1. “The Fun Factory”

*Class, Comedy, and Popular Culture, 1912–1914*

One has to hand this to the Americans: with slapstick films they have created a form that offers a counterweight to their reality. If in that reality they subject the world to an often unbearable discipline, the film in turn dismantles this self-imposed order quite forcefully.

*Siegfried Kracauer, “Artistisches und Amerikanisches” (1926)*

When, in 1912, the *Moving Picture World* critic W. Stephen Bush lamented the “absence of genuine humor” in a majority of comic films, he was merely making explicit a perception that had long been accepted at the grass-roots level.\(^1\) Feeling short-changed by an industry that had drastically cut back its comedy output since 1908, theater owners had taken to writing to trade journals to voice their dissatisfactions. “There is too much high class drama, which cannot be understood by the average working man,” noted one such exhibitor. “A very large proportion seems to thoroughly enjoy the old Essanay slap-stick variety.”\(^2\) Filmmakers, too, acknowledged the demand: “Can you write a good comedy?” *Photoplay* asked its readers in October 1912. “Try it, for the producer will pay more attention to it just now than any other.”\(^3\) “Comedies, comedies, comedies,” a studio scenarist demanded in another issue of the same publication. “Get your scriptwriting readers to try their hand at comedies; we need them, all film producers want them.”\(^4\)

No doubt there was reason to be thankful, then, when the formation of a new, all-comedy company was announced that fall. No doubt, too, the new concern would benefit from the perceived weakness of its competition. Within weeks of its first releases, fan magazines were heaping praise on “the good work of the new company,” observing that it had become “in a very short time one of the most popular brands on the screen.”\(^5\) The Keystone Film Company had been born.

That much—and that much alone—can be stated with confidence. The picture blurs, however, when we ask why Keystone proved so popular. The
above account might suggest a simple issue of supply and demand; and, in film history, this is how Keystone’s early success has usually been interpreted. For Kalton Lahue, Keystone prospered because exhibitors were beginning “to cry out for more and better comedies”; for Eileen Bowser, the company was a “veritable fountain of slapstick” that relieved the drought of previous years. Such an interpretation, valid as far as it goes, leaves untouched the question of content: what was it about Keystone films—as opposed to comedies of other brands—that made them such a success? After all, there were other comic filmmakers in the years immediately prior to Keystone’s birth, and many of them had achieved considerable popularity by the time Keystone arrived on the scene. The comedies of French manufacturer Pathé Frères continued to score well on the American market during this period, with the comic Max Linder frequently singled out by critics as one of “the world’s greatest moving picture comedians” or, more simply, “a sure draw.” The Essanay comedian Augustus Carney created the character of “Alkali Ike” in the spring of 1911 and, beginning with Alkali Ike’s Auto (May 1911), launched a series of popular comedies set in the fictional western town of Snakeville: such was their success that by late 1912, Carney’s personal appearances at vaudeville houses were provoking “wild demonstrations on the part of his admirers,” and department stores began selling Alkali Ike dolls at $1.50 apiece. Nor was Carney’s popularity unchallenged among homegrown comedians and producers. Until his death in 1915, Vitagraph’s rotund John Bunny won consistent acclaim for his appearances in domestic comedies, achieving a measure of international fame in the process. Production figures at Biograph likewise reflect a renewed interest in comedy, with comic films accounting for 43 and 48 percent of the studio’s fiction output in 1911 and 1912 respectively (compared to a low of 32 percent in 1908).

It was, in fact, at Biograph that many of Keystone’s founding members, including the company’s head, Mack Sennett, got their start in motion pictures; still, it would not be until their work for Keystone that critics began to speak of a new standard—a breakthrough, even—in comic filmmaking. As Moving Picture World claimed only a year after the company’s debut: “If you are in communication with any comedy company and the editor has tried to tell you what is wanted, it’s dollars to doughnuts that you’ve been told, ‘like Keystone.’” Again, then: why Keystone? Years later, Sennett offered a simple answer, situating the studio’s success in terms of the culture and values of his audience. “Motion picture audiences,” he suggested, “are seldom made up one hundred per cent of tycoons, heroes, or millionaires.” For the “common people,” he noted, there can be nothing
funnier than “the reduction of authority to absurdity,” and it was this principle that became the centerpiece of his comedy. An examination of Keystone’s comic principles will have to wait until later in this chapter, but Sennett’s argument offers a useful starting point for analysis. It is true that motion picture audiences hardly consisted of tycoons and millionaires: a 1910 Russell Sage Foundation survey claimed that fully 78 percent of New York City’s moviegoers came from the blue-collar sector; and workers and their families continued to compose the bulk of the moviegoing public at least until World War I. If Keystone’s success cannot adequately be described in terms of supply and demand, then it seems appropriate to frame the problem in terms that look to the sociology of cultural production, examining how the studio’s films engaged the values and practices of the “common people” of whom Sennett wrote. For the present chapter, this means interpreting Keystone—its films, its mode of production, and extratextual discourse on the studio—in terms of the material connections that bound it to the culture, values, and experiences of America’s urban working class. And it means asking a tiered series of questions leading from the conditions of working-class life to the formal properties of Keystone’s output. Who were the key filmmakers and what were their social backgrounds? What was work like at Keystone and how can it be understood in relation to workers’ experiences of labor? Where did Keystone position its product relative to film industry developments and how did its output address questions of social hierarchy? What, finally, were the pleasures and meanings that the films offered their working-class audience? The answers to these questions require a close reading of Keystone’s early years; but they also promise a historical understanding of slapstick as specifically and structurally connected to turn-of-the-century class formation: at once a “sociology” and an “aesthetics.”

“GO DOWN TO THE BOWERY AND START IN BURLESQUE”: POPULAR CULTURE AND THE WORKING CLASS

In 1900, a twenty-year-old boilermaker, tired of the debilitating heat and backbreaking toil of his ten-hour-a-day job at the local ironworks, left the family boardinghouse in East Berlin, Connecticut, and journeyed to New York in the hope of finding success at the Metropolitan Opera. Armed with a letter of introduction from the musical comedy star Marie Dressler, the young Irish-Canadian immigrant headed for the offices of David Belasco, then the most celebrated impresario of the Broadway stage. The brief audition that followed left Belasco deeply unimpressed. “Let’s be practical about
you,” Belasco supposedly remarked. “If you won’t go home, young man, the best way for you to start is this: go down to the Bowery and start in burlesque. . . . And it strikes me forcefully that burlesque is something you might be uncommonly good at.”

Such, in brief, was Sennett’s version of his entry into show business, as recounted in his 1954 autobiography *King of Comedy*. The hard facts, recently uncovered by the film historian Simon Louvish, uncover a slightly different narrative, giving the lie somewhat to Sennett’s rugged self-image as “The Iron Boy Who Wanted to Sing at the Met” (Louvish’s phrase). Sennett’s career as a boilermaker seems, in fact, to have lasted all of one year (1897), after which the family moved to Northampton, Mass., where he worked at a pulp mill, remaining there until at least 1901. Yet whatever its embellishments, Sennett’s account remains of interest for the glimpse it provides into the cultural milieu of turn-of-the-century New York. American urban culture had, by this time, taken on the aspect of a hierarchically ordered world, in which leisure and recreational pursuits were stratified along lines determined by ethnicity, gender, and, above all, class. Broadway was the mecca of theatrical entertainment for New York’s leisured classes, and immigrant workers (whether boilermakers or pulp mill employees) simply belonged elsewhere. Fictitious or not, Belasco’s injunction to “go down to the Bowery and start in burlesque” resonates with the force of cultural policing, an attempt to regulate the boundaries linking cultural practice and class status. Sennett himself remembered Broadway as a deeply alienating place, “as far removed from anything in my experience as Versailles from a general store in Vermont.” The theatrical stars, he recalled, moved in a world of “tail coats, ermine wraps, and tasteful supper parties that were stimulating to hear about but in which I naturally had no part.”

Not that there was no entertainment for urban workers and immigrants. The recreational world of the working class was, however, quite different from the culture of the dominant classes. By the late nineteenth century, a panoply of cheap amusements had developed outside the orbit of the “respectable” middle-class world of concert halls, museums, and the legitimate stage. Temporally distinct from the discipline of the workplace and spatially separate from the responsibilities of home, burlesque houses and saloons offered wage-earning men a refuge from the demands of their daily lives. Dance halls and amusement parks fomented a mixed-sex (or “heterosexual”) culture in which young working women experimented with new attitudes toward sexual expressiveness and personal style. A new culture of popular sensationalism—whose forms included dime-novels, “blood
and thunder" stage melodrama, and traveling daredevil acts, among others—was supplying working-class and white-collar customers with commodified thrills that vividly contradicted the genteel interpretation of culture as, in Matthew Arnold’s words, “the study and pursuit of perfection.” To these sites of recreation, another would soon be added, one that would lead to the massive expansion of the filmmaking industry in which Sennett eventually made his name: the crude storefront “nickelodeons” in which immigrant and native-born workers enjoyed short, one-reel movies for the price of a nickel or a dime.

But it was at a burlesque house that Sennett first encountered this milieu, and it proved to be an experience he would remember the rest of his life. A bawdy, variety-style entertainment largely frequented by working men, burlesque appealed to Sennett with the force of revelation. “The round, fat girls in nothing much doing their bumps and grinds, the German-dialect comedians, and especially the cops and tramps with their bed slats and bladders appealed to me as being funny people. Their approach to life was earthy and understandable. They whaled the daylights out of pretension. They made fun of themselves and the human race. They reduced convention, dogma, stuffed shirts, and Authority to nonsense, and then blossomed into pandemonium. . . . [A]s a little guy, as a thoroughly accredited representative of the Common Man . . . , I thought all this was delightful.” Here was a form of theater that, as Sennett described it, allowed workers to escape feelings of alienation and exclusion, to laugh at the spectacle of a world in which conventions and hierarchies were gleefully overturned. Sennett had found a theatrical milieu with which he could identify, and soon afterward, he made his debut (as the back end of a pantomime horse, he recalled) at Miner’s Bowery Burlesque.

Sennett’s pungent description of burlesque provides a useful entry point for our analysis, since it foregrounds relations tying popular humor to the experiences of the urban working class. Physical comedy was, of course, hardly an invention of the New World: in the modern era, its lineage extends back to, and beyond, European street theater of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as commedia dell’arte and forms of carnival. (It was, in fact, English-style clowning that provided the first formalized tradition of knockabout on U.S. soil, following the development of the circus during the Jacksonian era and the popularity of circus clowns like John Gosson.) Knockabout’s characteristically American form only emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, through contact with the sphere of working-class leisure. Slapstick was paradigmatic of the postbellum culture of working-class sensationalism, at once intensely
corporeal and resoundingly opposed to cultivated standards. The clown here assumed a distinctly proletarian stance, speaking to, for, and about the working class: the “nut” comics and knockabout turns that began to appear in concert saloons of the 1860s and 1870s were commonly stage Irishmen, in whose performances tumble-down comedy was combined with songs about labor, strikes, and payday.23 Vaudeville historian Douglas Gilbert describes the popular performers Needham and Kelly, who did a song-and-clog-dance act (“We can dig a sewer, lay a pipe or carry the hod /...W e ’ r e the advocates of all hard workin’ men”) that ended in “bumps”—jargon for bruising falls on the head, neck, and shoulders.24 Physical humor, in such instances, took on the lineaments of a “popular realist” aesthetic, providing a nearly direct translation of workers’ embodied relation to labor into forms of comic spectacle.25

It was this relation to working-class culture that supported slapstick’s full flowering in the 1880s and 1890s, with the massive expansion of the market for cheap amusements. “It was because of the great number of these cheap places of amusement and the impulse that they gave to jig-dancing, the singing of comic songs, and the reproduction of knockabout variety acts among the boys of the town,” the Harper’s Weekly critic James L. Ford wrote in 1904, that there had emerged a “positive mania” for the slapstick style, as pioneered by performers like Weber and Fields and Dick and Sam Bernard.26 Explanations for that “mania” differed at the time—Ford attributed it to a need for “pure diversion” among those subjected to the pace of modern industry, others saw in it a reflection of “that common calamity of proletarianism, arrested development”—but few disputed its connection to the disreputable tastes of the urban proletariat.27 Slapstick, in its late-nineteenth-century development, became increasingly incompatible with refinement: one of the familiar clichés of comedy producers seeking “respectability” was the claim that they had excised all rough-and-tumble from their shows. Such humor even became a target of repressive legislation in New York when, for a brief period in late 1907, blue laws were invoked to prohibit Sunday performances of “acrobatic acts, juggling, trained animals, and ‘slapstick’ acts.”28

If, then, slapstick differed from the standards of genteel culture, those differences were themselves rooted in the material conditions of working-class life and were significant in large part as a function of class hierarchy. Cheap theater, as a major repository of such humor, became a venue in which performers and audience members could set forth and express, through their bodies, alternate values and standards of comportment. Sennett’s own account clearly records the worker’s vicarious pleasure in
witnessing genteel standards subverted (“convention, dogma, stuffed shirts, and Authority [reduced] to nonsense”). “Amateur nights” meanwhile offered an institutionalized setting in which would-be comics could, in turn, emulate those subversions. Popular comedy thus offered a framework within which workers’ fantasies and aspirations took shape, a corporeal horizon for negotiating alienated social relations at the level of direct physical immediacy. In a world where opportunities were limited for people with little education or capital, a career in vaudeville or burlesque even held out possibilities for upward mobility, promising an alternate route to wealth and status: as Minnie Marx, mother of the Marx Brothers, put it, “Where else can people who don’t know anything make so much money?”29 This was a sentiment that would have rung true for the filmmakers and performers who came together to form the Keystone Film Company: one way or another, most of them lay beyond the pale of native-born, middle-class society; one way or another, most arrived at comic careers as a way of throwing off the shackles of social circumstance. Accordingly, a comparison of their early careers sheds light on the lines of intersection that bound the forms of popular culture to the personalities in which they were embodied.

