bois's first great film role as an adult was the fox-trotting bandleader in Lubitsch's *The Oyster Princess*, with his antic conducting igniting an entire audience into feverish dance, but here the only public is his oblivious girlfriend and a bed-ridden yet cigar-chomping Pirchan, like Sandrock before her, more general than matriarch. It being the latter's sixtieth birthday, Bois sneaks a bite from a passing cake carried in by a maid. Fritz' earnest, energetic face, coupled with ridiculously precise hand gestures, is inherently comic, yet there are added laughs in that he



is only imitating a conductor, quickly revealed to be penny-less and unemployed. Because of this Pirchan cautions her niece against marrying him, preferring one Mr. Eiche, a gigantically fat *petit-bourgeois* with an endless family of the like-bodied. After being slapped hard in the face by his aunt, Bois must compete with Eiche to win his cousin's affection, racing to an auction house to bid on Pirchan's long desired Chinese vase. Filming the massive Eiche from an extreme low angle, the camera becomes highly mobile as it chases the two men, with Fritz sneaking into the sidecar of Eiche's motorcycle.

Here the influence of Harold Lloyd becomes clear: not only by using modern transportation as means to a gag, but also with how Bois contorts his body into the smallest hiding-place, something that Lloyd did as an almost signature gesture, crouching as a means to hide from much larger or more numerous opponents. As Lloyd said of his character: "he was always struggling against the bigger man or the difficult situation."<sup>113</sup> Lloyd's crouch was a sign of ingenuity, hiding not just out of fear, but also so as to perform the tasks that will help him get ahead while others remain oblivious and unsuspecting. Yet in contrast with Lloyd the sidecar joke escalates when Fritz secretly slits open Eiche's bag of cherries, eating them and then spitting the pits out at his clueless chauffeur, his face filled with grotesque spite worthy of the early Lubitsch. Fritz outbids Eiche for the vase only to reveal to the auctioneer that he has only a few cents to his name. Sputtering with rage the auctioneer accidentally knocks the vase over and the clever Fritz buys its shards. He hurries home, narcissistically checks himself in the mirror so as to appear presentable and hands over the hidden shards in a gift box. The gag becomes evident: Fritz immediately tries to get his aunt's birthday party guests to smash the box, tickling one of Eiche's fat relatives, precariously placing it on the edge of a table and finally knocking it

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Reilly, *Harold Lloyd*, p. 176.

into the hands of his competitor, who falls on top of it, crushing the box and breaking the already broken vase. Throughout the whole sequence, Bois's talents as actor and director are evident, with quick cuts to nervous faces as his Fritz puts the vase in danger, changing his expression from consternated to ingratiating to haughty in seconds. All this is done in the silent fashion, without dialogue, musical accompaniment provided by an ancient, deaf relative pounding on the piano in the corner of the aunt's apartment. Demanding compensation of 10,000 Marks for the broken vase, Fritz turns down his aunt's offer of money with ostentatious pride only to immediately take it, using it as handkerchief to dry his crocodile tears. Approved to marry his cousin, they rush off to the city hall while their aunt discovers in her box a receipt not for an expensive vase, but rather worthless shards. The wedding is a secular affair and afterwards a distracted Fritz accidentally kisses a man after his new bride walks off when he isn't looking—an androgynous joke worthy of the cabaret and recalling his cross-dressing in *Der Fürst von Pappenheim* and *Charley's Aunt*. After the window breaks on their taxicab, its driver announcing the film's title as a maxim of good fortune, the car runs over the glass and gets a flat tire and in a final shot, the newlyweds catch an old-fashioned ride on a horse-drawn dairy cart to ride off to their uncertain future.

With its jazzy score, useless morale and grotesque characters, *Scherben bringen Glück* synthesizes the comic energies and influences that defined Bois's career in the twenties and early thirties. Meager success comes not through hard work, but through a combination of chance, dishonesty and manipulation. Imitating a conductor, checking himself in the mirror, hiding his dissembling face from his vase-grieving aunt, Fritz is a consummate parvenu, auditioning for traditional bourgeois life more like someone being tested for employment or military service. Personal happiness requires the same skills as professional success and despite being a family

