To a joke, then, I owe my first gleam of complete consciousness – which again has recapitulatory implications, since the first creatures on earth to become aware of time were also the first creatures to smile.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (19)

Contrary to what it seems, comedy was in reality the most serious genre in Hollywood – in the sense that it reflected through the comic mode the deepest moral and social beliefs of American life.

André Bazin, 1948 film review

One does not yet know what the image will give or show, but the interval must be objectively *calculable*, a certain technology is required, and this is perhaps the origin or the essence of technology.

Jacques Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains* (19)

If tragedy is about the fact that people are mortal, then comedy is about the fools we make of ourselves on the way to the grave. The traditional distinction between Tragedy and Comedy, however, has always been difficult, at best, to maintain, especially when any moment or statement, depending on context, has the potential to be funny. In fact, comedy has been able to perform a great deal of analytic work that typically was the domain of tragedy or drama, especially since the end of the First World War. The emergence in the twentieth century of a host of literary and cultural figures, from James Joyce to Samuel Beckett to Eugène Ionesco to Flannery O’Connor to Joseph Heller to Günter Grass to Gabriel García Márquez to Salman Rushdie to Don DeLillo to Martin Amis and many others, reminds us of the great traditions of comedic cultural critique often ceded to other expressive arts. These are but a handful of the large number of writers who turned to comic, and often darkly comic, modes to address the horrors of existence in times of war, trauma and upheaval wrought by culture, ideology, politics, race and technology. The powerful thrust of comic critique has long held sway in the Western intellectual
tradition, certainly dating back to Aristophanes, and the early part of the twentieth century provides a temporal moment of initial and important impetus for comic engagement with large, socio-economic-historical-technological forces, most especially in and through film, an engagement that continued with a precipitous momentum throughout the century.

One of the major social and cultural issues that comic film took up was cinema itself, thematising its relationship to its audience and to the increasingly important status of the mechanically produced and moving image: that is, what cinema was doing to the collective understanding of the Real as it was understood in relation to technologies of representation as well as production. The trends begun early in comic film have continued with variations and different emphases throughout the century and into the next. Comic cinema in the early part of the twentieth century played a central role in cinema’s history as an industry, in narrative development and, more pertinently, its role in complicating the distinction between tragedy and comedy as it concerns social relations, issues all at play within film. The forms of comic cinema, how they worked and how the images shape our sense of collective and individual selves, as well as its content, mirrored crises of knowledge production and legitimisation under way within a host of national institutions, including the university, at the same moment.

Essentially following a chronological arrangement while also making synchronic connections, this book examines, in a simultaneously historical and conceptual fashion, the central role comedic films have played in cinema history, in terms of narrative, the construction of specific comic modes, and the rapidly growing import of visual culture in the public discursive and political spheres: all related to the problematic of popular culture and / as cultural critique. Some ways of delimiting the very large brief of studying American comic film as performing cultural critique include: film comedy within cultural, historical, economic and theoretical contexts; film comedy and its traditions within cinema history; important innovators in American film comedy; the positioning of cinema within a larger technological field and mediascape, as well as the longer trajectories that constitute these larger contexts of cinema’s emergence and changes; and the role of visual technology within cultural politics, self-reflexive examination of the status of the image, and cinema’s engagement and thematising of its own power and influence in the changing nature of visual and aural representation/production. Though the book uses all of these as touchstones for analysis, the major portion of its engagement with the field comes with the role of cinema in the emergence of visual technology’s specific ascendancy during the twentieth century, and cinema’s reflexive
engagement with visual culture and the various scopic regimes and technologies that constitute it.

The Maltese Cross: The Flickering Shutter of Auto-technological Education

The films produced today are merely the visible allegory of the cinematic form that has taken over everything – social and political life, the landscape, war, etc. – the form of life totally scripted for the screen. This is no doubt why cinema is disappearing: because it has passed into the hands of reality. A lethal transfusion in which each loses its specificity. If we view history as a film – which it has become in spite of us – then the truth of information consists in the post-synchronization, dubbing and sub-titling of the film of history.

Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil* (125)

So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain held fast in the will to master it. We press on past the essence of technology.

Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ (32)

The hypnotic movements of the Sioux ghost dance could not be more aptly named, at least in the footage shot by W. L. K. Dickinson in 1894 in Edison’s famous Black Maria studio. The performers are indeed performers, ethnographic examples from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Philippe-Alain Michaud writes of them that

the performers in the two photo-printed strips escape from the circus world employing them and recall, in their spectral apparition, the reality of their disappearance. And while they entered the film in borrowed guise, they appear there for their own sakes, since, in fact, the set depicts nothing except the event of their vanishing and the litany of their return. (66)

Destruction in the name of preservation can be found in numerous cultural endeavours throughout history, not the least of which is documented in the act of documentation, in the representation of the cultural and technological regime that is replacing that which it preserves in representation. An early example resides at the very heart of Western secular literature with Homer’s oral performance jotted down by a skilled amanuensis (as posited by Albert Lord and his student Milman Parry) – Homer’s ghost-writer, as it were. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show had been parked in New Jersey at the time of filming with Edison’s Black Maria studio nearby. The Wild West Show itself was an endangered form of performance, whilst Native American nations such as the Sioux had been all but destroyed.

The techno-scientific capacity to document what a given technology’s existence is erasing and destroying can be discerned in these brief film
clips. The many links between film and gun technologies (as found in Etienne-Jules Marey’s photographic gun from the early 1880s) lend an especial resonance to these haunting images of the ghost dance, for the gun in North America proved instrumental in the destruction of the native population and its cultures. Friedrich Kittler notes the linkages between the two technologies, with the history of the movie camera simultaneous with and influencing the history of automatic weapons. ‘The transport of pictures’, he writes, ‘only repeats the transport of bullets’ (124). Kittler brings these to Dickinson’s footage through the Colt revolver and the Gatling gun that cleared the West of its ‘nonhumans’ (124). The Western as a genre that moved from the dime novel to become a foundational element of the new entertainment form of cinema is ironically and tragically prefigured in Dickinson’s film clip. However, what has made it on to the film stock has already been mediated by performance and rendered fully decontextualised, for it is a circus show, a vaudeville version of Sioux cosmology that we see flickering before our eyes, simultaneously adding to and detracting from its poignancy. It is both better and worse that, through the technology of reproduction and representation found in this film, we are not necessarily witnessing some lost cultural expression. It would already have disappeared, been erased before Dickinson’s specific camera arrived, and the camera documents merely a ghost of the ghost dance.

At many levels – the cinematic technology, its cultural influence and its ability to document, as well the conditions of possibility it produces – Dickinson’s film footage embodies and exemplifies what Virilio calls ‘the aesthetics of disappearance’. The gaps in perception caused by technologically produced movement and speed result in ‘picnolepsy’, a form of perception emergent from absences and lost snippets of time. Finding overlaps between the fundamentally different philosophical positions of René Descartes and Henri Bergson, Virilio claims that, for both thinkers, consciousness or thought emerges from duration. It is ‘our duration that thinks, the first product of consciousness would be its own speed in its distance of time, speed would be the causal idea, the idea before the idea’ (32). Virilio’s preoccupations with speed in relation to temporality and its influence on apperception and consciousness direct us to cinema’s position within and contributions to the vastly larger domain of material and immaterial changes resultant from technological prosthetic extensions of the senses and systems of thought that so dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The cinematic image fused with locomotion, motorised systems and movement, to become a standard, or normative, vision of the world: a default and ‘natural’ mode of seeing.
Tom Gunning argues that we need ‘to theorize film’s place synchronically within the wider system of interlocking technologies which compose the terrain of modern experience’ (Calling 19). Making explicit connections to telephony and railroad transportation with and through cinema, Gunning suggests that ‘cinema teaches us about technology not only through an examination of its own mechanics, modes of production and expression, but through its representation of, and interactions with, other technologies’ (Calling 19). Cinema not only furthered the training of viewers to engage with moving images in specific ways, he continues, but it also showed viewers how to interact with and understand the host of technologies emergent at the turn of the twentieth century that transformed sounds, images and movement – and thus time and space – within a system of interconnected and mutually influential technologies (Calling 20).

One technology that was cinematic from its inception, even as it predated cinema, is the railway, and early cinema clearly enjoyed a fascination with train travel, starting with the Lumière Brothers’ first public screenings. Early film screenings included what became known as ‘phantom rides’, simulations of train journeys that allowed audiences vicarious travel at speeds unimagined and often unexperienced. The sites and the locales on offer were often of the exotic stripe but even more so was the sheer technological splendour on display: speed, mobility and viewing-at-a-distance. Hale’s Tours took phantom rides to another level by offering audiences visual travel to all parts of the world (‘without the luggage!’), all augmented with haptic and aural effects such as shaking bleachers, hissing steam whistles and clanging bells. The Hale’s Tours, like the panorama, provide early examples of immersive simulated environments. Striking in these early travelogues is the symbiotic glorification of the train and cinema (both movement machines) that, importantly, provided a view of the rail trip from the train’s point of view, with one machine speaking to and being documented by the other. In essence, audiences were mere bystanders to a kind of early machine-to-machine communication, rather like seeing footage of a fighter plane through the cross-hairs of a gun aiming to bring it down, with the camera and gun speaking to each other and both agonistically engaging yet a third machine (the aeroplane). This kind of machinic communication and interaction, of course, gains a rapid momentum and undergoes exponential growth throughout the twentieth century, but finds an early and influential incarnation in the phantom rides.