The pattern is exemplified by the early biography of Mack Sennett, the onetime boilermaker who came to Broadway with a self-bestowed name and a keen desire to escape the daily grind. Born Michael Sinnott, the future filmmaker was raised within the immigrant and working-class communities in which popular amusements had their roots, and his childhood experiences left him with a lifelong empathy for the values of working people. Recalling life on the Quebec farm where he grew up, Sennett fondly remembered the boisterous Irish-Canadian wakes in which his uncle would perform “house-shattering jigs” while other men would “twist the wrist,” straining their ham-sized biceps to see who could force the other man’s hand to the table.”30 After moving to the steelmaking town of East Berlin, Connecticut, in 1897, the Sinnott family fell into the pattern of many Irish immigrants in America, abandoning farm life to find unskilled factory work—in young Michael Sinnott’s case, a job at the American Iron Works. (Historians of Irish immigrant experience have noted how the Irish were primarily a phenomenon of urban life in the mid-to-late-nineteenth-century United States, where they constituted a large body of urban floating labor, virtually a “new” working class of unskilled immigrants.)31 There, he formed close associations with fellow ironworkers who lodged at his mother’s boardinghouse. They were, Sennett remembered, “big men with appetites, and the quantities of cabbage, meat loaf, fresh hot bread,
biscuits, pie, buttermilk, and gallon tins of coffee they consumed were prodigious. . . . In the evening they gathered around the fireplace in the living room to discuss William Jennings Bryan and William Howard Taft, or to play checkers, and cribbage, or to talk shop.” Yet his own experience at the ironworks—“struggling, lifting, hammering, and getting burned”—left him unsatisfied and, by his own account, he channeled his aspirations into daily singing lessons.32

His newfound operatic ambitions seem to have led him to Broadway some time in early 1902, but brought little of the success he sought. Although there is scant verifiable information about this period in his life, it appears that Sennett failed to progress beyond anonymous appearances as a chorus boy in musical comedies and operettas. The titles listed in his autobiography include King Dodo (1902), A Chinese Honeymoon (1902), and Mlle. Modiste (1906), but much of his chorus work seems to have been performed at the Casino Theatre, a cheap musical comedy house that, according to New York’s Dramatic Mirror, appealed to “the Tenderloin element.”33 Only once did Sennett receive any kind of credit notice from the theatrical press—for what must have been a fairly inauspicious role as “Servant” in Rida Johnson Young’s 1907 hit The Boys of Company B.34

Sennett’s frustrations, as recounted in his autobiography, point to an important ambivalence in his own social attitudes. Imbued with a commoner’s distaste for social airs, he was caught between desire for theatrical success and thinly veiled resentment of the privileged world in which Broadway stars moved. Although he later admitted to having been “awed” by Broadway, he nonetheless dismissed the “high tones” of theatrical society as the “kind of thing [that] never did become my métier.”35 He may have wanted to escape his class origins, but he remained profoundly shaped by them. (Even during the years of his Keystone success, he would maintain uncommonly deep ties to his family, helping out his uncle John Foy with a job in the studio carpentry department and sending constant financial support to his mother’s farm in Danville, Quebec.)36 Thus it was that he embraced burlesque—a place where he could become something other than a worker and yet maintain contact with the plebeian culture with which he identified. At Miner’s Bowery theater, for example, Sennett performed in comic skits for an audience largely composed of recent immigrants. (In the words of the Dramatic Mirror, the Bowery Burlesque was known for “attract[ing] people of all nationalities.”)37 As another source of revenue, Sennett journeyed into the streets themselves with the “The Cloverdale Boys,” a street-corner Irish quartet available for hire at “weddings in Brooklyn, funerals in the Bronx, [and] Irish wakes all over town.”38
Finally, in January 1908, he set about finding work in the still unrespectable medium of motion pictures, offering his services as an actor at Biograph’s East Fourteenth Street studio. This time, his persistence would be rewarded: Sennett’s career took a decisive turn and, after three years’ acting for Biograph, he took over as director of the studio’s comedy unit.

Sennett had arrived at Biograph after almost a decade of failure in other forms of popular entertainment; his future colleagues followed different paths, but were similarly motivated by a desire for self-transformation. For Ford Sterling, the road to motion pictures would prove just as circuitous, albeit paved with more success. Born George Ford Stich in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in 1882, Sterling grew up in relatively prosperous circumstances around Texas and in Chicago, where his father George Stich Sr., a second-generation German, worked in the cattle trade. Despite a secure middle-class upbringing—including brief enrolment at Notre Dame College (then a Catholic boarding school)—Sterling seems to have rebelled after his father’s death threw the family on hard times: he left home and college at age eighteen and soon joined John Robinson’s Circus as “Keno, the Boy Clown.” His ensuing career seems to have spanned almost the entire array of popular entertainments—from professional baseball to vaudeville and Mississippi boat shows, from “straight” drama with the Frank Keenan Players to German caricatures in musical comedies such as *King Casey*—eventually bringing him to Sennett’s Biograph unit in the spring of 1912.39

Other future Keystoners meanwhile took a more direct route into the movies, although they, too, found opportunities for personal reinvention: both Mabel Normand and Henry Lehrman, for example, used their film careers to proclaim new identities that would not be marked by the stigma of their lower-class backgrounds. Born in Vienna in 1886, Lehrman arrived in New York in his early twenties, where he worked as a streetcar conductor and nickelodeon usher before trying his luck in the picture industry. Arriving at Biograph in 1911, he introduced himself as Monsieur Henri Lehrman, lied about his supposedly lengthy experience as a French film-maker at Pathé Frères, and offered his services for five dollars a day. For the rest of his career, he would jokingly be known by the nickname “Pathé.”40

With Mabel Normand—of whom more in chapter 6—this play on identities took on yet more protean dimensions. Her father was a carpenter of French-Canadian descent and her mother was of Irish parentage; shortly before her birth, the family moved to the immigrant neighborhoods of New Brighton, Staten Island, where Mabel was raised. But this was not the image of her childhood that Normand would choose to publicize. “Mabel
Normand,” claimed a biographical sketch in a 1914 edition of *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, “was born in Boston, Mass., of one of the most aristocratic New England families, her maternal grandfather being Governor of Massachusetts.”41 Alternately, according to a 1920 account, Normand had been “born in Atlanta, Georgia, where she received her education and rudimentary instructions in drawing, her desire to learn to paint and illustrate [taking] her, as a young girl, to New York.”42 Stardom had given Normand the chance to invent herself a more genteel image.43

Of the team of Biograph comedians that Sennett had pieced together by 1912, only Fred Mace had had an authentic opportunity fully to pursue the respectable, middle-class lifestyle to which his colleagues frequently pretended. By far the most educated of Keystone’s founding members, Mace graduated in 1898 from the University of Pennsylvania as a doctor of dental surgery before deciding to try his luck in musical comedy. Unlike Sennett, Mace found ready success on Broadway, winning acclaim for supporting roles in *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1902, supposedly with Sennett himself in the chorus line),44 *Piff! Paff!! Pouf!!!* (1904), and *The Time, the Place and the Girl* (1907), and featured in numerous celebrity profiles in the trades and local press.45 As a member of Broadway’s sporting crowd, Mace acquired a cultural style he later brought with him to California. After joining Sennett’s Biograph unit in May 1911, he set about establishing himself as a member of the film community’s elite, hiring a Japanese valet for his Los Angeles home (which he shared with his parents), building up his collection of first editions, and founding The Photoplayers as a gentlemen’s club for the nascent filmmaking community.

In the summer of 1912, these Biograph comedians would come together to form the Keystone Film Company. At a time when more “respectable” motion picture companies aligned themselves with Anglo-Saxon culture and identity,46 Keystone’s founding members brought with them a different legacy, one inseparable from their class and immigrant origins. Even before entering motion pictures, many of them had explored the routes linking ethnic neighborhoods to the institutions of popular culture. At Keystone, they would participate in a series of cultural transformations: they would challenge the genteel Victorianism of the native-born middle class, and, in so doing, would give shape to an emergent mass culture that drew energies from the plebeian world of popular entertainment. During the studio’s first years, in particular, Keystone’s filmmakers would define a new style of film comedy that appealed to the sensationalist tastes of the popular classes and spoke to their resistance to middle-class values. But before these developments could take place, there were practical matters to
attend to: studio facilities would have to be built for the filmmakers to work in, systems of production would have to be set in place. Whatever innovations Keystone’s filmmakers achieved would depend upon the mode of production they adopted.

“A PEEP BEHIND THE SCENES”: RATIONALIZATION, IRRATIONALITY, AND THE FOUNDING OF THE KEystone FILM COMPANY

In later years, Mack Sennett liked to describe the founding of the Keystone Film Company as an opportunistic scheme hatched by a shady group of street-corner wise guys. “Charles O. Baumann . . . and Adam Kessel,” recalled Sennett, “were small-time bookmakers around downtown New York. They would even take twenty-five-cent bets. I began to put money on horses . . . [and] went in debt to Kessel and Baumann for a hundred dollars . . . Here I was with an impossible-to-pay debt to Kessel and Bauman. I went home by side streets and sent word I was out when they called. I had them barred from the Biograph studio so they couldn’t get in there and break my legs.” After learning that they had had “some experience with motion picture people,” Sennett came out of hiding and proposed a novel means of settlement. “Forget the $100 I owe you,” Sennett told them. “And put up $2500 to start a new company. I’ll make you rich.”47

It is a colorful anecdote and, like most of Sennett’s stories, it wallows in disreputability at the expense of the facts. Baumann had, it is true, once been a bookmaker, and Kessel had worked as a streetcar conductor, but this had been years earlier.48 (New York State had, in fact, passed an anti-gambling law in 1908 that made racetrack betting illegal.) They had also acquired much more than “some experience” in motion pictures. Kessel’s association with the picture business dated back to 1900, when he had briefly operated a Mutoscope parlor on Brooklyn’s Thornton Street (in between jobs as a slot machine operator and a liquor salesman).49 The pair had first entered partnership in the film industry in 1909 with the purchase of the Empire Film Exchange; and, by the summer of 1912, when they were supposedly threatening Sennett with broken legs, Kessel and Baumann were established as two of the most significant figures in the war of the independent producers against Thomas Edison’s monopolistic Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC).