relation Fritz the schlemihl, jobless and ill-fated, is something of a black sheep. The short's happy ending is, like its title, undercut by the queer kiss, broken glass and shift in transportation, all of which contravene the suggested upward mobility provided by Fritz's stingy aunt, who finds out about her nephew's trickery only when it is too late. Riding on a milk truck, Fritz is happier for having a bride, but still very much a pariah from a society that is composed of the fat, martial and stupid. As with so many of Bois's past roles, youth wins out, tradition is rocked, but there are no sheltering utopias of a present vitality. Unlike the vast majority of Depression comedies, which indulged either in fantasies of impossible upward mobility or else preached gratitude for one's station, *Scherben* recalls the rollicking, sensational caricature of the twenties' Lloyd, while also stripping from the latter's image any and all optimism. Lloyd's *Amerikanismus* was celebrated for its energy, combating the neurasthenia of an over-tested and over-worked employee audience, his stunts and thrills combating the day's stresses with a reckless image of inexhaustible egoism and endless trickery. *Scherben* is the most direct instance of how this *Amerikanismus* was perverted by Bois, with its virtues and affects linked to eccentric traits of androgyny, cynicism and *Schlemihltum*. A parasite of prestige, Bois's Fritz is so honestly open about his social climbing, so energetic in his laziness that his status as *schlemihl* shines through with every cherry pit spit at his opponent, every frown at an oblivious aunt. That Bois had to bring the film twice before the German censors, eventually cutting out a fifth of his first cut, suggests the satirical elements of the film were considered too biting or too potent for audiences to endure.<sup>114</sup> Under Bois's directorial glare, with his witty editing, gliding camera and syncopated rhythm, no class or type escapes the grotesque and all society proves itself as schlemihl as the film's protagonist. Far from sheltering his audience, Bois refuses to idealize the situation of the

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<sup>114</sup> See Thomas Brandlmeier, "Mit Grazie, Charme und Chuzpe: Filmauftritte," *Ich mache alles mit den Beinen*, p. 124. Brandlmeier's essay offers a helpful overview of Bois's film career, but he fails to mention the Trianon contest.

employee and in this way he was an idiosyncratic figure among his generation, who would turn for protection and self-definition to a similar clan of hulking, inarticulate bullies.

Bois would not sit in the director's chair for another twenty years. Instead of following the "difficult" "path from one to two actors to feature-length five or six actors" from *Scherben bringen Glück* to longer vehicles for a schlemihl star, Bois would walk a different path, that of exile.<sup>115</sup> Leaving Germany after Hitler's election, he would act on stage in Austria, Switzerland and New York before arriving in a Hollywood already overstuffed with contemporaries in Weimar comedy: Felix Bressart, Siegfried Arno, Reinhold Schünzel, Szöke Szakall not to mention past colleagues like Lubitsch, Wilder, Brecht, and the Manns. Aided by legendary agent Paul Kohner, best friend for so many exiled German film artists, Curt Bois would get consistent work as a bit player in over forty feature films, sharing the screen for a few minutes with John Barrymore, Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Rita Hayworth, Gene Kelly, Charles Laughton, Spencer Tracy, Rudy Vallee and many others. Speaking a continentally accented English, Bois often played in costume or period films, but the kinds of roles he played suggest a dull echo of his earlier type: a cook in *Cover Girl* (1944) and *Blonde Fever* (1944), a tailor in *Boom Town* (1940), a barber in *Hold Back Dawn* (1941), a baker in *The Great Waltz* (1938), a juror in *The Lady in Question* (1940), a lawyer in *Saratoga Trunk* (1945), a dance teacher in *Golddiggers of Paris* (1938) and most famously a canny pickpocket in *Casablanca* (1942).

As with his meatier roles on the German screen, Bois was invariably singled out for praise despite the brevity of his appearances and he even received a laudatory profile, "He

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<sup>115</sup> Willy Haas quoted in Saunders, "'Wer nimmt die Komik ernst?'" p. 75.

Laughs at Obscurity,” in *Modern Screen*.<sup>116</sup> Describing his past stardom in Germany, the article does not reference his many film roles and instead describes the reactions of theater audiences: “People knocked themselves out when he came on a stage. They clapped violently before he even opened his mouth. They bought tickets to his shows deliriously, the way jitterbugs buy ducats to hear Harry James. And they came away in such a worn-out state from laughing at Curt that they were useless for days afterwards.”<sup>117</sup> In English Bois acts no differently than in his past interviews with reporters: “So that you’ll surely know him next time, he’s a little guy with a touch of the elfin about him, dark-haired, dark-eyed and so intense that he can’t sit still for five minutes. When he talks, he jumps up and acts, things out, he waves his paws about, he struggles to find the correct English word. His eyebrows reminds you of twin elevators constantly in motion. As he mentions people in conversation, he is those people...”<sup>118</sup> The article suggests a basic continuity in Bois’s temperament as well as in the way his personality consistently came across as comic mimic, popular like a jazz-band, body-parts like machines, the laughter he provokes so animated that it incapacitates.