Cinema, as a latecomer in this field, not only displayed its affinities with these other technologies but also became the vehicle for an interpretive
mastery of them, a technology to contain and control other technologies, to show viewers how to understand themselves in relation to them and to the alterations of time and space they bore witness to in their daily lives. In much the same way some half a century later, the computer combined numerous extant machines to colonise and appropriate them, rendering their previous incarnations almost unrecognisable (the calculator, the typewriter and so on). Walter Benjamin argues, in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’, that ‘the function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with the vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily’ (27, emphasis in original). This training provides a kind of existential equilibrium between media technologies and the world they produce, within which humans must function. The equilibrium Benjamin hints at, though, is fundamentally a simulacrum manufactured by all media in their mediation between the Real and humanity (the Real as real and humanity as human, as opposed to machinic). To continue an expanded sense of Gunning’s suggestion, we can usefully understand cinema, or media, functioning along with and in reaction to many other discursive and material practices, such as the shift from rural and agrarian production to urban and industrial manufacturing, the organisation of urban space and the built environment, the movement of people on small and large scales, the exponential growth of science and technology to order and explain life, instrumental reason as dominant, bourgeois culture and those cultural and economic forces that sought to resist it (including the avant-garde).

Cinema mostly taught viewers how to understand cinema, constantly thematising its addresses and relationship to its audience: the broadcast monologue of cinema speaking to, not with, viewers. And comic cinema, perhaps consciously and perhaps knowingly, provided a self-reflexive critique of this auto-technological or auto-medial training, allowing audiences to glimpse the many ways in which they were being conditioned, shaped and articulated in the newly advanced mechanical era by this quintessential example of art form become industry. Comic cinema, then, returns us self-reflexively and through its own medium and medial relations to the kinds of questions about the construction of human perception and consciousness (or aesthetics) that Benjamin raises in his meditation on art and mechanical reproduction.

Comedic film plays a central role in cinema’s transformation from visual special effect and novelty device to art form and viable commercial product, especially through its centrality in the emergence of standardised narrative patterns, the early constitution of genres, and formalisation of cinematic grammar. It also explored the changing relationship between
mechanical visualisation and the constitution of the Real, a relationship it manipulated and perpetuated in specific ways. Visual culture’s ascendancy accelerated in and through early comedic cinema, and so did the potential for the medium to question the very transformations it exacerbated. Through the manipulation of time and space, combined with an apparently precise mimetic replication and indexicality (which is debatable), film contains the possibility to cause shifts in visual culture that are capable of critique. Yet it can also be mobilised, and perhaps more easily so in the perpetuation of that which it sought to challenge: culpability in the conditions of crisis rather than critique of them. The vision machines of entertainment had long been the vision machines of business enterprises, urban control and military power too, but it took the early film comedians to make this invisible usage of visual culture visible to the audiences who were subject to popular entertainment, industrialised labour and warfare all at the same time. The extent to which this intervention has continued or not, as well as the metamorphoses of comedic film in questioning larger cultural forces, remains in question.

Gunning has argued that the earliest audiences came to see not film per se but the cinematograph, thus joining a long line of inventions that people paid to watch or hear in operation. Their interest in film actually revealed an interest in how the apparatus worked and what it did (Crazy Machines 88). While this is certainly true, an equally important element of the general fascination with the machine, as Virilio and others have noted, is a fascination with its potential for failure. This possibility of failure or disruption, Gunning further suggests, provides the appeal of the gag film, which proved important for early cinema’s viability. In a profound way, the content of these early gag films depended on, while also contradicting, the appeal of the apparatus: the self-negating appeal of machinic functioning and failure. The avant-garde in the early part of the twentieth century seemed especially enthralled with technological potentials for shaping consciousness and articulating modes of thought that resided outside the rational systems of bourgeois culture, while also concentrating on the ways in which the very techne underpinning the values and economy of this culture could and did work against itself (cp. Bishop and Phillips). Marcel Duchamp, for example, was especially interested in pursuing logics, systems and technologies to their logical ends, which means their breaking points, their failure – not their realisation. The comedic in film operates in a similar fashion, as a form of disruption working to unsettle and critique its very own conditions of possibility while drawing attention to its dependent and contrary status. To update and expand this claim, we can consider the comedic in cinema as an extension and manifestation
of contemporary glitch aesthetics operative at all levels. The comedic is the glitch writ large, the spanner in the works that is the working of the works itself. Thus the comic performs a kind of epistemic break in its very being while also highlighting the continuity that makes any kind of break possible.