One way of looking at Kessel and Baumann’s careers is to see them as part of the new generation of “merchants of leisure” (Francis Couvares’s phrase) who were, at that time, emerging from the working class to forge
the links of a new culture of commercial entertainment. Second-generation German immigrants both, Kessel and Baumann had entered the film industry following wide-ranging careers as purveyors of “cheap amusements”; and, like other entrepreneurs from their class, they played a role in challenging and subverting middle-class attempts to gain control of working-class leisure. The battle between the MPPC and the Independents was just such a skirmish, in which the Independents were frequently characterized in the trade press as ghetto junkmen, in contrast with Edison’s more respectably “American” organization. Popularly known as the Trust, the MPPC had been founded in December 1908 when Edison persuaded eight other production companies, one importer of films (George Kleine), and Eastman Kodak (the only U.S. manufacturer of raw film) to band together, limiting domestic film production for themselves and restricting distribution and exhibition to licensed exchanges and theaters. Although most exchange owners quickly signed with the MPPC to guarantee a supply of films, a number decided to battle it out, Kessel and Baumann among them. In order to keep the Empire exchange solvent, they chose to go into production for themselves, and, on September 25, 1909, they launched the New York Motion Picture Company (NYMP), a holding organization for their newly inaugurated production company, trademark “Bison.” By the following year, the more entrepreneurial independents were moving onto the offensive, raiding Trust companies for top talent, and, here too, Kessel and Baumann were among the first. Carl Laemmle, a German-born Jewish immigrant and former nickelodeon operator, had led the way, luring Florence Lawrence from Biograph to his Independent Motion Picture Company in 1909; but Kessel and Baumann followed suit in 1910, signing several Biograph players (among them, James Kirkwood, Marion Leonard, and Henry B. Walthall) for their new Reliance brand. The formation of Keystone kept to this pattern: having already pillaged Biograph’s dramatic talent, Kessel and Baumann now raided its comedy unit, signing up director Mack Sennett and actors Henry Lehrman, Mabel Normand, and Ford Sterling.

This account is perhaps a little too neat. For the factors behind Keystone’s creation lay not only in disputes between Trust companies and independents but also in developing fissures within the expanding independent sector. In order to combat Edison’s Trust, the independents had initially required organization and solidarity: to provide the movement with vital organizational coherence, Kessel and Baumann had joined forces with Laemmle in April 1910 to create the Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company (Sales Company, for short), a distribution
channel for all independent productions. But the growing strength of the independent movement soon made this coalition unnecessary. The first cracks surfaced early in 1912, when Harry E. Aitken, president of the Majestic brand, deserted the Sales Company and formed a new, if short-lived, distribution outlet, the Film Supply Company of America. This breakaway move became a credible threat to the Sales Company’s dominance when Aitken subsequently launched a second distribution enterprise, the Mutual Film Corporation, announced to the trade in March, with the aggressive policy of buying up and consolidating independent exchanges. Within months, the independent sector was polarized into warring factions: at one end, those production companies aligned with the rapidly growing Mutual organization; at the other, those affiliated with Laemmle’s Universal Film Manufacturing Company, founded in June in response to Aitken’s secession.53 NYMP, meanwhile, found itself at the center of these shifting allegiances. Although Kessel and Baumann’s first instinct had been to continue with Laemmle, they performed an about-face a few weeks later and entered into negotiations with Mutual, officially announcing their decision to join Aitken’s organization on July 29, 1912. The decision proved significant in the development of American film comedy. Since none of Mutual’s production companies (Majestic, Reliance, Thanhouser, and American) were equipped to produce comic films, Kessel and Baumann were assigned the task of launching a new comedy label. Some time at the beginning of July, just days after withdrawing its product from Universal, NYMP entered into arrangements with members of Biograph’s comedy unit.54

Sennett clearly welcomed Kessel and Baumann’s proposal (which gave him a one-third interest in the new company),55 and he wasted no time in building up a backlog of releases: according to Keystone studio documents, production officially began in New York on July 6, though it is likely that it started a couple of days earlier, during the Fourth of July holiday.56 After completing a handful of films at NYMP’s facilities in New York and New Jersey, Sennett, Lehrman, Normand, and Sterling departed for California, arriving in Los Angeles on August 28 and then journeying out to nearby Edendale to set up operations in the former Bison plant, previously a grocery store (fig. 1).57 “This makeshift studio was exactly what I needed and where I had pined to make pictures when I first saw Southern California,” Sennett later recalled in his memoir King of Comedy.58 As the Keystone company settled into what would be its permanent home, Harry Aitken’s publicity apparatus moved into high gear, trumpeting NYMP’s first releases through the Mutual program. In both the August 31 and September 7 issues of Moving Picture World, Mutual ran a three-page ad
informing exhibitors about release schedules for Kessel and Baumann’s three companies, the Bison-101 production unit (renamed Kay-Bee in October) and the new Keystone and Broncho labels. The Keystone Film Company, exhibitors learned, would begin releasing on September 23, with regular weekly offerings of two subjects on a single reel (a “split reel,” in industry parlance). According to the initial contract, Mutual agreed to pay Keystone ten cents per foot for thirty-three positive prints of each of the studio’s weekly reels—a total of around $3,300 per week, half to be kept by NYMP, half to be paid to Keystone to cover production expenses.

As early advertisements for Keystone reveal, Sennett’s Biograph successes were significant in generating interest in the new program. Rather than making claims about the innovativeness of Keystone’s films, Mutual’s publicity chose to emphasize their continuity with Sennett’s previous Biograph productions. “Keystone Films are new in name only,” asserted the World’s first advertisement for the new concern. “They are produced by the company heretofore with the Biograph Co., and directed by the same man—Mr. Mack Sennett. The quality of these films is well known to
exhibitors. Sennett himself was not above exploiting his back catalogue for publicity purposes. For the November release of *At It Again*, for example, Sennett and Mace resurrected the successful “two sleuths” roles first introduced in a number of Biograph comedies, beginning with *$500.00 Reward* (1911). Capitalizing on these earlier successes, publicity for *At It Again* claimed that the film “revives the travesty on Sherlock Holmes, in which Mack Sennett and Fred Mace won unbounded popularity.”

Yet behind the confident appeal to past successes lay much deeper uncertainties in NYMP’s initial plans for Keystone. For several months, Kessel and Baumann remained unclear about the kinds of films they wanted from Keystone and ambivalent about the way the studio was to be managed. The decision to found a studio devoted exclusively to comedy production was unprecedented at the time, and, for a while, NYMP’s management seriously considered adding a dramatic unit at the Keystone lot. An early trade press report, for instance, hinted vaguely that Keystone’s weekly release schedule would include a “dramatic reel” supervised by “a director who is coming on in a few days, but whose identity is not to be revealed at this time.” Although nothing came of such announcements, they continued to surface periodically until almost the end of the year. Kessel and Baumann also doubted Sennett’s ability to run a studio without assistance and arranged for Thomas Ince, then director of NYMP’s Bison brand, to keep a watchful eye on the new company.

Ince’s involvement is crucial to the present analysis. In inviting his supervision, Kessel and Baumann were placing Keystone within the sphere of influence of a filmmaker who was taking pioneering steps in the efficient organization of film production. Ince was at the forefront of the spread of production-line practices that had begun to take hold in the film industry, the model for which was the departmentalized system of “scientific management” first proposed in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s experiments in industrial efficiency (published in 1895 and 1903). Part of a general trend to improve the output of industrial workers, Taylor advocated a hierarchical “line and staff” type of management, time-and-motion studies for improving workers’ performance, and the initiation of planning departments that would determine costs and materials in advance of each job. It was just such a system that Ince implemented at his Bison company: as early as June 1912, he split the work staff into two production units and introduced detailed continuity scripts as blueprints to control each unit’s work. Ince soon abandoned regular directing and editing chores in favor of a centralized, supervisory role, hiring a Rutgers-educated accountant, George W. Stout, to organize the studio into a more thoroughly departmentalized operation.
This mode of production—what Janet Staiger terms the “central producer” system—marked a sea-change in American filmmaking practice. And, since Kessel and Baumann had enjoined Ince to keep a watchful eye on Sennett’s fledgling studio, it was only to be expected that Keystone’s mode of production would be cast in the same mold. Ironically, for an ex-iron-worker who had sought escape from his social circumstance through the world of show business, Sennett would come to preside over a factory-style studio system. From the outset, he drew on the expertise of, and even hired, members of Ince’s managerial staff. Sometime around November 1912, for example, Sennett borrowed Richard V. Spencer from Ince’s studio to head Keystone’s scenario department. Described in the trade press as “an old hand at the game” and a “valuable asset to the Keystone company,” Spencer set to work organizing Keystone’s writing staff. He was soon promoted to general script supervisor for NYMP’s West Coast operations, however, and was replaced at Keystone by Karl Coolidge, a local photoplay writer from the Ammex Film Company. A second key member of Ince’s management joined Keystone’s payroll in the summer of 1913, this time in the person of George Stout himself, whom Sennett hired as his business manager at $75 a week. Stout’s signing was no doubt necessitated by the growing complexity of Keystone’s work process as the studio followed Ince’s lead in the direction of centralization and departmentalization: already by January, a second unit had been added under Henry Lehrman’s direction, and a third would be established in the fall under the directors Wilfred Lucas and George Nichols. (Nichols also apparently directed for Keystone during its earliest months, in the fall of 1912 and early 1913, although not as head of a separate unit.) As he had done for Ince, Stout further subdivided Keystone’s operations, breaking the studio’s functions into ten separate departments and assigning to each a department head and assistant. With the studio largely under Stout’s organizational management, Sennett, like Ince before him, relinquished hands-on directorial duties and, at the end of the year, took up a more supervisory position, overseeing pre- and postproduction on all pictures. The growth of Keystone’s management hierarchy was reflected in the studio’s spatial layout. In February 1914, construction began on a two-story administration “tower” at the corner of the Keystone lot: the top floor housed Sennett’s personal office, affording him complete panoptic surveillance of Keystone’s employees (fig. 2).

The paradox here is that, throughout their careers, Sennett and his filmmakers consistently repudiated their allegiance to this system, preferring instead to proclaim their carnivalesque defiance of the industrial virtues of efficiency and work discipline. In a later interview, Sennett came close to
denying that the Edendale lot was a workplace at all. “[The way] we ran our studio, there were no bosses. We had no signs up—'you can't do this,' 'you can't do that,' 'you can't go in there,' 'you can't go in here.' We didn't have any signs. I wouldn't allow a sign to be stuck up in that studio. . . . There was no big boss. I just happened to be like a referee.”71 He frequently spoke out against rationalization and efficiency experts during his tenure at Keystone. “[I]t might be possible to save lumber bills and gasoline and electric light by system,” Sennett noted in one published piece, “[but my] impression is that the whole theory of maximum efficiency is overdone. . . . [Y]ou cannot turn men into machines.”72 Indeed, from the studio’s earliest days, Sennett’s publicity department worked hard to depict the Keystone lot as a zany counterweight to the rationalization of American industry, a place where the lines separating work and play, productive labor and dynamic disorder, became hopelessly tangled. The mythmaking process began early on, as indicated in a Moving Picture World report in October 1912:

Mack Sennett, director of the Keystone company, tells a thrilling story about a hair raising adventure that occurred to him and Fred Mace this week. The Keystone company was engaged in making a comedy in

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**FIGURE 2.** The Keystone studios, ca. 1914. Sennett’s tower is visible at the far corner of the lot. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
Griffith Park. . . . The services of a bear were required in the picture and Sennett had engaged one from a menagerie. According to his version the bear had a mean disposition and refused to be a motion picture actor. Instead it took off after Mace and Sennett who started toward the top of the mountain. . . . They ran out along a point and then discovered that they were on the brink of a precipice 1000 feet high. Behind them was the on-rushing bear. Ahead of them yawned the chasm. There were only two things to do, and either one was certain death. Mace says that they turned back and were devoured by the bear, but Sennett insists that they leaped. The reader will recall that in the opening sentence of this paragraph it was stated that this adventure had occurred to Sennett and Mace. One suspects that it occurred to them when they were trying to figure out something for the press agent.73

The studio’s bizarre press releases soon acquired a certain notoriety, as suggested by a subsequent report published the following month in the same magazine:

I have another thrilling adventure which is vouched for by Mack Sennett and sworn to by Fred Mace. It concerns another daring escapade of the two Keystone sleuths but as Richard V. Spencer refuses to guarantee it, and it imposes a greater burden upon the credulity than the famous bear story did, it seems wise to print only the really essential portions of it which are as follows: “Mack Sennett, the famous director of the Keystone company who ___ accompanied by Fred Mace, the inimitable comedian, who ___ Both Mace and Sennett will continue to produce the further exploits of the ‘Two Sleuths’ ___ Sennett ___ Mace ___ Sennett.”74

Notwithstanding the evident skepticism of the World’s writers, Keystone continued its stream of eccentric announcements. During the studio’s first year, bemused subscribers to the World learned that Sennett was claiming the world record for completing a 500-foot film within a single day; that Richard Spencer had taken to editing scripts while sitting on a pile of logs; that Fred Mace was hosting wild parties “to the scandalization of his neighbors”; and that Ford Sterling had almost fallen victim to an exploding taxicab.75

From its beginnings, then, the Keystone lot was the object of a discourse that blurred distinctions between the studio’s working environment and the world portrayed in its films. Keystone’s mode of production was redefined in terms of its product: the making of slapstick was itself a kind of comedy—as Sennett would claim in his autobiography, “We lived our art.”76 So central was this conceit to Keystone’s identity that the studio occasionally released “behind the scenes” films depicting the Edendale lot
as a space of comic disorder and chaos. Advertising copy for the first of these, *Mabel's Dramatic Career* (September 1913), promised exhibitors that the “peep behind the scenes [showing] the Keystone players at work” offered “novelties and real laughs.” The “peep behind the scenes” in this film consists of a single minute-long shot in which Mabel, a country girl, auditions at the “Kinometograph Keystone Studios.” Rather than offering a plausible representation of an audition, Normand presents what is recognizably a slapstick routine, in which she clumsily and grotesquely approximates the postures of screen acting only to fall flat on her face, to the guffaws of those around her. As in later examples like *A Film Johnnie* (March 1914) and *The Masquerader* (August 1914), work at the Keystone lot is represented in terms of knockabout disorder and slapstick action.