While there is some hyperbole here, Bois’s potential maturation into auteur-star of German cinema was more than hypothetical. His performances on stage and screen in the final years of the Republic suggest that he had, like Chaplin or Lloyd before him, learned from his disparate achievements to build a singular comic voice. While Trianon’s ambitious “German Harold Lloyd” series would fail to reach German screens let alone American ones, the dream of reaching the United States was not unrealistic. *Der Schlemihl* would be released in New York City in 1934, three years after its German release and in a review with the telling title, “A

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<sup>116</sup> Kate Calvin, “He laughs at Obscurity,” *Modern Screen* (February 1945).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

German Film Comedy,” the New York Times praised the “amusing slapstick comedy” and especially its “excellent” and “outstanding” star, “whose blood bars him from working at his profession in Germany under the Nazi dispensation.”<sup>119</sup> Despite this prohibition, Bois would return to German cinemas in the most undesirable of ways, his cross-dressing in *Der Fürst von Pappenheim* providing grist for the notorious propaganda films, *Juden ohne Maske* [Jews without Masks] (1937) and *Der ewige Jude* [The eternal Jew] (1940). In the latter he would finally co-star with a more famous Nazi target, Charlie Chaplin, whose films Bois had only previously introduced on stage. Suggesting some essential connection between the Jewish body and perversion, homosexuality and/or feminization, *Der ewige Jude* would offer Bois up as “conscious support and endorsement for Paragraph 175,” the 1871 law which criminalized homosexuality. When Bois eventually returned to Berlin, always feeling like a tourist in Hollywood and increasingly fearful of the growing McCarthyism, Bois’s starring role in Nazi propaganda let alone Nazism itself were rarely discussed among his peers in the German arts. Running into Hubert von Meyerinck, one of the stars of UFA’s spectacular *Münchhausen* (1943), ghostwritten by astute Bois fan Erich Kästner, Bois responded to the greeting “We haven’t seen in each other in an eternity” with a sharp riposte worthy of the cabaret stage: “True, it’s been a thousand years.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> “A German Film Comedy,” *New York Times* (11/5/1934).

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Volker Kühn, “Ich bin’s, das Heinerle!” Kabarettist mit Kopf, Bauch und Beinen—Die Geschichte einer Begegnung,” *Ich mache alles mit den Beinen*, p. 105.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Once one of the most prolific directors of the Weimar era, Richard Oswald was just another lesser known German exile eking out a living in Hollywood during the thirties and forties. Oswald was able to maintain something of a career, directing primarily for B studios. In the teens and twenties Oswald worked in nearly every genre of German cinema, from costume dramas to social problem films, *Aufklärungsfilme* [enlightenment films] to expressionist horror, but his last feature in Hollywood suggests something of a poor person's Lubitsch, adapting a nineteenth century stage farce for the screen. One of his better efforts, *A Loveable Cheat* (1949) is a version of Balzac's play *Mercadet*, the story of a French bourgeois—the title character—in constant debt, manipulating his creditors through comic subterfuge while arranging a marriage with a wealthy aristocrat for his daughter. Casting the part of the aristocrat, Count de la Brive, Oswald turned to an actor with whom he had worked twenty years earlier (in the film *Dr. Bessels Verwandlung* (1927)) in Weimar-era Berlin: Curt Bois. In contrast to his bit parts and one-line cameos in so many other Hollywood films, this was a great comic supporting role, one for which Bois was especially fitting. Bois's Count is not only not rich, in fact in a great deal of debt himself and thus in Mercadet's words a "swindler," but, in addition, he does not appear all too interested in Mercadet's daughter or women more generally. Recalling his androgynous turns in *Der Fürst von Pappenheim* and *Charley's Aunt* not to mention his transgressive kiss in *Scherben bringen Glück*, Bois is introduced jumping off a horse, "sprunghaft" [jumpy] (that common term describing Bois in the Weimar press) in recovery from the ride, and subsequently flirting with his future fiancée's dashing suitor. The rather frank admission of queer erotics (the Count's first words in the film are "What's your desire?") may seem surprising given the Hollywood context,

but it recalls not only Bois's Weimar career, not to mention Oswald's most famous film, the sympathetic portrait of homosexuality, *Anders als die Andern* [Different from the others] (1919).<sup>1</sup> Yet the Count's swindling also recalls Bois's Weimar stage performances in productions like Erwin Piscator's *Konjunktur* and Max Reinhardt's *Phaea*, in which his characters of conman in the former and Hollywood agent in the latter, rise to hilarious triumph through duplicity and blackmail. The American quality of these characters is likewise evoked by Bois, who hides behind sofas in a reprise of Harold Lloyd's favorite posture while elsewhere displaying the twitchy facial tics and haughty mannerisms of Chaplin at his most effete and dictatorial, "act[ing]," as Walter Benjamin put it apropos the star's early, unintentional satire of Hitler, "the well-bred man."<sup>2</sup>

While Lloyd and Chaplin's evocation by Bois remains mere reference in *A Loveable Cheat* the third member of their comic troika appears in the flesh. A middle-aged Buster Keaton plays the most comic member of a group of creditors seeking repayment from Mercadet. He is introduced as silent, unable to speak because he wears what Mercadet calls that recent "American invention," false teeth. Named Goulard, Keaton's character eventually starts speaking in that deep, froggy and decidedly uncontinental voice jarring to any fan of the star's silent comedies. Goulard's face is, however, consistently deadpan and he is the constant object of Mercadet's manipulations and fabrications, forced to give the debtor even more money and even lend him his silver for a dinner to host Bois's Count. Paired with a ridiculously tall wife, the diminutive Keaton, along with the even shorter Bois, produces the film's only bit of successful comedy, one that moves away from Oswald's tired, stagey adaptation and into that chaotic,