**Comedy, Cinema, Critique**

Only comedy, with its conceits, makes it possible for the anonymous audience to become a public – a reality that must be reckoned with, but which can also be calculated upon. A humorous conceit easily turns the crowd of theatergoers into a mass that can be attacked, seduced, beguiled to listen to things it would otherwise not readily listen to. Comedy is a mousetrap in which the public is easily caught and in which it will get caught again and again. Tragedy, on the other hand, presupposes a community, the existence of which cannot always be presumed without embarrassing results.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, ‘Theater Problems’ (156)

It is humor which makes language stammer, which imposes on it a minor usage, on which constitutes a complete bilingual system within the same language.

Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues II* (51–2)

Aristotle asserts that a child becomes ‘human’ when s/he laughs because the child understands a specific combination of reality and fantasy, an awareness of rules, codes, values and the Law, and the pleasure derived from the imagination and creativity to manipulate them. The child’s laughter emerges from the deep pleasure and giddy insight that the order of the world can be otherwise, which becomes the basis for critical engagement with it. Comedy provides a space of suspension, when the rules are momentarily revealed as rules, when form yields to content’s brutal manipulation of it. Following Aristotle’s insight that a child becomes ‘human’ when s/he laughs, the child then understands a specific combination of reality and fantasy, an awareness of rules/codes/values/Law and the pleasure derived from the imagination/creativity to manipulate them. Thus comedy can be and often is serious business because it is based on, works with, comments upon and critiques all that has the potential to be, or that is presented as, serious. As Dürrenmatt suggests in the epigraph attached to this section, comedy might well work better than tragedy or drama for addressing the serious demands and quandaries of existence, exposing the constructedness of values and culture, power and liberty, fear and hope. A kind of doubling and a nod towards audience awareness of this doubling are essential to the comic text. Similarly, because of the ‘double vision’ needed for the comedic to work, or the double modality
with which it addresses its audience, the potential for an ethical gesture of explicit co-creation of meaning proves essential for the functioning of the comedic text.

However, important questions emerge. Does comedy reinforce the power it apparently overturns? Is the Law (the logos, the phallus, the father) reinscribed and reinforced by that which comments on it, even if done critically and derisively? That is, beyond the basic question of whether or not a popular culture product can critique effectively the systems that produce it, at a deeper epistemological level, can comedy effect meaningful change and insights with regard to the very conditions that make it possible? The ambiguous, even aporic, terrain that these questions constitute provides the ground for any examination of comedy’s potential or capacity to perform cultural critique or cultural politics. Add to that the medium and industry that constitute cinema as emergent art form and cultural product, as well as collaborator in a rapidly shifting mediascape, and the questions become more complex, layered, nuanced and difficult.

Less difficult but no less nuanced or complex is the integral part that comedy played in film’s movement from sheer visual effect to a consumer product that is a delivery system of narrative, thus saving the fledgling technology from the fate that befell a whole host of other optical manipulation devices. As the crowds began to tire of seeing trains enter a station, workers leave a factory or people sneezing, the Lumière Brothers struck on ‘the single shot narrative’, as Gunning productively named it, found in *L’Arroseur arrosé* (1895), or ‘The Sprayer Sprayed’ (Crazy Machines 89). The Lumière film is a gag film documenting the comic situation of a hoax being perpetrated on an unsuspecting victim. In this particular instance, a man is watering a lawn when a young scamp steps on the hose stemming the flow of water. When the sprayer looks curiously at the mouth of the hose, the boy releases the stream, thus spraying the sprayer. These single-shot narratives proliferated in the first decade of cinema’s existence and remained the dominant genre in terms of sheer quantity until around 1903 (89). The single-shot narrative had the initial advantage of continuous time and space, rendering all of the action understandable in the physical world, and needing no knowledge of the emerging yet inchoate grammar of cinema and editing. Therefore the gag films did not avail themselves of cinema’s infinite capacity to manipulate time and space: the metaphysics of cinema.