In its carnivalesque affirmation of inefficiency and riotous playfulness, Keystone’s publicity apparatus spoke out against the very tenets of industrial rationalization that George Stout and Richard V. Spencer had implemented at the studio. For Keystone’s filmmakers and staff, life at Keystone was structured in terms of this very contradiction. The Edendale lot was, as a *Motion Picture News* writer aptly put it in 1914, a “fun factory,” at once a place of rationalized labor and a place of irrational play. The tower-top office was both a tool of surveillance and a place in which Sennett indulged his eccentricities, such as holding story conferences in an enormous bath or boxing in his office gym. Filmmaking at Keystone was rigidly planned and departmentalized, but it was also spontaneous and opportunistic. If a suitable occasion presented itself, the studio’s filmmakers would take comedians out to public events and film their spur-of-the-moment shenanigans. Such was the case on New Year’s Day 1913, when Fred Mace and Mack Sennett infiltrated the Pasadena Rose Parade costumed as the “two sleuths,” while a Keystone cameraman rushed after them shooting footage that would ultimately materialize in *The Sleuths at the Floral Parade* (March 1913). Later that year, Sennett sent out a group of his comedians to improvise comic scenes on the Edendale lake while it was being drained, making use of their mud-caked antics as the climax for *A Muddy Romance* (November 1913).

There are important reasons why this image of studio labor as “a great big joke”—in the words of Sennett gagman, Felix Adler—was so assiduously propagated throughout Keystone’s career. Keystone’s discourse about its mode of production constituted an important part of the studio’s differentiation practices. By so insistently promoting its eccentricities, Keystone distanced itself from hegemonic ideals of labor efficiency precisely at a time when those ideals were taking hold within the film industry. Indeed, in a context of industrywide gentrification, Keystone’s self-image not only...
represented a rejection of the middle-class work ethic; it also implied allegiance to the attitudes of America’s immigrant working class. As the labor historian Herbert Gutman argued in a famous essay, turn-of-the-century immigrant laborers negotiated the discipline and rigor of New World industrial practice by clinging on to “premodern” work habits: drinking and singing on the job, playing games, leaving the workplace for excursions—all were “patterns of opposition” that rejected the legitimacy of the factory system. Industrial rationalization was to be challenged, undisciplined jocularity to be embraced. Publicity on Keystone appealed to precisely these values, offering working-class filmgoers a carnivalesque discourse of work in the absence of hierarchy, without supervision, without a “big boss.” There is even evidence that workers may have taken vicarious pleasure from reading about life at Sennett’s “fun factory”—at least to judge by an article in a February 1915 issue of Los Angeles Citizen, a local labor periodical with a large working-class readership. Titled “The ‘Movies’ in the Making,” the article discusses the growth of new film studios in Los Angeles, using Keystone as its example of how movies are made; yet the picture of filmmaking that emerges is remarkably rosy for a socialist paper, describing an almost utopian reciprocity among Keystone’s employees and their unstructured attitude to labor:

[The good feeling that exists among the Keystoneites catches and holds our attention. Everyone in sight is smiling, even old “Dad,” the gateman to whom before entering we must fully state our business. . . . On the lawn, directly in front of several dressing-rooms, a society belle is seen throwing a ball to a rough-looking hobo, a blue-coated policeman accepts a cigarette from a masked burglar and many other mixed characters are romping on the grass. A queer sight, you say? No. They are performers, made up and awaiting the call to action. A happy and carefree lot are the photoplayers, who, out in the open away from the restrictions of the legitimate stage, must in some way give vent to their jocular spirits.]

Here was an image of labor that surely would have appealed to blue-collar readers whose own working lives gave so little room for venting “jocular spirits.”

This rhetorical conjunction of labor and play, and of the effacement of labor by play, would become central to what Jennifer Bean has described as the “imagination of early Hollywood,” and not only at Keystone. By around 1915, in news articles and fan discourse alike, the West Coast studios were routinely viewed as “utopic places,” in Bean’s words, where the rationalizing imperatives of capitalism were transformed into “endlessly variegated
metamorphosis and play." Keystone was both an early model for and, arguably, the apogee of this fantasy. In a 1916 special issue on the studio, the *Dramatic Mirror* spoke precisely of the exemplary “happiness” on the Keystone lot: “Keystone is one of the most likable studios in the whole industry. You have to camp there for a couple of days at least to realize just what a big and happy family these Keystoners are. . . . Happiness, good humor, and fun dominate the daily life, work and play of the Keystone. One of the happiest penalties you might receive would be a sentence of a day or more to be spent on the Keystone lot.”

Exemplary also was the way Keystone’s self-image buttressed the attitudes and values of America’s immigrant working class. Themselves largely of working-class, immigrant origin, Keystone’s filmmakers envisioned their own labor as a playful release from the rigors of industrial discipline, an image of working conditions that, as the *Citizen* article shows, could be appropriated for the pleasure of working-class readers. For the laboring filmgoers who were the film industry’s core audience, such publicity surely functioned as a site of projective fantasy, transforming the Keystone studio into an imaginary space distinct from the rigors of the working day (a “heterotopia,” to use Michel Foucault’s term). Well-publicized glimpses “behind the scenes” thus established an inverted, carnivalesque vision of labor whose meaning was materially grounded in the attitudes and values of America’s workers.

Still, it was not in terms of its work process alone that Keystone defined alternatives to the dominant culture. Over the course of its first year, Keystone’s filmmakers developed a knockabout comic style that directly opposed the growing “respectability” of motion picture comedy in the early 1910s. What people saw on the screens would pose as much of a challenge to dominant values as what they read about Keystone in newspapers and magazines.

“FArCE COMEDY” AND “COMiC MOTiON”: KEySTOnE’S EARLY COMiC FORM

In his useful study of the Keystone Film Company, Douglas Riblet observes that the studio’s early films reveal striking shifts in their approach to film comedy: while the majority of Keystone’s earliest extant releases generally feature “succinct” narratives structured around central pranks and misunderstandings, the bulk of its 1913 output foregrounds an increasingly “unrestrained” and “chaotic” brand of knockabout. These
are perceptive observations, and any discussion of Keystone’s early comic form will have to take account of this transformation. Yet what is missing from Riblet’s discussion is any attempt to account for this development in social and cultural terms: What, for example, were the assumptions underlying these different comic aesthetics? How were certain styles of comedy historically associated with certain classes of audience? What values and experiences were interpreted and expressed by the changing semantic forms of early comedy? To answer these questions requires tracing these forms historically and critically, investigating not only their structural properties but also their association with specific class values and ideologies.

We have already noted, for example, that by the time Keystone released its first split-reel in September 1912, American film comedy was just recovering from what had been a four-year slump. Yet, no less important, these years of quantitative decline were also marked by qualitative change, as film producers struggled to define a more “respectable” comic style capable of appealing to a middle-class audience. Both within and outside of the field of comedy, cinema’s drive for respectability had entailed a move into the realm of genteel moral discourse, associated with notions of female moral authority and the idealization of domesticity.88 Even a cursory glance at comedies of the period shows that they increasingly focused on familial and marital settings as a new basis for comic situations. The process is well exemplified in Biograph’s output as it developed under D.W. Griffith, Whereas Biograph’s pre-1908 comedies had consisted largely of single, extended gags involving chases, ethnic stereotypes, and sexual titillation, Griffith’s emphasis on melodrama contributed to the emergence of “middle-class situation comedies.”89

The new direction first became evident with the launching in 1908 of Griffith’s “Jones” comedy series, centered upon the marital misunderstandings between “Mr. and Mrs. Jones” (John Cumpson and Florence Lawrence); but it soon spread to other comedy manufacturers, such as Vitagraph, where the rowdy antics of its earlier “Happy Hooligan” shorts (starring Vitagraph’s co-founder J. Stuart Blackton as the eponymous Hooligan) were replaced by a successful series of domestic comedies pairing John Bunny with Flora Finch.90 Such films defined their greater respectability vis-à-vis earlier slapstick by drawing on conventional presumptions linking moral propriety to female guardianship; but they also offered a satirical—and decidedly male—protest against those presumptions, representing the domestic sphere as a battleground between nagging wives protecting the “purity” of the home and henpecked husbands pursuing disreputable pleasures in the face of female prohibitions.91
Still, more was at stake here than a switch to domestic content: the desire for middle-class appeal also provoked the narrative discourse of screen comedy. It is in this sense that the decline of slapstick needs to be understood as part of a more general reaction against the “cinema of attractions,” a term coined by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault to describe the first decade of film history, when motion pictures featured as an attraction at vaudeville houses and other variety entertainments. This was a cinema that, as described by Gunning, had consistently foregrounded theatrical display over narrative absorption, emphasizing surprise and visual delight at the expense of an unfolding story. Directly presentational in approach, such an exhibitionist aesthetic overlapped with—and, with the nickelodeon boom of 1905 to 1907, was eventually incorporated into—the disreputable culture of working-class sensationalism. The industry’s bid for middle-class respectability consequently saw filmic discourse move away from an attractions-based aesthetic in the direction of narrative unity, as exemplified by the socially respectable narrative arts of the novel and the “well-made” play. And nowhere were the implications of this shift more acute than in the case of film comedy. One of the most consistent complaints about early comic films—and one that would later be leveled against Keystone’s output—had been their disinterest in story. Motion Picture Story Magazine, from its inception in 1911, had consistently pushed filmmakers toward “refined comedy, carrying [a] humorous and logical story,” as one article put it. Moving Picture World’s leading critic, Epes Winthrop Sargent, likewise repeatedly criticized the “senseless chases” of early comedies, suggesting that gags and comic actions should be “germane to the plot and natural to the situation.” Making comedy acceptable to middle-class tastes consequently required a drastic stylistic overhaul: comedy would have to become something other than mere slapstick.

Filmmakers at Biograph and Vitagraph negotiated these demands by drawing on an unexpected inheritance: the “mischief gag,” a major genre of comic filmmaking from 1896 to 1905. “Mischief gag” films were short prank narratives (many consisting of only a single shot) that typically followed a straightforward structure of cause and effect: a rascal sets up a prank, to which a second character falls victim. The locus classicus for the genre is, of course, the Lumière brothers’ now famous L’Arroseur arrosé (1895), in which a mischievous boy manipulates the flow of water in a hose so that a gardener receives a faceful of water. Though unsophisticated, this rudimentary cause-effect structure provided a template that later filmmakers found suitable for extrapolating into longer one-reel subjects. Many of the domestic comedies produced by Biograph and Vitagraph between 1908
and 1915 depend heavily upon this formula, offering extended “mischief-gag” narratives in which characters plot to outwit wayward husbands or nagging wives. A case in point is Vitagraph’s *Her Crowning Glory* (1911), which fleshes out the prank through an extended presentation of character motivation. For much of its length, the film charts the comic love of a lonely widower (John Bunny) for his daughter’s governess (Flora Finch) and the daughter’s equally comic resentment at the alienation of her father’s affections. The prank occurs only at the film’s end, providing a supervening moment of comic surprise to a character-based situation of escalating hostilities: the daughter takes matters into her own hands and cuts off the governess’s hair, which has the desired effect of dampening her father’s ardor.