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Dyer, "Less and More than Women and Men: Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany," *New German Critique* 51 (Autumn 1990), pp. 5-60.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 3, p. 792.



physical realm familiar to both actors: slapstick. Sitting at Mercadet's dinner table, Keaton pulls out Bois's chair for his wife only to have the Count fall on his behind. Toasting the count, Keaton's glass collides with his wife's, spilling wine all over Bois, who becomes victim to Goulard's attempt to remedy the situation, absent-mindedly cleaning the Count's clothing and combing his hair. There is also a brief moment of Keaton's famous physical timing and elastic intuition when he notices Bois piling food on his plate, quickly switching it for his own empty one. While Bois had been favorably compared to Keaton in the twenties— in *Ein steinreicher Mann* Bois was according to one critic “a little schlemihl, who slightly recalls Buster Keaton without being a copy of the great comedian”—here he is on equal footing with the former star, both paired together during the film's opening credits as promise of comic relief.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly did the two get along all too well, with Bois remembering Keaton as an “enchanting man,” sharing conversation (and the inevitable drink) during the film's shoot.<sup>4</sup> Bois had earlier noticed Keaton first picking up checks at a film studio for writing gags, the two men exchanging glances as the latter sized up his soon-to-be co-star in *A Loveable Cheat*.<sup>5</sup> Although the film's comic highpoint arrives during the aforementioned dinner, its narrative climax comes when, as in Balzac's play, a desperate Mercadet enlists Bois's dissembling Count to play his former business partner, a certain Monsieur Godot, who had years earlier run off to America with all his money. Although never seen, the real Godot arrives to save Mercadet, embarrass Keaton for being a bad friend and lend Bois's debtor money.

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<sup>3</sup> *Kinematograph* 31 (1932)

<sup>4</sup> “The Life of an Actor,” XLVII Mostra Internazionale D'Arte Cinematografica.

<sup>5</sup> Ducke, “‘Ich versuche, nicht zu spielen,’ Über Curt Bois im Film,” p. 27.



**Figure 1: Keaton and Bois share screen and comic credit in *A Loveable Cheat***

The image of Keaton and Bois in *A Loveable Cheat* offers a concluding emblem to *Weimar Slapstick*, an uncanny reminder of, on the one hand, slapstick's American roots and, on the other, its eccentric imitations and grotesque translations among Germans. It is also an after-image, one that marks the finitude of the phenomenon charted in the preceding chapters, slapstick's transformation and dissolution within American sound cinema as well as the far more tragic plight of many of those Germans who appreciated and re-functioned slapstick most creatively. It was not enough for Bois or Brecht to flee persecution; they also had to struggle to find any means of support in Hollywood while, in a grotesque twist to the tragedy, increasingly face threats by American authorities suspicious of their political leanings. Returning to Germany soon after filming *A Loveable Cheat*, Bois joined Brecht's Berliner Ensemble and would act on stage and screen for many years before continuing his career in West Berlin. Perhaps his most famous stage role was in the first German production of Brecht's *Mr. Puntilla and His Servant Matti*, playing the drunk Puntilla, a character taken directly from Chaplin's *City Lights*, but also recalling the fallen aristocrat from Oswald's Balzac adaptation. Keaton too was a kind of exile, yet one of his own making, ruined by poor financial decisions, bad marriages and an incapacitating alcoholism. Less tragic than his friend Fatty Arbuckle's demise, Keaton's case was

still an extreme when compared to his other comic peers. Chaplin, moving away from slapstick first in *Monsieur Verdoux* and then in *Limelight* (1952) (featuring a cameo from a rehabilitated Keaton) would be persecuted like his German friends Brecht and Eisler, following their lead in fleeing to Europe. Lloyd would continue to make films into the forties, increasingly lame and often deeply conservative sound comedies where the vim and vigor of his go-getter persona had disappeared, no longer a suitable representative of a country overcome first by depression and then war. Felix the Cat had virtually disappeared from the screen and while the surreal anarchism of the Fleischer Brothers and Warner Brothers would amp up throughout the thirties, Disney would progressively overwhelm competition with the rise of its cartoon features, which gave up surrealism and “grotesque exaggeration” for the sake of kitschy fairy tales and saccharine fables. The double concern of this dissertation, the two sides united by its title, lose their mutually animating force in a world where bodies are chased, shocked and distracted by far graver threats, where Chaplin’s political instincts as a performer were no longer welcomed in a conservative and increasingly fearful Hollywood, where some of slapstick’s most inspired fans lived on as refugees and exiles. Chaplin himself admitted that he would never have made *The Great Dictator* if he had know the full extent of the Third Reich’s atrocities. The essential political, psychological and corporeal elements of the pairings I have analyzed here (Chaplin-Brecht, Felix-Theobald, Keaton-Hausmann and Lloyd-Bois) would seem to be consigned in this era to the margins, from Bois and Keaton’s comic play in *A Loveable Cheat* to Brecht’s re-functioning of Chaplin’s *The Kid* for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Like the cinema of attractions that preceded and informed the slapstick or cartoon shorts and features of the teens and twenties, do these elements go, in Tom Gunning’s words, underground as a “never dominant but always sensed current,” waiting at crucial moments to be innervated, a shocking, uncanny and