To realise the narrative capacity of film more fully, filmmakers needed to understand the implications of the camera eye replacing the audience’s eye. The cinema camera frees our biological organ from its time–space
and corporeal constraints, which had a profound impact on visual culture and how we view viewing (or see seeing). Editing clearly exemplifies this capacity to alter and play with time and space, and thus ‘the shot’ became the building block from which cinematic narrative could be constructed. As a visual literacy and cinematic grammar quickly established itself with regard to techniques for story telling, the medium’s ability to render elastic the constraints of the physical world similarly increased. This had a huge appeal for magician filmmakers (from Méliès to Orson Welles) and comedians. Comedic filmmakers also added their own angles to what quickly solidified, under D. W. Griffith’s tutelage, as stock elements of cinematic narrative. Mack Sennett’s massively influential and successful Keystone studios helped establish speed as an important dimension of cinematic narrative, and of course film technology generally; indeed, the phrase ‘cut to the chase’, which has long been a part of daily parlance, resulted from Sennett’s cure-all for narrative slack or obscurity as he cranked out films (literally) by the hundreds.

At the same time that the pace of films and the relationship of shot-to-scene gained complexity, genres codified narrative constraints and possibilities further, establishing a kind of story-telling techne that film comedians used and abused, parodied and kicked against. Doug Kellner and Michael Ryan argue that Hollywood genre films promote dominant American values and ideologies, such as the import of money and success; the proper social forms and institutions of heterosexual love, marriage and family; the legitimate sources of power and authority found in the state, police and legal system; the threat posed by violence to the American system (a threat met by even greater violence in the control of the state); and American values and institutions as largely correct, beneficial and benevolent to society as a whole. Cinematic comedy at times challenges these, while at other times it merely reinforces them. Again, we return to the dilemma of whether or not comedy reinstates the power it apparently overturns by choosing specific elements of culture to target for humorous engagement. Althusser’s famous argument that ‘ideology is a “representation” of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (153) might well provide a way to work the ever-apparent inconsistencies in filmic cultural critique. Further, the insight that all ideology is in service of maintaining the status quo would have profound implications on film’s (in)ability to function as critical engagement at all.

Regardless of its efficacy as cultural critique, comedic film does have social and cultural effects. The Dürrenmatt epigraph leads us to the possibility of the ethical, or rather the potential for the ethical, operative within comedy that emerges through a collective conversion of the anonymity
of the crowd into the identity of audience through the double modality of the address upon which comedy relies. The playfulness essential to the comedic emerges from the explicit need for the addressee to ‘get’ the humour and interpret it as humour. If this fails, then the humour fails. Similarly, having to explain humour obliterates the effect that results from the splendid moment of ‘getting it’ and thus the shared insights that comedy allows. While reader-response and reception-based theories of meaning have long been in circulation with regard to all manner of textual address, they are perhaps more relevant with comedy than with other types of texts, for there is the tacit and unstated assumption from the addressee that is akin to saying ‘I know you know what I am saying, and I am signalling to you that I know you know.’ The result, then, can be a camaraderie of likeness, a shared sensibility about the working of the world. The profound inter-relatedness of addressee, address and addresser, most especially with regard to an awareness of the level of the address and its self-referentiality, makes the comedic communicative act possible. The comedic text, then, functions like a discursive glitch, or linguistic stammer, in the smooth-running machine of the social order.

Miriam Hansen argues that ‘film has the potential to reverse, in the form of play, the catastrophic consequences of an already failed reception of technology’ (Benjamin and Cinema 52). Comedic film perhaps engages this general potentiality of film more fully than any other enunciative mode of the medium.

**Animation and Automation: Technics of Vision, War and Entertainment**

I have said that it is a quality, not a defect, of the photoplays that while the actors tend to become types and hieroglyphics and dolls, on the other hand, dolls and hieroglyphics and mechanisms tend to become human. By an extension of this principle, non-human tones, textures, lines, and spaces take on a vitality almost like that of flesh and blood.

Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Motion Picture*, writing in 1915

Walt Disney, along with Ub Iwerks, created Oswald the Lucky Rabbit for Universal Studios, an animated character deeply attuned to the vast range of technological developments and film comedians of the era. In her excellent study of animation’s central position within the development of, and in dialogue with, the avant-garde, Esther Leslie links the character to a range of film comedians, including Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Laurel and Hardy, but especially Buster Keaton because of his consistent interactions and playful encounters with technology, including
A 1927 cartoon featuring Oswald, entitled ‘Great Guns’, emerges in the interwar year era and examines the continued appeal of military action and its capacity for stoking nationalist fervour in spite of the exponentially powerful weaponry developed for the First World War. These weapons figure strongly in the film in both comic and horrific ways that bind the technology of cinema and its capacity for altering perceptions and images of the world, as well as our corporeal integrity, with those rapidly developing and changing technologies of warfare that do the same. The cartoon includes anthropomorphised and animate cannons (the eponymous great guns) and munitions, with the former having mouth-like barrels that consume cannon shells like food and the latter taking pleasure in destruction as well as heeding the neutrality of Red Cross medics – making a mockery of the international ideal of humane warfare in the age of modernist industrial production.