An earlier example is D. W. Griffith’s *Mrs. Jones Entertains* (1909), one of the director’s “Jones” family comedies. Here, Mrs. Jones has invited members of the Ladies Temperance League to a luncheon in her home, much to the frustration of Mr. Jones, who hardly shares their views. His mischievous solution is to spike their drinks. Intoxicated, the leader of the League tries to kiss Jones, and his wife furiously orders the women out of her house.96

What is surprising—particularly given his reputation as a filmmaker who reinvigorated the slapstick tradition of film comedy—is that, for the most part, Sennett’s initial work at Biograph fell securely within the parameters of this new, more “refined” comic style. Of the eighty-nine split-reel and one-reel films he directed there, many focus on distinctly middle-class characters, settings and situations; and most of his early plots are tautly structured around central pranks or misunderstandings. The same appears to be true of the earliest Keystone productions—including those directed by Nichols and, later, Lehrman—though here the paucity of surviving prints problematizes general claims. Out of forty-nine comedies released between September 1912 and February 1913, only *The Water Nymph* (September 1912), *Stolen Glory, At Coney Island, The Grocery Clerk’s Romance* (October 1912), *The Cure That Failed* (dir. Nichols), and *The Deacon Outwitted* (dir. Lehrman, January 1913) survive. Yet, judging from these, it is clear that Keystone’s initial output, far from breaking fresh ground, remained heavily indebted to the refinements characterizing Vitagraph’s and Biograph’s output. The “prank,” for instance, remains a central device of narrative closure in both *The Water Nymph* and *The Deacon Outwitted*, where young men fool their fathers into consenting to their marriages. In the former, this is achieved when a dapper young gent (Sennett) persuades his fiancée (Normand) to draw the advances of his flirtatious father (Sterling), eventually embarrassing him into approving their engagement. In the latter, a deacon’s son and his sweetheart make
themselves up in blackface and trick the deacon into marrying them. A more elaborate rendering is offered in *The Cure That Failed*: here, the basic mischief-gag paradigm is doubled, providing what Riblet labels a “prank/counter-prank” structure, in which the victim of one prank turns the tables by executing a second.97 Ford Sterling plays a drunkard on whom his wife (Normand) and friends play a trick: one of the friends (Fred Mace) dresses as a woman and tries to convince the drunken husband that the two were married during the previous night’s revels. Realizing that he is being duped, Sterling’s character feigns despair at his apparent bigamy and pretends to commit suicide. It is only when his friends are subsequently arrested for murder that the husband “revives” to reveal his trick.

There is, then, a strong commitment to narrative values in Keystone’s earliest surviving output. As with the respectable style of Griffith’s Biograph comedies and the John Bunny Vitagraphs, the mischief gag provides the narrative template, and humor arises through the causal organization of preparation and punch line. Still, this trend toward respectability was hardly uniform, even within Sennett’s own filmmaking: already in a number of his later Biograph films, Sennett had experimented with a disconnected, loosely structured format more characteristic of the bawdy style of pre-1908 comic films. Direct ethnic and racial parody had begun to surface in his Biograph films during early 1912, notably *A Spanish Dilemma* and *The Tourists*. Other Sennett films from this period, such as *Neighbors*, revisited the format of old-style chase comedy, a residual comic form of which Griffith’s 1909 *The Curtain Pole*—featuring Sennett himself as a drunken Frenchman—had been the last notable example in Biograph’s catalogue. If Keystone’s earliest output often skirted these tendencies (at least judging from extant prints), they remained an available part of Sennett’s repertoire and would come to dominate the studio’s releases from March 1913 onward.

Sennett’s more boisterous comic bent did not long go unrecognized, even at Biograph. Starting with *The Fatal Chocolate*, released in February 1912, Biograph’s management began identifying its comic output as “farce comedy,” on the title frames and in the *Biograph Bulletin*, a designation evoking knockabout humor lacking any real validity of plot or characterization.98 Originally a generic label from late nineteenth-century musical theater, the term “farce comedy” dates back to Nate Salsbury’s popular stage productions of the 1870s, and in its earliest appearance, it described revue-style playlets in which a rudimentary narrative situation—generally given in the title, as in, say, *Tourists in the Pullman Palace Car* (1879)—was exploited as a basis for comedy skits and musical numbers.99 Applied to Sennett’s Biograph work, however, it implied a more general return to

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rough-and-tumble comic formulas marginalized in the film industry’s quest for respectability. (As the Photoplay critic Raymond Schrock explained in January 1913, “farce comedy” implied “wild action, grotesque makeup and a general free-for-all,” as distinct from “good clean comedy” with a “well-defined plot.”) And it proved to be a label that Sennett was happy to accept: every Keystone comedy released through Mutual would likewise be identified as “farce comedy” by its title card.

As that label suggests, Keystone’s contribution to American film comedy needs to be seen, not in terms of the emergence of new comic forms, but instead as a return to, and extrapolation from, residual comic practices that contested the gentrification of the motion picture industry. It was this approach that formed the basis for developments at the studio following the “prank” comedies of its earliest releases. Particularly notable was the revival of the comic chase as the cornerstone of Keystone’s slapstick style. A staple of American (and international) film production since before the nickelodeon era, the chase comedy had nonetheless declined in recent years, reflecting a demand for films of greater narrative sophistication. (In its review of Griffith’s The Curtain Pole, Moving Picture World wondered why Biograph had decided to follow “the worn-out scheme of foreign producers and introduce these long chases...as part of their amusement films.”) At Keystone, however, the chase quickly set the pattern for the broad physical humor for which the studio’s later films became known. This is clear, for example, in the climax to Stolen Glory, the earliest example of a chase among Keystone’s surviving films. In this remarkable location-shot sequence, Ford Sterling pursues Fred Mace through what is evidently an actual parade in downtown Los Angeles. The balance of the film’s humor is here turned decisively in favor of physical spectacle, with little concern for narrative motivation: the comedy of the chase derives less from its function in the film’s plot—which, such as it is, concerns Mace’s theft of Sterling’s military uniform—than from the spectacle of the genuinely furious paraders, who, in a series of shots, break ranks to shoo the unruly comedians away to the sidewalks.

As articulated in Stolen Glory, the chase remains recognizably primitive in format: pursued and pursuer simply follow one another through a linear succession of shots, here interspersed with actuality-style shots of the parade in which no Keystone performers are visible. From at least March 1913, however, the studio’s filmmakers began to replace this structure with a more complex patterning—namely, the race to the rescue intercutting between characters in comic peril and their would-be rescuers. This, of course, was a format associated with D. W. Griffith’s earlier Biograph films, in which the director’s use of parallel editing had pioneered in the suspenseful
manipulation of narrative time. In Sennett’s hands, however, the form was appropriated as a basis for anachronistic knockabout. Significantly, the first surviving Keystone film to feature a parallel-edited climax—The Man Next Door, a split-reel comedy released March 17—is also the first extant appearance of one of the most famous hallmarks of the studio’s comedy, the “Keystone Kops,” as they would come to be known (fig. 3). Comic policemen were a longtime standard of variety knockabout, even appearing in several early chase comedies, like Edison’s The Little Train Robbery (1905) and—a French example that Sennett might have known—Pathé’s La Course des sergents de ville (The Policemen’s Little Run, 1907). Sennett’s innovation in The Man Next Door was to combine clumsy cops with the parallel-editing conventions of film melodrama, a comic take on dramatic technique presaging Keystone’s more overt parodies from this period (discussed later in this chapter). Soon the association of comic policemen and rescue melodrama became standard strategy at Keystone: of at least fifteen extant prints ending with a parallel-edited rescue released in 1913, eleven feature Keystone’s roughhouse cops as the would-be rescuers.
In these sequences, knockabout generally takes a very specific form, in which the cops’ tumbledown clumsiness frustrates their efforts at rescue, their incompetence counteracting the temporal urgency required for the rescue itself. *The Man Next Door* provides a paradigmatic example by establishing a contrast between a situation of (apparent) peril and the disorganized inefficiency of the policemen. The peril is established when a wife and her lover (Dot Farley and Ford Sterling) trap the wife’s husband (Nick Cogley) in a parlor-room trunk, mistakenly believing him to be a burglar. The wife then phones the police, setting up a parallel-edited climax, as follows:

- **Shot 36**: Exterior police station. Four policemen rush out in a disorderly group.
- **Shot 37**: Parlor. The lover (Ford Sterling) sits on top of the trunk as the husband (Nick Cogley) struggles to get out.
- **Shot 38**: Hallway. The wife (Dot Farley) ends her call to the police and exits to the parlor.
- **Shot 39**: Parlor. The lover hands a gun to the wife and, sitting atop the trunk, exits to the hallway.
- **Shot 40**: Hallway. The lover picks up the phone.
- **Shot 41**: Road. The police attempt to flag down a speeding automobile. The car races past them, knocking them down.
- **Shot 42**: Hallway. The lover puts down the phone, exiting to the parlor.
- **Shot 43**: Puddle. The police stand before a large puddle blocking the road.
- **Shot 44**: Parlor. The lover enters.
- **Shot 45**: Puddle. As they wade through the puddle, the police are knocked into the water by another speeding car.
- **Shot 46**: Road (as in shot 41). A separate group of policemen unsuccessfully attempts to flag down another passing automobile.
- **Shot 47**: Puddle (closer view). The soaked policemen get to their feet and run out of the puddle the way they came.
- **Shot 48**: Parlor. The lover is sitting atop the trunk. The trapped husband manages to lift the lid and stick out his hand, which the lover promptly bites.
- **Shot 49**: Interior trunk. Close-up of the husband lying in the trunk, cradling his wounded fingers.
Shot 50: Parlor. The lover remains on top of the trunk.

Shot 51: Road (a different location from shots 41 and 46). The policemen rush down the road. One finds an abandoned bike and rides out of shot.

Shot 52: Parlor. The wife is sitting on the trunk. The lover hears the approaching police and exits.

Shot 53: Exterior house. The lover rushes outside and leads the policemen in to the parlor.

Shot 54: Parlor. The police pull the husband from the trunk, much to the embarrassment of the wife, whose adultery is now revealed.

“This half-reel picture, is full of rapid-fire situations, which fortunately are easily understood and bring shouts of laughter,” Moving Picture World noted. The Man Next Door is, indeed, the most rapidly edited of Keystone’s extant releases up to this point, with an average shot length of 6.1 seconds (almost doubling the combined average speed of Keystone’s previous surviving films). But it is precisely on the question of temporality that the film proves most complex. To be sure, there is the “rapid-fire” rhythm imposed by intercutting, a rhythm that lends precision and purposefulness to the unfolding action; but there is also, within this formal patterning, the erratic movement of the cops, a movement in which the cops’ tumbledown incompetence comically defers purpose and precision. Their straggling inefficiency is, in fact, doubly inscribed within the text, defined not only across the lines of action, through the contrast with the urgent panic of the adulterers, but also within the pacing of the race itself, through the contrast with the automobiles that race past them. In terms of the film’s formal properties, the cops’ actions are entirely excessive, opening up conflicting temporalities in a film otherwise predicated on the evocation of rhythm and speed.

One way to describe these games with time would be in terms of the various experiences of temporality available in turn-of-the-century America. Such an approach is suggested by Tom Gunning, who interprets D. W. Griffith’s innovations in parallel editing in terms of “the split-second timing” of industrial production. On this reading, Griffith’s use of editing—the measured alternation between separate lines of action—becomes an emblem of industrial time, invoking the mechanical rhythms of factory labor. But what happens when these insights are applied to The Man Next Door? Working-class nickelodeon audiences may indeed have found something “strangely familiar” (Gunning) in the rhythmic divisions of Griffith’s films;
but this is hardly the experience of time that the Keystone film conveys. On the one hand, the film’s “rapid-fire” intercutting imposes the same rigid, orderly tempo as a Griffith film; but the cops’ knockabout incompetence defies that rigidity, refuses order. The spectacle of irrationality is reintroduced within the rationalized rhythms of modern clock time, subverting the drama of rescue by the comedy of the cops’ (in)actions, and, in the process, bodying forth comic alternatives to the temporal discipline that workers experienced in their daily lives.