synaesthetic life resurrected?<sup>6</sup> If Weimar culture's "creative understanding" of slapstick offers, in its ceaseless *Verfremdung* of American models, icons and ideologies, the most illuminating of screens for experiencing this grotesque genre and its eccentric stars, what legacies does this transnational, cosmopolitan network offer the posterity of the post-war era?

To answer such questions, it is worth recalling the ending of Oswald's *A Loveable Cheat*, in which the unseen Godot miraculously arrives to ensure Mercadet's prosperity. While Samuel Beckett consistently denied having read Balzac's play before writing his *Waiting for Godot* the playwright was never asked if he had been inspired by its American film adaptation. This is curious because of Beckett's eventual collaboration with Buster Keaton in the author's sole cinematic project, *Film*, directed in 1964 by Alan Schneider. Although Keaton was not Beckett's first choice he turned out to be absolutely fitting for a film—in many ways *the* film—about the essence of perception in its cinematic form. Keaton's final, self-annihilating look into the camera at *Film*'s end, the revelation of his perception of himself, recalls the cinematographic quality of the actor's own gaze, the association of his look with that of the camera, anticipated already by *The Cameraman*. More broadly it speaks to a re-functioning of slapstick occurring not over space—as in the case of *Weimar Slapstick*—but over time, a temporal distance from slapstick's heyday to its convalescence and refurbishment in the post-war era. This distance is most visible in Keaton's ancient face, its almost Greek beauty—recall the image of the actor as Venus de Milo—transformed into a ruin for the present, an antique from the past. *Film* straddles between these periods of time as much as it does between the perceiving eye of the camera (called "E" in Beckett's script) and the elusive, frightful object of Keaton's character ("O"). Taking place in the period of "about 1929," *Film* situates Keaton in a context that is both familiar and estranged, the

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<sup>6</sup> Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," p. 61.

very year his final silent feature, *Spite Marriage*, was released. Watching *Film* one cannot help but feel caught between the film's inter-war present and Keaton's own ruined present of 1964. Although the film is a philosophical exploration of the nature of perception—the title alone is a bit of a give away in this regard—its references to slapstick not only in the form of Keaton, but also in a series of attempted gags with different animals helpfully measure the distance between Beckett's unique art and the antique genre as much as their intimacy and mutual dependence.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of *Waiting for Godot* Beckett insisted that his protagonists wear bowlers and the influence of Laurel and Hardy on Vladimir and Estragon is readily apparent to anyone familiar with the slapstick team. Before Keaton Chaplin was the Irishman's first choice for *Film* and Keaton was futilely sought by the playwright to play Lucky in *Godot*'s American premiere. Just as he straddled the modernism of the inter-war period and developing post-modern aesthetics so too does Beckett offer a telling answer to the question of American slapstick's relevancy as resource for critics, artists and intellectuals. While the spatial circulations at stake in *Weimar Slapstick* were dependent on a global proliferation of films, commodities and ideas, an overabundance that made a figure like Chaplin an inevitable point of discussion and influence in a setting as dynamic as Weimar Berlin, the temporal distension of slapstick's legacy was far more fragile, in need of a very active labor of recall and renewal. In the same decade Beckett turned to Keaton slapstick was being screened for a new generation of viewers—aided by film clubs, collectors, archivists and festival programmers—who were discovering the genre's attractions and sensations for the first time. As Chaplin, Lloyd and Keaton aged their cinematic infancy was celebrated once more. Keaton returned to Germany for a film festival honor, posing

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<sup>7</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, "Ireland's greatest film," *Essays Critical and Clinical*, translated by Smith and Greco (London: Verso, 1998); Simon Critchley, "To be or not to be is not the question," On Beckett's *Film*," *Film-Philosophy* 11.2 (August 2007), pp. 108-121.