Leslie argues that ‘Great Guns’ parodies a then-popular educational film touting the wonders of a new ‘silent great gun’ fired by electro-magnetic power, with its innovative firing mechanism seen as an improvement over more combustible methods (25). In the cartoon, the animate shells leap of their own volition into the outstretched mouths of the great guns they feed, with the entire system of battle being humanless in its conduct, if not in its results or effects. In fact, the battle scene depicted ranks high in carnage, with decapitations littering the screen. As early as 1900, Nikolas Tesla predicted warfare in the future being waged by machines and directed towards machines – rather like the machine-to-machine vision and communication discussed earlier – and solely a battle of technological supremacy. The closed loop of technology operating in and on the world without apparent human influence anticipates the fully automated weapons systems of the present, as well as numerous automatic systems such as elements of financial markets, but is also embodied by cinema in so far as human agents are not present, except through the medium of representation. An auto-technological awareness of cinema’s relation to the other technologies with which it is engaged runs throughout ‘Great Guns’, and as always, cinema becomes its primary interest.

After Oswald is literally blown to bits, swept up and taken back to the hospital, the nurse (who, conveniently enough, is the love interest Oswald impresses by strutting around in his uniform early in the film) puts the rabbit pieces into a martini shaker, shakes it up and pours out a black liquid that forms into Oswald. The inky pouring out of the rabbit protagonist provides an allusion to the self-reflexive referencing in the Fleischer Brothers’ Ko-Ko the Klown shorts, in which the character emerges from an inkwell, showing the material base of both his static and his animated
self. Ko-Ko interacts with his animators in the ‘Out of the Inkwell’ productions and in one film – ‘A Trip to Mars’ (1924) – involuntarily journeys to space because of the animator’s enthusiasm for astronomy. His trip and his experiences there thus provide yet another allusion to even earlier cinema, Edison’s ‘A Trip to Mars’ (1910) and Georges Méliès’s ‘A Trip to the Moon’ (1902) with direct references to Méliès’s exploding moon demons. In fact, the films in Ko-Ko’s ‘Out of the Inkwell’ series always begin with the animator Max Fleischer’s hand, which is holding an ink pen that brings shape to the clown and manipulates him until he becomes animate; this could well be seen as an allusion to Emil Cohl’s 1908 innovative animation short Fantasmagorie, which also features Cohl’s hands drawing a clown that eventually begins to move. The ‘Out of the Inkwell’ series features extended interaction between animation and live action while foregrounding the cinematic manipulation required for each to materialise on the screen. In this way, the Fleischers’ shorts offer a contained sense of human agency in the form of the illustrator and film technicians, but in each the animator falls prey to the antics of his animated character. The ghost in the machine is the genie in the bottle – or the klown in the inkwell – and, once loosed, can only momentarily be contained.

Mixing live action and animation, the film fully exploits the capacity of the cinematic image to offer windows on a type of reality that visual technologies make possible and can generate, harnessing the kinds of optics that also allow for prosthetic tele-viewing (telescopes), targeting (for guns and rockets) and perspectival projection and manipulation. The film ends with both the animator and Ko-Ko returning to the inkwell, with the heavens as background of the image crumpled up and also stuffed into the inkwell by a pair of metacinematic hands, revealing the image beneath the image that is always an image – the ground of the image as a technological and material necessity for the image to function as an image.

Both ‘Great Guns’ and ‘A Trip to Mars’ offer reflections on cinematic auto-technological education operative in film in relation to other technologies but also with regard to how its viewers, its addressees, might engage it. These films, as with any text, do not operate alone but rather within their level of address, and an awareness of the novelty of moving images as a unique mode of address is apparent in early cinema. Not only are the addressees far removed in space and time – potentially as distant as readers of written texts – but also they are in need of acquiring a grammar necessary for understanding the message. In general, any level of address includes some self-referential aspects, referring to itself as an act of communicative engagement. With cinema, the self-referential dimensions
operate at the level of enunciation and are often about the means or media of enunciation, laying bare the host of technologies and institutional apparatuses that allow the film to articulate its message. Cinema’s relationship to its audience has been the content of that address essentially from the outset, as soon as filmmakers started making films about the audience’s confusion or wonderment at seeing a film, such as Edison’s *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902) and many others.