If these slapstick races became a benchmark of Keystone’s style, one explanation seems, then, to lie in their capacity to address experiences and fantasies born of the circumstances of native industrialization. Under Taylor’s studies in scientific management, the modern analysis of the work-process had, by this time, extended principles of rationalization to the worker’s body itself, conceived as a mechanical part incorporated into a factory system and required only to perform precisely standardized actions. At Henry Ford’s automobile plant in Highland Park, Detroit, for instance, the assembly line was so organized that workers never had to move from their posts, even to stoop to pick something up. For workers whose own labor thus became a “mechanically objectified ‘performance’” (as Georg Lukács wrote in 1922), Keystone’s chaotic chases may have supplied compensatory spectacles of disorder, of bodies unable to perform according to the requirements of a task.113 They visualized comic substitutes for the self-control and discipline necessary to adapt to the conditions of modern working life; and, in so doing, perhaps provided an imaginary refuge in which the dehumanizing impact of industrial labor could be negotiated in a playful manner. There is, in fact, a suggestive homology linking Keystone’s chase sequences to work processes on the studio lot. For, just as studio publicity promoted an image of play within an industry subject to the requirements of efficiency and standardization, so the climax of The Man Next Door restores a moment of irrationality within the precision of the film’s parallel editing. Keystone’s carnivalesque resistance to the industrial virtues of discipline and orderliness, its cheerful proclamation of the values of disorder and spontaneity, was articulated at all levels of the filmmaking process, in the action of the studio’s films as in publicity on the studio’s filmmaking practices.

Evidently there was much here for wage-earning filmgoers to enjoy, and, by the end of the year, the fast-paced capers of Keystone’s policemen had become a staple of the studio’s product. Trade press reviews of new releases routinely drew exhibitors’ attention to Keystone films in which “the cops” appeared, and nickelodeon exhibitors soon began advertising
the studio’s product in terms of the rough-and-tumble policemen, as at the
Bungalow Theater in St. Maries, Idaho, where billboards promoted “the
break neck police” as an attraction in the theater’s program. But knock-
about was hardly limited to the cops’ appearances. A rougher style of
comedy became generally pervasive in Keystone’s films from this period,
with characters hitting each other with brooms (in Love and Rubbish, July 1913) and bricks (The Riot, August 1913), slipping on banana skins
(A Healthy Neighborhood, October 1913), falling around in mud (A
Muddy Romance), and other antics.

The visceral effect of such slapstick also formed the center of a number
of ongoing developments in Keystone’s studio style. From at least as early
as the November 1912 release of A Desperate Lover, Keystone’s filmmakers
had begun to employ undercranking as a way of heightening slapstick spec-
tacle. And, by late 1913, George Nichols, director of the studio’s third unit,
was exploiting editing to accentuate the disjunctive impact of the studio’s
roughhouse comedy, cutting rapidly as characters and objects are thrown
between contiguous spaces. (Charles Chaplin, who performed under
Nichols’s direction in several films, found this style far from salutary for
his more incremental style of comedy. As he complained in his autobiogra-
phy, Nichols “had but one gag, which was to take the comedian by the neck
and bounce him from one scene to another.”) Further, as the example of
The Man Next Door suggests, the manipulation of tempo through editing
also became a cornerstone of the studio’s style in this period, with cutting
notably increasing over the course of the year: between September 1912
and February 1913, the average shot ran just under twelve seconds;
between July and December 1913, the length was nearer eight seconds,
with the fastest editing reserved for the films’ frenzied climaxes. Critics
were quick to notice the vital role that editing played in Keystone’s comic
style. In a 1915 article titled “Tempo—The Value of It,” Wid Gunning
argued that D. W. Griffith and Mack Sennett were “the two greatest living
‘tempo builders’ in the business today,” noting how Keystone’s filmmakers
exploited tempo for comic effect. “[I]n almost every good Keystone
comedy,” Gunning elaborated, “the action goes along smoothly with a few
good laughs for about half the length of the film and then suddenly it
begins to swing faster and faster, until it is moving at the rate of about a
mile a minute with laugh following laugh, just the proper time being
allowed each to carry from one to the other. That’s ‘tempo.’” In later
years, Sennett would formulate his approach to comedy under the rubric of
“comic motion.” “There is one thing that I always contend,” he once
claimed, “and that is motion. Comic motion.” On such an approach,
Sennett explained, comedy attaches not to the ends for which an action is undertaken but to the qualities of the movement itself. “Lloyd Hamilton [a comedian for Sennett in the 1920s] had comic motion. He would just walk across the room and, without apparently doing anything, make you laugh. Chaplin would do the same thing.”

What Sennett is describing here is the pantomimic virtuosity of these performers; but the approach to comedy embedded in his examples also sheds light on developments in Keystone’s early comic form. Whereas Keystone’s earliest comedies had tied action to narrative as the mainspring of their humor, its 1913 releases began to privilege action—or “comic motion”—as an attraction in its own right, apart from narrative ends. For industry commentators concerned to elevate film as a cultural product, such developments could only be viewed with an ambivalence that, more often than not, indicated barely concealed moral disapproval. As early as December 1912, one reviewer complained that the undercranking in *A Desperate Lover* made the action difficult to follow: “A very slow camera and consequent speedy entrances and exits are the amusing things in this picture. Fred Mace’s disguise may make a laugh or two; but the reason for his disguise is not at all clear nor is the story clear. We should like to tell what it is about; but we don’t know.”

From around March 1913, reviews in *Moving Picture World* frequently noted the primacy of action over plot in Keystone’s releases: *A Wife Wanted* (March) was described as “plenty of action and shooting and very little plot”; *Her New Beau* (March) as “more action than plot”; and *Cupid in a Dental Parlor* (April) as “lots of action but a slight plot.” Yet for working-class viewers who experienced the wrenching discipline of industrial practice firsthand, these same developments may have functioned similarly to Keystone’s crazy chases, actualizing imaginary forms of liberation through the vicarious experience of uncontrollable mobility. For these viewers, Keystone’s “sensational” focus on bodily disorder may have made slapstick a meaningful corollary to the embodied nature of their labor; and, if so, then what critics disparaged in Keystone’s output was the very imprint of working-class fantasy.

This last point needs to be handled carefully. Such an interpretation must remain purely formal unless supported by empirically oriented considerations concerning Keystone’s actual audiences and their responses to these films. Unfortunately, little evidence survives that would allow us to know exactly where the films played during this early period. Until 1913, most local newspapers offered at best only scattered and partial listings, especially in larger cities like New York and Chicago; and smaller theaters would in any case have had insufficient funds to advertise, beyond posting...
the day’s bill outside the theater. What data there are, however, offer
tantalizing indications that Keystone’s pictures were indeed a staple of the
cheaper theaters, that they may even have had a special attraction for wage-
earning audiences. Few other studios, for example, received as much atten-
tion from the Los Angeles Citizen, the city’s local labor paper. Special
articles on the region’s film industry often focused on Keystone, and the
Citizen routinely singled out theaters at which the studio’s “well-known,”
“excruciatingly funny,” and “celebrated” comedies were playing. Indeed,
from late 1913, the studio’s output seems to have been a common feature
on the bills of “cheap” vaudeville houses, whose lower ticket costs made
them popular with working- and lower-middle-class audiences. In downtow-

town Los Angeles, Keystone films played at the Empress from October
1913 and the Pantages from September 1914, both of which offered a ten-
cent scale of prices and drew their clientele from nearby Main Street—the
“pleasure street . . . of all the day laborers, the orange grove hands, the
fellows who keep Southern California in repairs.” In New York, the films
proved a long-standing fixture on the bill of Proctor’s Twenty-Third Street
Theater, a cheap vaudeville house situated in the Union Square entertain-
ment district. The pattern is further reflected in the weekly film listings
published in the Chicago Tribune from March 1914: although Keystone’s
films seem to have been a regular attraction at Chicago’s five- and ten-cent
nickelodeons during the first half of 1914, they were almost never listed as
playing at the more prestigious picture houses.

Further evidence suggests that the studio’s films found particular favor
with the immigrant portion of the working class, at least in smaller indus-
trial cities. In the textile mill town of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, for exam-
ple, the studio’s films played prominently at the Star Theatre to audiences
mostly from Polish, Italian, and other working-class immigrant neighbor-
hoods from late 1912 through much of 1913. Within weeks of Keystone’s
debut there, Pawtucket’s local press reported that these “exceptionally
funny comedy subjects” were provoking “shouts of laughter.” Soon the
Star was promoting its Keystone subjects by brand name, promising in its
news ads “Big Laughmakers from the Popular Keystone Co.” or declaring
simply “It’s a Keystone.” In Milwaukee, a small city with a significant
German population, Keystone films proved immensely popular at the
Vaudette, a German-owned five-cent picture house. As Mutual’s trade jour-

nal, Reel Life, proclaimed: “‘A Keystone comedy for every day of the year’
is the motto upon which Otto L. Meister and A. Reiss, owners of the
Vaudette Theatre in Milwaukee, Wis., have built up an enormous busi-

ness.” Likewise in Des Moines, where, in December 1912, Keystone films
made their local debut at the Elite, a theater catering chiefly to the Scandinavian and Jewish communities of the city’s east side. Finally, a similar situation seems to have existed in Toledo—the center of America’s glassmaking industry and home to a sizable population of Bulgarian immigrants—where by mid-1913, Keystone’s films were “bring[ing] round after round of laughter and an occasional excited scream from the women” at the city’s largest picture house, the 1,000-seat Colonial. In fact, the first Toledo theater to advertise a Keystone film by brand name in the local press—the Hart Theatre—was, perhaps not coincidentally, also one that directly targeted working-class audiences by posting regular listings in the local labor weekly, the Toledo Union Leader.

Just as Keystone had revived forms of screen comedy first popular at the height of the nickelodeon boom, so too did its films find initial success among those who had constituted the nickelodeons’ major clientele—the immigrant and native-born working class. In a context of industrywide gentrification, Keystone was a site of heterogeneity, with neither its output nor its audiences fitting the ideals that elsewhere guided cinema’s development. That heterogeneity, this chapter has been arguing, was a function of the studio’s multilayered affinity with the attitudes and experiences of America’s working class. But it would also take shape in ways that overtly challenged the cinematic practices through which the industry was seeking to appeal to the “better” classes. Beginning in early 1913, a new production trend emerged that underscored the studio’s open nonconformity to the ideological mainstream of the contemporary film industry: the “comic melodrama.”

“TO BURLESQUE EVERY SERIOUS THING THAT GRIFFITH DID”: PARODY AND POLEMIC IN KEYSTONE’S FILMS

On March 29, 1913, Moving Picture World announced a new series of Keystone comedies. “Mack Sennett, Fred Mace and the rest of the members of the Keystone company are engaged in putting on a new line of pictures—that is, Sennett says he is producing ‘comic melodramas’ which is an entirely new form of art.” This “new line of pictures” had in fact been launched two days previously, with the March 27 release of At Twelve o’Clock, a lost film that directly parodied D.W. Griffith’s 1908 The Fatal Hour. Griffith’s picture—the first of his films, incidentally, to include a parallel-edited finale—had featured as its central attraction the kind of technological contrivance common to the “sensation scenes” of low-priced stage melodrama. While on the trail of a gang of white slavers, a woman
detective is captured and tied in front of a gun rigged to fire when a clock strikes twelve. A race to the rescue ensues, in which she is saved just before the eponymous “fatal hour.” It was the contrivance of the timed gun that Sennett borrowed for his film, in which a “big Mexican bruiser” (Mace) ties the erstwhile object of his affections (Normand) to a post, directly in the sights of a revolver. But where Griffith’s film propelled its narrative trajectory through the precise and irrevocable advance of the clock’s deadline, Sennett transformed this temporal structure into comedy, introducing alternate rhythms that subverted its dramatic momentum. According to the Moving Picture World’s plot summary, the film derived much of its humor by intercutting between the woman’s urgent situation and the interminable incompetence of the policemen, who “have all manner of mishaps in reaching the scene.” This temporal playfulness seems to have culminated, in the film’s climactic moments, in a physical symbol of time’s inversion: the woman’s boyfriend (Sennett) “finally secures a big magnet, which he sticks through the barred window at one minute of twelve, and . . . pulls the hands back.” Time, dramatized by Griffith in its unstoppable forward movement, is, in the Keystone film, rendered comical by its apparent reversibility.