in front of a train in Munich while Chaplin received an Academy Award for lifetime achievement, a bestowal engineered by a counter-cultural generation of Hollywood talent. Jack Lemmon befriended Harold Lloyd, evoking his energy for getting ahead in the business world of employees and bosses in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* while, at the other end of the spectrum, Yvonne Rainer would attend screenings of Keaton's films at the Museum of Modern Art, developing dance pieces influenced by the actor's way with objects. With the resurgence of scholarly and intellectual interest in film, an interest that had flourished most forcefully in Germany in the teens and twenties, new biographies and studies of slapstick were published in France, Germany and the United States, not to mention collections of prior writings on film, including above all seminal first responses to the iconic Tramp. For both new left and neo-avant-garde the insights of Brecht and Benjamin would be especially inspiring and when the 68er Peter Sloterdijk sought, in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, an image for the "bashed ego" evoked by *Mann ist Mann* he chose *Modern Times* and the Tramp's comic plight in the gigantic gears of a factory machine. At the same time in which the *Critique* was published the Tramp would recur in a highly dissimilar context, hawking personal computers in a series of television commercials and print advertisements for IBM, his twitchy neurasthenia of the assembly line anachronistically tied to the Post-Fordist labor of corporate management and financial speculation. As the present separates itself further and further from cinema's silent past more effort is made to resurrect slapstick's modern times, its once contemporary take on factories, automobiles, skyscrapers and, not least, the cinema itself. Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011) dilates this separation even further while simultaneously overcoming it, his mid-thirties protagonists enjoying a retrospective of *Safety Last* while *Hugo*'s own viewers watch this film within the film wearing 3D glasses. Even before *Hugo*, the famous skyscraper sequence that provides the climax of that film had already

been converted into 3D at the request of the granddaughter of Lloyd, who had himself participated in the first wave of 3D photography, taking over 200,000 “stereoscopic pictures.”<sup>8</sup> Germany, meanwhile, is still a consistently fascinating setting for appeals to slapstick, whether it be hack director Uwe Boll’s promotion of a 3D refurbishment of Chaplin’s early films or May Day events in Berlin, where Reinhardt’s *Deutsches Theater* screens *Modern Times* and autonomists advertise their protest using the same image referred to by Sloterdijk. Chaplin’s film has been likewise referenced in a permanent exhibition of the *Neue National Galerie*’s collection, first with its title, “Moderne Zeiten” [Modern times] and second with a fascinating pairing in one of the exhibition’s galleries: the factory scene from Chaplin’s film, displayed by a flat screen television, is catty corner to Hannah Höch’s landmark Weimar montage, *Schnitt mit dem Kuchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands*. As we know from the case of Höch’s lover Hausmann, not to mention their colleagues in Berlin Dada Grosz, Heartfield, Baader and Blumenfeld, this pairing reflects a very real historical encounter, one that curators and scholars have turned to re-frame our understanding of the relationship between cinema’s mass culture and the political and aesthetic ambitions of the avant-garde.

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<sup>8</sup> “Famous Harold Lloyd Scene Converted to 3D,” (2/16/2011) <http://www.3dfocus.co.uk/3d-news-2/famous-harold-lloyd-scene-converted-to-3d/2218>.



**Figure 2: *Modern Times* as May Day Protest**

In the preceding work I have sought to complicate and enrich our understanding of this relationship in a myriad of ways, using the particular instance of slapstick to re-read Weimar culture all the while alienating slapstick by placing it in a radically dissimilar context. Whether it be Brecht's gestic politicization of Chaplin's lumpenproletariat or the inverted, "negative" expressionism of Leni and Seiber's *Rebus* series, I have attended to the particular historical features of such German-American encounters by bringing a variety of archives together. This was necessary precisely because of the temporal re-functioning of slapstick outlined above, the legacy of slapstick as it has been inherited and transformed since the twenties by filmmakers, artists and scholars. The historical archive of *Weimar Slapstick*, produced within the particular media-sphere of the Weimar Republic (personal letters and diaries, programmatic manifestos, intellectual documents, newspaper reviews, advertisements, songs etc.), is thus inextricably tied to the sediment of appropriations and reflections produced out of that first archive's transmission and transformation. Re-constructing each in terms of the other is necessary because so many



recent scholarly and artistic encounters with slapstick have been informed by the Weimar generation, whether it be the Dadaists or the Frankfurt School. Slapstick was not merely a function of discourse or a screen for fanciful projections, but existed as a material force that moved across media in diverse ways. In light of Beckett's *Film* we might isolate one particular feature as the defining trait of slapstick as a cinematic genre unique to modernity: the reduction or transformation of the human to the status of an object. Certainly this was Beckett's insight into Keaton's machine gags with his casting of the comedian as the "Object" of his film, but it was perhaps most paradigmatically stated by Brecht, who insisted, "As soon as the human being appears as an object, the causal connections become decisive. Similarly the great American comedies depict the human being as an object..."<sup>9</sup> Following Brecht's point, I have analyzed many other kinds of connections suggested by slapstick, from the connection of "eccentric feeling" in Keaton and Hausmann's fashionable, dancing synaesthesia to the satirical connections of Bois's imitation of American schlemihl Lloyd. Like the great machines, structures and spaces that obsessed these American eccentrics, connection itself has been the great obsession of *Weimar Slapstick* itself, tracing uncanny links and echoes from Hollywood to Berlin and back again. Because of the Republic's complex history and extra-territorial spacing *connection* is the name of the game. Like Deleuze and Guattari's desiring-machines, such connections are not smooth or continuous, but link only by virtue of a certain difference or disjunction, a gap or point where the machinery breaks down. Such machines work only by virtue of not working properly, which is precisely the operational and functionalist gambit of slapstick itself, the genre's interest in infusing the ends-means logic of technical machines with a chaotic, thrilling *jouissance*. Like the "maliciousness of objects" or Lacan's lamella, the objectification of the human is matched by

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<sup>9</sup> Bertolt Brecht on *Film and Radio*, p. 171.

the uncanny subjectification of objects, the personality and obstinacy of things. Yet in contrast to expressionism or *Neue Sachlichkeit* this animation was in slapstick accepted and often celebrated, less an agent of anxiety for human loss and more an opportunity for discovering new, unforeseen capacities and insights divorced from hide-bound categories of subject and object. Mark Winokur has given a cogent account of slapstick's essential feature, arguing that in it the world is "reconceived as an entity that utilizes its own oppressiveness as the very buffer protecting the individual from itself, turning the environment into the subject of comedy by protecting the self with what threatens the self. This makes a negative definition of the self positive, thus rendering difference attractive."<sup>10</sup> Winokur's primary example of this comic reversal of reification is all too familiar: the Tramp caught within the assembly line in *Modern Times*. The eccentric, the very cipher for this "attractive" difference, does not take absolute exception from this threatening world, but rather utilizes it as the very means to find a new kind of subjectivity. That is the very definition of the eccentric, its ambiguous location within and without, neither a complete hero nor a tragic victim, but something in between. Winokur's contemporary scholarly point was made not only by familiar faces like Kracauer, but also by daily critics like those at *Das Tage-Buch*, who said of Lloyd in *Safety Last*, "He remains the victor because he defeats the city with its own means."<sup>11</sup>

In my "Introduction," I stated that these eccentrics should not be construed as angels of history, but rather as object lessons. This is no easy task as far too many scholars have seen Chaplin's Tramp or Keaton's deadpan as figures of redemption, achieving transcendence from the fallen world of modernity or otherwise traumatically re-stating or allegorizing this fallen state all the more emphatically. As I also stated at the start, this dichotomous account, by which utopia

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<sup>10</sup> Winokur, *American Laughter*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Das Tage-Buch*, 19 (10/4/24).

and dystopia are merely two sides of the same coin, has dominated both popular and scholarly accounts of the Weimar Republic not to mention particular takes on the reception of slapstick among notable German intellectuals and philosophers. Not surprisingly do the messianic claims of Benjamin, Kracauer and Adorno precede such an account, with Benjamin's image of an angel of history, allegorically envisioning the ruinous catastrophe of historical progress, seemingly anticipated by the angelic interlude in Chaplin's first feature, *The Kid*.



**Figure 3: Chaplin's fallen angel in *The Kid***

In Wim Wenders' *Himmel über Berlin* [Wings of Desire] (1987) Benjamin's angel returns. One of the most important German films of the post-war era, *Himmel* follows two angels, Damiel and Cassiel, through divided Berlin, caught between heaven and humanity with no clear path for reaching either. Blessed with a physical capacity to travel throughout the city and a psychic capacity to hear the thoughts of its residents, Damiel and Cassiel spend much of their time in the *Staatsbibliothek* [state library], around the corner from a barren Potsdamer Platz on the edge of the Berlin Wall. As we are introduced to the library's clean, cavernous reading room a din of voices is heard, the sound of each patron's thoughts as they scan books and daydream. A woman is heard reading to herself, "Walter Benjamin bought Paul Klee's

watercolor *Angelus Novus* in 1921.” Amidst all the bodies and voices, Damiel concludes his visit by listening to an old man, climbing up the library steps with a cane. The man stops, wipes at his nose, as his voice is heard by both the angel and the film’s audience: “Speak to me, oh Muse, of the storyteller [der Erzähler], driven to the ends of the earth, both infant and ancient, and through him reveal Everyman.”

This man, both ancient and child-like, is named Homer and he is played by Curt Bois. Bois was 85 when *Himmel über Berlin* was made and having started his film career at the age of 9, having starred in cinemas Wilhelmine, Weimar, American, East German and West German, he has had, still to this day, the longest career of any actor in the history of film. He was chosen for the role of Homer precisely because of this career, because his life suggested the entire trajectory of not only German cinema (excluding, of course, that of the Third Reich), but of Germany’s history in the twentieth century. While Damien and Cassiel directly evoke Benjamin’s angel of history Bois evokes “The Storyteller,” an essay that insists on the loss of experience and the concomitant alienation brought about by new media like that of film.<sup>12</sup> A famously antinomian thinker Benjamin was in all things ambiguous, dialectical or even contradictory and this text stands on the other side of an essay like “Experience and Poverty,” where the collapse of experience is relished with anarchic glee in the creaturely image of Mickey Mouse.<sup>13</sup> In *Himmel über Berlin* Homer, speaking with the inherent gravitas Bois cannot help but express with his face and “broken voice” (Homer’s words), guards against the storms of history, preserving the past by passing it on to the present in the form of a story, part of an oral tradition that Bois himself relished throughout his final decades, publishing several memoirs and offering

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<sup>12</sup> See Jonathan Bordo, “The Homer of Potsdamer Platz—Walter Benjamin in Wim Wenders’ *Sky over Berlin / Wings of Desire*, A Critical Topography,” *Images 2* (2009), pp. 86-109.