Evidently, Sennett was elaborating upon the games with time that he had introduced in such films as The Man Next Door. Yet it was its explicitly parodic engagement with the clichéd sensationalism of melodrama that made the film the noteworthy triumph of Keystone’s debut year. “[The Keystone] company,” pronounced the Moving Picture World’s reviewer, “has hit upon an exceptionally good burlesque idea, which is worked out in first-class form. . . . [T]he travesty, which occupies a full reel, is above the ordinary offering of the kind.” Although the majority of Keystone’s releases had hitherto been split-reel subjects, the comic melodramas—of which At Twelve o’Clock was the first—were almost always released as full-reel attractions, receiving considerable coverage in the trade press and even the nation’s newspapers. Just weeks after At Twelve o’Clock’s release, the syndicated movie columnist Gertrude M. Price described how Keystone was “Mak[ing] Comedy Out of Melodrama”—quoting Sennett’s definition of comedy as “the 10, 20, 30 type of melodrama ‘burlesqued a bit’”—and trade press ads began overtly to publicize Keystone’s output as “broad burlesque[s] on melodrama.” Such success is particularly notable inasmuch as these pictures provide the most explicit moment in Keystone’s early resistance to the film industry’s ideological mainstream. If the developments discussed in the preceding pages expressed this through a formal regression to older comic styles,
then Keystone’s burlesques took aim rather at the ethical content of dramatic filmmaking, engaging the sentimental modes of popular melodrama in order to subvert them. A form of ideological rewriting, they parodied the narrative and conceptual conventions through which dramatic filmmakers had sought to conform their films to the ethical precepts of the genteel middle class.

These observations will need to be substantiated through analysis: for the present, Keystone’s burlesques can briefly be situated in relation to the broader context of turn-of-the-century American theater. A derivative of the Italian burlare (to ridicule), the term “burlesque” refers, in its initial significance, to the tradition of theatrical parody that flourished across Europe from the late seventeenth century on, arriving in America two centuries later. (Historically, this has not been the only meaning of the word, and “burlesque” also refers, of course, to the bawdy, variety-style entertainment that put on leg shows for working-class men, in which Mack Sennett began his performing career.) At the simplest level, burlesque may be defined as a form of theatrical parody that has tended historically to flourish within “belated” societies in which formerly prestigious cultural forms have become desacralized, their ritual functions no longer meaningful for their audiences. Such was certainly the case on the late-nineteenth-century American stage, where the taste for burlesque spread across all classes, from the wage-earning audiences of cheap vaudeville houses to the privileged clientele of New York’s premier burlesque theater, the Weber and Fields Music Hall. Burlesque theatrics even passed through the hallowed portals of the genteel home: American middle-class families frequently staged amateur playlets in their parlors, and many of these directly parodied the histrionic acting and narrative conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama. One season’s dramatic success would be the following season’s travesty, as when the Weber and Fields Music Hall staged Quo Vass Iss? in 1900, burlesquing the historical drama Quo Vadis? which had just finished its run at the New York Theatre. Nor was it uncommon for a travesty and its “straight” counterpart to be staged concurrently, as was the case in 1898 when New York theatergoers could enjoy the historical romance Cyrano de Bergerac at the Garden and then laugh at Cyranose de Bric-a-Brac at the Music Hall.

Such rampant burlesquing—in vaudeville as on Broadway, on the stage as in genteel homes—was symptomatic of a deeply carnivalesque social situation. The flourishing of burlesque was coterminus with a crisis in cultural authority, as the continuing realities of social division circumscribed genteel attempts to define—and elicit consent to—a coherent hegemonic
vision. Under the pressures and upheavals of modernity, genteel culture had entered what one historian has called its “weightless” period, marked by uncertain moral commitments, an experience of fragmentation and change, and a growing sense of unreality. Unsurprisingly, then, a favored target of burlesque playwrights was melodrama, a theatrical form that, from its origins in postrevolutionary France, had sought to reassure bourgeois audiences of just the opposite, of the continued existence of an irrefutable and unchanging moral order. On Peter Brooks’s influential reading, the emergence of melodrama in Europe was a response to the uncertainties of modernity—where “traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide[d] the necessary social glue”—offering audiences a compensatory vision of a world governed by a sense of cosmic justice. As such, melodrama had originally performed a quasi-religious duty: it addressed fears of moral collapse by depicting the “apparent triumph of villainy” only to allay those fears with the “eventual victory of virtue.” Yet the profounder uncertainties of the American situation largely outstripped melodrama’s ameliorative function, and the genre took root on the American stage only alongside a deep awareness that its moral vision was, ultimately, something of a sham. If, in Europe, melodrama had grown out of a revitalized bourgeois culture, the form acquired more disreputable associations in America, where it flourished chiefly in the 10–20–30 cent houses frequented by the working- and lower-middle classes—those dispossessed classes for whom melodrama’s vision of moral justice might still have offered solace. From cheap vaudeville to Broadway, a burgeoning tradition of burlesque meanwhile took aim at the genre’s underlying moral iconography, presenting a world of comic moral extremism in which das-tardly “vilyuns” contended with “poor but honest” mothers bereft of “chee-iuld”: the moral terms of melodrama were exaggerated to the point at which they collapsed in preposterous hyperbole.

A paradox emerges, however, when considering the relation between melodramatic theater and early film. A mode of representation associated with the lower orders, melodrama nevertheless provided innovative filmmakers with a repertoire of conventions for delivering comprehensible stories and moral lessons. As such, they served as a valuable resource for filmmakers who wanted to transcend the medium’s disreputable origins and align their output with the ethical precepts of the genteel middle class. Theatrical melodrama had, after all, evolved a rigidly codified iconography for articulating traditional moral values, and, regardless of the genre’s appeal to working-class audiences, its ideological signals remained rooted in a bourgeois worldview. Nowhere was this more evident than in the early
career of D. W. Griffith, a director for whom melodrama provided an important tool in his quest to, as he later put it, “reform the motion picture industry.” During a period in which the film industry had come under ever more damaging fire from reformers and vice crusaders, Griffith saw that the motion picture could be used to, in his words, “keep boys and girls along the right planes of conduct.” Although critical of charity workers who attempted to impose their values on the underprivileged (as in A Child of the Ghetto and Simple Charity, both 1910), his early films nonetheless captured the crusading spirit of the Progressive era in their vision of ultimate moral order and social justice. From soon after his directorial debut at Biograph in June 1908, he turned to the ambiguous heritage of melodrama as a repository of techniques for realizing that vision: in Griffith’s hands, the spectacular conventions of cheap, “blood-and-thunder” melodrama became strategies for reinvigorating the waning values of American Victorianism.

A case in point here is the director’s innovative use of parallel editing to dramatize the “race-to-the-rescue” finales of his films. A cinematic equivalent to the “sensation scenes” of cheap melodrama, these climaxes nonetheless afforded Griffith a means of representing the tenets of Victorian moral discourse. The dualism expressed through Griffith’s parallel-edited rescues, which dramatize the contrast between an evil aggressor and imperiled innocence—typically, a woman or threatened family—was precisely delineated in terms of middle-class self-definition, particularly as this was predicated on a sentimental idealization of femininity and the sanctity of domestic space. Visualized as what Griffith called the “battle of human ethics common to all consciousness,” the parallel-edited rescue served as the vehicle for a specific social conception aligned with the ideology of genteel domesticity. Time and again, in Griffith’s films, the “battle of human ethics” centered upon the shattering of the genteel order by an outside intruder, usually a marginal figure marked as socially or racially different. The climactic race to the rescue of The Fatal Hour, for example, is precipitated by the violent abduction of two white women by a Chinese villain and his henchman. In a similar vein, The Lonely Villa (1909) exploits parallel editing to arouse identification with a white suburban family whose home has fallen under attack from intruding immigrant burglars.

Mention of The Lonely Villa returns us to Mack Sennett, who later claimed authorship of the film’s basic story idea. If the claim has any validity, then Sennett can fairly be accused of plagiarism: The Lonely Villa drew heavily on a 1907 Pathé film released in America as A Narrow Escape, which in turn was based on André de Lorde’s 1901 one-act play Au téléphone.)
It was around this time, in fact, that Sennett struck up what appears to have been a fairly one-sided friendship with Griffith, seizing on Griffith’s habit of taking evening strolls as an opportunity to advance his own ambitions: “When Griffith walked, I walked. I fell in, matched strides, and asked questions. Griffith told me what he was doing and what he hoped to do with the screen, and some of what he said stuck. I thought things over. I began to learn how to make a motion picture.” These walks, Sennett admitted, were “my day school, my adult education program, my university” in picture making. But while he admired the expressive value of Griffith’s storytelling techniques, he remained skeptical about the moral agenda that Griffith made them serve, a difference of opinion that he associated with their different backgrounds. “I did not see these factors in the same terms as Griffith . . . I think that being from the South influenced him: his father had been a notable Confederate officer, and [Griffith] had been brought up on tales of Chancellorsville, Manassas, Cold Harbor, and charge the ramparts. He saw stories as mass movement suddenly pinpointed and dramatized in human tragedy.” In contrast, “What I saw in his great ideas was a new way to show people being funny.”

Sennett also realized that Griffith’s techniques could be used to parody the moral themes that his tutor took so seriously. As Sennett explained to a journalist in 1916, his “natural tendency to burlesque every serious thing that Griffith did” became “the turning point of his career.” That tendency first expressed itself in Sennett’s 1912 half-reel comedy Help! Help! which was released while both he and Griffith were still at Biograph. An overt burlesque of The Lonely Villa, the film illustrates a fundamental tactic of parody, namely, the comic effect achieved through structural incongruities between an original text and its parodic imitation. Help! Help! achieves this through a direct, dialectical engagement with The Lonely Villa’s parallel-edited format, evoking the Manichean melodrama of Griffith’s film only to reveal, in the closing moments, that all is not as it seems: the moral dualism of Griffith’s conception is dissolved in a humorous twist.

The film begins with “Mr. and Mrs. Suburbanite” (as a title puts it) at breakfast in their middle-class suburban home. The wife (Normand) is reading a newspaper report about a spate of local robberies, to which she draws her husband’s attention. The husband (Mace) reassures her that all is well and leaves for work. Alone and apprehensive, Mrs. Suburbanite spies two tramps outside her home and, fearful that they are the burglars, locks herself inside her husband’s study. The sudden movement of a curtain convinces her that the tramps are jimmying the window, and, in a state of exaggerated
terror, she phones her husband for help. What follows is a burlesque race to the rescue in which Sennett cuts between the husband’s comic mishaps in his dash homeward and the wife’s absurd displays of fear. As in Griffith’s film, the husband’s first impulse is to race home by automobile (shots 15, 17, 19, 23, 25); as in Griffith’s film, the automobile fails to work (27, 29, 31). In *The Lonely Villa*, the husband flags down a horse-drawn carriage, which successfully hurries him home. In *Help! Help!*, the husband attempts to steal a donkey, which obstinately refuses to move (32, 33, 35). Chased away by the donkey’s irate owner, Mr. Suburbanite hotfoots it over a field, only to encounter a rifle-toting farmer, who drives him off his land (38). Interpolated with these sequences are shots of the terrified wife staring at the curtain (16), phoning the telephone operator (20, 21, 22), cringing on the floor in a desperate prayer (24, 26, 28), climbing into a trunk (30), and crouching with fear in a series of close-ups from within the trunk (34, 36, 39).153

While both Griffith’s original and Sennett’s parody thus use parallel editing to dramatize basically similar situations, the structure of *Help! Help!* contains a crucial difference. *The Lonely Villa* had conveyed its drama through a three-pronged editing pattern—cutting between threatened family, intruding burglars, and desperate husband. With the exception of two early shots in which the tramps are seen outside the Suburbanites’ home, *Help! Help!* excises the intruders from its structure, focusing on only two narrative trajectories—the wife’s panic and the husband’s pursuit. This careful transformation sets up the final twist—the discovery, upon the husband’s arrival, that there were no burglars after all, just a dog playing behind the curtain (40, 41, 42, 43). Where, in *The Lonely Villa*, the invasion of the middle-class home had been real, the urgent rescue justified, here the invasion is imagined, the rescue a waste of time.