<sup>13</sup> See John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

interviews to countless German journalists fascinated by his career, which started on stage at the age of eight in Leo Fall's *Der fidele Bauer* [The Happy Farmer] and peaked, eight decades later, on the very stage where he had debuted: accepting a Felix European Film Award for best supporting actor for his portrayal of Homer. Like his former co-star Keaton before him, Bois would the following year be silent for a piece written by Samuel Beckett, performing in *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Like Benjamin and Bois before him, Wenders too is fascinated by American popular culture, by Disney comics, rock and roll and the rebellious cinema of Nicholas Ray. Like many before and after him, he sought to integrate the democratic energies of American mass culture within various German traditions including above all the films of the Weimar era (especially Murnau and Lang), but despite his casting of Bois he has, more often, extended the melancholic vision of Benjamin's angel. Speaking of his angels Wenders has said "There have always been childhood images as invisible, omnipresent observers, there was...the old hunger for transcendence, and also a longing for the exact opposite—the longing for comedy."<sup>14</sup> If Wenders has, throughout his oeuvre, consistently remained on the side of transcendence, he at least hints at that transcendence's inversion in the form of comedy, the form that Curt Bois excelled at as schlemihl, as a German-Jewish Harold Lloyd. Recalling humanity's childhood with his smile, Homer speaks for the power of memory to confront and redeem a shattered present.

Unfortunately Wenders himself did not have the same strength in recalling the past. After Bois's death in 1991, Wenders turned to Heinz Rühmann to take over the part in a sequel to *Himmel, In weiter Ferne, so nah!* [Far away so close!] (1993), which would be dedicated to Bois. Furious that Wenders would turn to Nazi Germany's most popular comedian to stand in her husband's

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *ibid* p. 101.

place, Bois's widow Dagmar demanded that Wenders remove the dedication, justifiably angry that the director had equated an anti-Fascist opponent and exiled victim of the National Socialists with one of its fellow-traveling cheerleaders.

In a later scene in the *Staatsbibliothek* Homer pages through August Sander's landmark collection of Weimar portraits, two unseen pages containing portraits of Raoul Hausmann as dancer and Dadaist. Having spent time reading about Bois, Hausmann and their slapstick inspirations in this very same room, I conclude with this moment, adding my own invocation of Benjamin to contrast with Wenders' citation, one that speaks to a different angel of history, more comic than melancholic, materialist rather than transcendental. As Homer looks over photographs from the past, one wonders if Bois himself sees a familiar face, someone he once knew before he was forced to leave his beloved Berlin. Homer's thoughts are heard once more: "But no one has thus far succeeded in singing an epic of peace. What is it about peace that its inspiration is not enduring?" Before this question Wenders presents archival images of dead children from World War II, images of history's catastrophic storm, to recall Benjamin's famous thesis on the philosophy of history. Yet there is another way of answering this question. In one of his *Denkbilder* [thought-images], Benjamin presents a series of figures for various kinds of success or lack thereof. For the "genius case" of a "lack of success" [Erfolglosigkeit] Benjamin offers a perhaps none too surprising representative: "Chaplin or the schlemihl. The schlemihl needs no push; he stumbles only over his own feet. The schlemihl is the only angel of peace who passes on earth."<sup>15</sup> Although this passage recalls the messianism of that other, more famous passage on angels, it suggests a comic inversion of that reference's apocalyptic presage. Like Chaplin's angel in *The Kid*, the violence here is self-inflicted, the schlemihl's stumbles come

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften Band 4*, p. 406.

from distraction or confusion, from forgetting one's self in the comic chaos of the present. If this angel is one of peace then it is not a peace divorced from violence, rather the violence is something that, as in all slapstick, comes through a kind of shocking self-alienation, one that transforms commanding, autonomous subject into unruly, liberated object. In contrast to the angels that haunt Wenders' film, Chaplin, Bois and Keaton reveal, in their own imitable and imitating ways, a ludic encounter with the storms of modernity. As in the finale of *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, Keaton's most theatrical, most Beckettian film, the eccentric does not seek to transcend the storm, but stumbles directly into its eye.



**Figure 4: Keaton finds himself on stage during *Steamboat Bill Jr.*'s climactic storm**

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