In one sense, *Help! Help!* can be seen as an early model of Sennett’s tendency to wring humor from the contrast between an (apparently) urgent state of affairs and the bungling inefficiency of the rescuers. But its success as parody also involves a more pointed subversion of Griffith’s moral drama. Griffith’s focus on the threatened family and the struggle to protect the middle-class home was, as has already been noted, consonant with a genteel worldview that sacralized the domestic sphere as a site of uplift and renewal. Saving the family, as a term of Griffith’s narrative form, aligned cinematic technique with the agenda of genteel reformers who associated moral stability with home-grown values and female (wifely, motherly) guidance. Yet it is precisely this ideology that is devalorized in Sennett’s film: idealized notions of domesticity and female moral stewardship are comically overwritten by Normand’s hyperbolic, gibbering performance until, finally,
it is revealed that there was no threat after all, just the mistaken assumption of a highly strung housewife. If *The Lonely Villa* rests on the assumption of domestic sanctity, *Help! Help!* offers a desacralized vision of suburban paranoia: the “Angel in the House” of sentimental cliché has become a fool.

The film thus instantiates a principle that would lie at the heart of Keystone’s series of burlesque melodramas: replicate the form of film melodrama but gut it of its moral—and moralizing—meanings. One way of doing that, as the earlier film had revealed, was to suggest a situation of melodramatic peril and then to expose it as simple misunderstanding. Keystone’s filmmakers seem to have taken particular delight in placing many of the archetypal icons of genteel virtue in circumstances of wholly imagined danger. Such is the case, for example, in the Lehrman-directed *The Bangville Police* (April 1913), a one-reel film that adapts the burlesque plot of *Help! Help!* to one of the most characteristic tropes of nineteenth-century sentimental literature, the idealization of the rural life as an unspoiled moral economy. Here, a simple country girl (Normand) mishears a conversation between two farmhands and, mistakenly believing that they intend to rob her, barricades herself inside a farmhouse and calls the police. Once again, the mistake is revealed only in the final moments, after the woman has been “rescued.” And, once again, the joke is at the woman’s expense. From the perspective of the film’s conclusion, Normand’s country maid seems more a dimwitted rube than an embodiment of feminine sanctity. In other films from the cycle, by contrast, the viewer is in on the mistake from the outset. A case in point is the split-reeler *Hide and Seek* (April 1913). In a comic twist on the climax of the stage melodrama *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, office workers mistakenly believe that a child is trapped in a time-locked vault: the police are called and a race to the rescue ensues. Interspersed among images of speeding police trucks and anxious office workers, the director, George Nichols, inserts a series of shots that reveal to the audience what none of the characters know—namely, that the little girl has simply wandered off to a nearby playground. Parallel editing thus establishes an ironic narrative omniscience, deflating the melodrama before it has begun to get off the ground.

Such narrational tactics can be grouped together as syntactic variations on melodramatic form. In each case, these burlesques manipulate the underlying structures of film melodrama, employing editing either to withhold information (in the case of *Help! Help!* and *The Bangville Police*) or to provide ironic commentary (in the case of *Hide and Seek*). Other burlesque tactics, however, took aim at melodrama’s familiar iconography, offering semantic variations upon the typology of characters through which the genre expressed its ideological vision. By substituting comic alternatives
for melodrama’s pantheon of country maidens, villainous city gents, and corn-fed heroes, Keystone’s burlesques frequently produce effects of ironic distanian, playing out a melodramatic situation through protagonists devoid of moral resonance. This is most pointed in A Little Hero (May 1913), a novelty half-reel comedy in which the melodramatic triad of hero, villain, and victim is transposed into the animal world. The film’s parallel-edited climax, in which a heroic dog rescues a bird from the dastardly clutches of a cat, drew wry commentary from Moving Picture World: “It is unique and, though a little rough on the cat, will pass muster.” Likewise, where Griffith’s melodramatic imagination frequently focused on the bravery and innocence of a youthful couple, Keystone’s burlesque “mellers” often centered upon overtly farcical visions of young love. In Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life (June 1913), for example, the youthful hero (Sennett) is a slow-witted, bashful rube, while his sweetheart (Normand) is a spirited young woman who, in the film’s opening sequence, reacts to the humble gift of a daisy with a comically unsentimental scowl.

What distinguishes films like Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life and A Little Hero is that, while satirizing melodrama’s moral iconography, they nevertheless make the most of the genre’s formal capacities for suspense. Unlike Help! Help! and The Bangville Police, these films place their comic characters in situations of quite authentic peril, often playing the formal conventions of melodrama in surprisingly “straight” fashion. Mabel’s New Hero (August 1913), for example, climaxes thrillingly when Normand’s character rescues herself from a runaway hot-air balloon; and Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life ends in similarly sensational style with a race to rescue Normand from the train tracks. Griffithian editing structures are carefully and explicitly evoked in such films, not always to ridicule, but to replicate their dramatic momentum: the slow-paced comic scenes of Barney Oldfield’s opening (average shot length 8.5 seconds) thus yield to a heightening of tempo during the film’s parallel-edited finale (average shot length 5.3 seconds), which in turn culminates in a spectacular process shot creating the impression of a hair’s breadth escape from the path of a thunderous locomotive (fig. 4). Available evidence on reception and publicity suggests that the films’ popularity resided precisely in their ability to fuse comic pleasure with genuine thrills, promoting hybridized viewing experiences that straddled the affective registers of slapstick and sensation melodrama. One exhibitor’s report on Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life, for instance, indicates the audience’s tremendous absorption in the parallel-edited suspense, even while he categorized the film as comedy. “The people stay to see it two and three times,” explained Harry D. Carr, owner of the
Lyric theater in Defiance, Ohio. “I ran it three times last night and am holding it over for tonight. It is the greatest comedy ever shown in town bar none.” Advertisements for the films stressed precisely this mixing of generic pleasures, describing Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life as “a combination of sensational, thrilling and humorous melodrama” and For the Love of Mabel (June 1913) as “a series of thrilling burlesque melodramatic incidents.”

In comparison with the formal subversions of films such as Help! Help! Keystone’s more authentically sensational burlesques admittedly do less to contravene melodramatic convention. Parody, as a satirical practice of imitation, here becomes subordinate to pastiche, as a form of mimicry lacking parody’s satiric edge: the melodramatic mode is mobilized less as a target of critique or distanced irony than through a comic self-consciousness that exploits and relies upon melodrama’s framework of thrilling affects. Even in such cases, though, a parodic intent remains evident in semantic incongruities of performance and characterization—most notably in Ford Sterling’s frequent and deliciously over-the-top portrayals of mustachioed “vilyuns” (fig. 5). Simple exaggeration was, after all, among the most basic.
and familiar of burlesque practices. “There’s just a hair’s breadth between melodrama and comedy,” Mack Sennett himself explained in a syndicated interview in 1913. “You can make the latter out of the former by exaggerating it a bit.” Epes Winthrop Sargent concurred, in a 1914 column on the “vogue” for travesty, arguing that “exaggeration” was the most potent weapon in the burlesque filmmaker’s arsenal. In a later interview, the Keystone comedian Chester Conklin likewise explained that all that was needed to burlesque melodrama was “simply [to] take a dramatic scene and overplay it.” Performances of this kind subverted the iconography of good and evil upon which melodrama thrived, allowing audiences, in Sargent’s words, to “laugh at the good-natured fun poked at the villainous villain, the heroic hero and the virtuous heroine,” even as they thrilled to the films’ sensational climaxes. In the hands of Keystone’s filmmakers, melodrama’s ethical ritual quickly shaded into carnivalesque caricature.

Sargent’s reference to a “vogue” is significant, since it indicates that Keystone’s burlesque melodramas quickly spawned imitators at other studios. Already by February 1914, Universal had followed Keystone’s lead,
instigating production of comic melodramas at both of the studio’s comic
divisions (Al Christie’s Nestor company and the Joker brand), and the
format would remain a staple of slapstick production throughout the silent
era.165 Keystone’s burlesques were, unarguably, the studio’s most influen-
tial contribution to American film comedy during its first year and would
become one of its most enduring formulas. As late as 1916, advertisements
were still promoting the burlesque melodrama as Mack Sennett’s “special
formula,” proven “to get desired results at all times.” “Take one perfectly
good dramatic plot,” one ad explained, “soak in several gallons of fun and
laughter, pour in one villain and mix thoroughly, add one favored sweet-
heart, and stir the contents until it is completely twisted out of shape into
a hilarious tangle of fun and frolic.”166

By this time, the institutionalization of the format had, as might be
expected, all but annulled its original parodic force (thus tilting the force of
the burlesque more decisively toward pastiche). Yet the mischievous vital-
ity of the earlier films cannot be stressed too much. Keystone’s early para-
dies mounted a merry resistance to a mode of melodramatic filmmaking
that aligned cinematic form with genteel moral precepts. These films lam-
pooned the moral rhetoric through which filmmakers like D. W. Griffith
had sought to refine film melodrama and they desacralized efforts to estab-
lish motion pictures as a handmaiden for sentimental and domestic ideolo-
gies. They appropriated melodrama’s moral iconography, emptied it of its
content, and subverted it to the transmission of alternative comic mes-
Sages. In a context of industry gentrification, they were standard-bearers
for the studio’s playful disregard for the values of genteel culture.

“Popular culture,” writes Stuart Hall, “is organized around the contradic-
tion: the popular versus the power-bloc”—and the comic pleasures that
Keystone offered consistently engaged that contradiction.167 In its rejec-
tion of the “refined” comic style pioneered at Biograph and Vitagraph, in
its self-publicized aversion to the tenets of industrial discipline, in its par-
ydying of cinematic forms that gave voice to genteel moral precepts,
Keystone articulated and reinforced the values of a working-class culture
that differed from and was antagonistic to the culture of the dominant
classes. Themselves largely of humble social origins, Keystone’s filmmak-
ers were unapologetic about their affinity with the plebeian culture of
America’s lower classes: popular amusements provided the essential values
and traditions with which they chose operate, and it was with the popular
classes that the films found their initial success. In certain instances, in fact,
those populist affinities impinged directly on class politics, leading the filmmakers into overt activism on behalf of labor issues: in April of 1913, for example, Mabel Normand toured Los Angeles nickelodeons in what was described in the press as a “Socialist propaganda campaign”; and, by early 1916, Sennett himself was writing publicly on behalf of labor, promoting the educational value of “well constructed dramas, uproarious comedies and current news pictures” for working men and women.168

Yet such isolated occurrences should neither be overemphasized nor imply a necessarily political subversiveness to Keystone’s early form: certainly, one cannot assume an a priori subversive vector to slapstick, no matter the context in which it was produced. The decisive question, in fact, is not whether Keystone slapstick departed from genteel values—it did—but whether that departure was, in the last resort, held in check. It is well to remember that slapstick comedy of the early 1910s was, after all, an entirely permissible rupture of hegemony in an industrial context that had learned to delegate such festive populism to a subordinate role. As Peter Krämer has suggested, the revival of slapstick that began around 1911 was possible only because of the consolidation of exhibition practices that prioritized dramas—whether one-reelers or, increasingly, multiple-reel subjects—as “feature” attractions, in relation to which all other genres (comedies, travesties, etc.) now served as support.169 The decline in violent comedy could be reversed by filmmakers like Sennett because the subversion for which slapstick stood was now safely contained by industry practices that accorded preeminence to “feature” dramas. This is why it is important to insist that the liberatory pleasures of Keystone slapstick were primarily vicarious and imaginary, and not politically transformative. Perhaps the most that can be said about the politics of Keystone’s early form is that it preserved a subsidiary space for the articulation of value systems that departed from dominant ideologies. If this fell far short of actualizing class conflict, still it offered a symbolic configuration for the values and attitudes of American workers; it was, as the German critic Siegfried Kracauer saw it, a “counterweight” to the discipline of an industrializing society.

Yet the point, taken by itself, hardly accounts for the full conditions of Keystone’s early success. Who audiences laughed with and who they laughed at proved to be ideologically charged issues that, over Keystone’s coming years, would touch on complex questions at the heart of American working-class experience—questions of ethnic division and class membership. Paradoxically, it was a young Englishman who turned out to be the pioneer.

Enter Charles Chaplin.