The relationship between addressee and addressee has been a long and complex one, as many film critics, historians and theorists have discussed. Vivian Sobchack, discussing movement and speed in film as considered through Tom Gunning’s work on the cinema of attractions, asserts that cinema’s self-reflexive consideration of its images is less to do with *the illusion of transparency* (or mimetic indexicality) and more to do with *the experience of revelation* (304, emphases in original). Sobchack’s argument makes a productive move towards Heidegger’s essay on the essence of technology as a means of instrumentalist control, in contrast to its potential for being a vehicle of revelation. Heidegger’s term for this is ‘enframing’, in so far as the essence of technology is not its material influence but rather the way it shapes thought, perception, evaluation and understanding of the world (thus keeping thought within a specific kind of frame). The Fleischers’ ‘Out of the Inkwell’ series allegorises cinematic enframing in relationship to the audience as Ko-Ko interacts in playful and malevolent ways with his animator, much as cinema does with its viewers, to interrogate (with humour) the silent, invisible operation of the technics that deliver the entertainment of the cinematic message. The audience is embodied by Fleischer, who believes he controls the animated entity, much as we believe we control our engagement with cinematic content. Each time, Ko-Ko as metonym for cinema’s message simultaneously cooperates with Fleischer’s desires and overturns them to express his own. The frame of the page and the frame of the cinematic image are broken repeatedly at the level of content while being maintained at the level of performance and enunciation: that is, the physical screen that is the ground of the image. The mode of presentation and representation inescapably dominates the film’s relationship with the audience, though comedy provides a moment of breakage to reveal the mechanism at work, as well as in its failure, which is perhaps a moment of hope. If cinema provides us with ‘a virtual encyclopaedia of modernity’s tropes: agency, control, technological prowess, speed, intelligence (both human and machine), the power to render the invisible visible, and the intimate connections between aesthetics and technology’ (Bishop and Phillips 50–1), then comedic cinema provides us with a means for swapping around the
entries of modernity’s encyclopaedia, changing its taxonomies and revealing their arbitrary yet determinate divisions.

**In What Follows . . . and Other Caveats, Frames and Contexts**

By doing so, Benjamin recast the more orthodox Marxist question of false consciousness in terms of his un/timely theory of ‘anthropological materialism’: How is consciousness, whether false or critical, produced and reproduced in the first place? What is the effect of industrial–capitalist technology on the organization of the human senses, and how does it affect the conditions of experience and agency, the ability to see connections and contradictions, remember the past, and imagine a (different) future?

Miriam Hansen, ‘Why Media Aesthetics?’ (393)

The restructuring of human work and association was shaped by the technique of fragmentation that is the essence of machine technology. The essence of automation technology is the opposite. It is integral and decentralist in depth, just as the machine was fragmentary, centralist, and superficial in its patterning of human relationships.

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (23)

A large and influential body of work on comedic cinema exists, and these texts have proven to be invaluable interlocutors for this book. As far as film comedy goes, few address comedy with relation to cultural criticism, and when they do, the focus tends to be tightly on specific aspects of the social domain, e.g. gender, class, race and discourse. Clearly, these are all essential concerns; however, the larger cultural critique examined in the text that follows is that of technology and visual culture, the formation of the Real through media technologies, the changing status of the image in relation to other scopic and medial regimes, and self-reflexive engagement of the larger cinematic machinery (material and immaterial) in shaping culture. Books that plough the social and cultural terrain of film comedy and that have informed this one include: Christopher Beach’s *Class, Language and American Film Comedy*, Dan Harries’s *Film Parody*, James Harvey’s *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood, from Lubitsch to Sturges*, Nora Henry’s *Ethics and Social Criticism in the Hollywood Films of von Stroheim, Lubitsch, and Wilder*, Elizabeth Kendall’s *The Runaway Bride*, Michael North’s *Machine-Age Comedy*, William Paul’s *Laughing Screaming*, Kathleen Rowe’s *The Unruly Woman* and Steve Vineberg’s *High Comedy in American Movies*, to name a few. Each of these texts contributes greatly to the discussion of the potential cultural critique that comedy and cinema afford, though they do so within some delimitations; the work that follows would wish to open this up and expand it,
specifically with regard to the technological self-reflexivity of much comic cinema.

Works on film comedy more generally, which the current work relates to but differs rather widely from, include: James Agee’s ‘Comedy’s Greatest Era’, Alan Dale’s Comedy is a Man in Trouble, Tom Gunning’s ground-breaking articles and chapters, Andrew Horton’s Comedy / Cinema / Theory, Henry Jenkins’s What Made Pistachio Nuts?, Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins’s edited volume, Classical Hollywood Comedy, Geoff King’s Film Comedy, Gerald Mast’s The Comic Mind, Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik’s Popular Film and Television Comedy, Jerry Palmer’s The Logic of the Absurd and Lisa Trahair’s The Philosophy of Comedy. Many of these more general texts are either genre-driven or cultural–historical (or industry-centred) analyses, providing overviews and documentation of a field without necessarily making arguments. A good number of these excellent works also analyse a specific temporal moment or desire to give a large overview of the entire terrain, thus presenting a detailed list rather than a sustained argument.

Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film adds to the conversation of film comedy in three primary and inter-related ways. One is that the book argues for the centrality of comedy in film as a means for staging (or attempting) cultural criticism. Another focuses on the cultural formations emergent from cinema itself: that is, the powerful and sustained shifts in visual culture emergent in the twentieth century that cinema helped generate, foster and question. As a result, comedic film often addresses technology (industrial, mechanical, visual, digital, military and so on) and techne generally, which constitute the grounds of possibility for cinema itself that fall into its purview of self-reflexive cultural criticism. The ways in which cinema further amplifies concerns that reach back to antiquity about mimesis and its simultaneous capacity for imitation and production form part of this self-reflexive or self-staging interaction with its technology and various techne. Cinema, thus, becomes an important site for producing and critiquing visual technology within US and global cultural politics, examining the status of the mechanically produced and reproduced moving image, and the thematising of its own power. In so doing, cinema simultaneously represents itself as a unique medium that is also part of a larger trajectory of visual and audiovisual technologies that have not only contributed to cinema’s formation but also created the media environment in which it must function. The final way in which this work adds to the current discussions about cinema comes through the role of critical theory outside the usual bounds of Bergson or Freud for addressing comic film, though these authors will be considered too. Other theo-
rists brought into play include Baudrillard, Eco, Bakhtin, Virilio, Derrida, Kittler, Hutcheon and Elsaesser, to name a few. This larger theoretical canvas provides scope for a strategic placement of comedic cinema in the critical discursive sphere while also examining cinema studies in ways that differ from phenomenological, psychoanalytic or gender-based studies, and yet acknowledging the import of these theoretical contributions and indeed drawing on them. The book that follows provides both genre analysis as well as cultural–historical contextualisation for the areas and arguments detailed above and offers a strategically selective angle on US comedic film: neither a broad overview nor a narrow temporal / cultural focus, but something that mobilises both simultaneously. Through these three areas of inquiry and the set of inter-related arguments in combination with one another, this book hopes to contribute to the conversations about comedy and film generated by the titles listed above.

As always, a surfeit of potential films for discussion unfolds before the comedic film commentator, and one must make hard choices. An economy of excess exists when it comes to American film comedy and coverage of periods and genres is not really possible. Yet it is this very fecundity that creates the imperatives behind the kind of study this book attempts, knowing that it will unavoidably be incomplete, leaving much that is suggestive for potential further development in this work’s gestures and engagements. Aiming for breadth and depth of canonical and mostly mainstream fare, though occasionally going outside the Hollywood norms, the book includes a wide range of filmmakers and films to be discussed in detail: Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936); Hal Roach/Laurel and Hardy’s ‘Finishing Touch’ (1928); Buster Keaton’s *Sherlock Jr.* (1924); Leo McCarey/Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* (1933); Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be* (1942); Woody Allen’s *Zelig* (1983); Mel Brooks’s *Blazing Saddles* (1974); Barry Levinson/David Mamet’s *Wag the Dog* (1997); Trey Parker’s *Team America* (2004); and Albert Brooks’s *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* (2005). Along with a handful of very early and contemporary animation shorts, ranging from Oswald the Lucky Rabbit (Disney), Ko-Ko the Klown (the Fleischers) and *The Dinosaur vs. The Missing Link* (Willis H. O’Brien; all dating from the first two decades of the twentieth century) to *Wall-e* (Andrew Stanton) and *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* (William Joyce; from the first two decades of the twenty-first century), other films that are perhaps unusual for a book on American film comedy are examined in some detail, including the World War I documentaries ‘War Neuroses’ (1917 and 1918), Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *F is for Fake* (1972), Spalding Gray’s/Jonathan Demme’s *Swimming to
Cambodia (1987) and Michael Moore’s Bowling for Columbine (2002). The animated films, especially but not exclusively the early ones, bespeak a studied engagement with the animated nature of the image that cinema mass-produced, and thus offer a thinking through and experimentation with cinema’s machinery in operation and explicitly on display. The other oblique films – the ones not often represented in film comedy works – are deeply engaged with the various technologies that allow to them to exist, circulate and operate as films, while also serving as an important intertexts for a number of comic films. These films are comedic, in that they show the workings of the various systems that allow them to exist as films, as well as the effects and indeed failures of these systems – the glitches that invariably occur but which are often glossed over are rendered bold and underscored.

This book also takes up several cinematic genres to show how they work together in relation to cultural criticism, technology, the status of the moving image, and cultural politics. These genres include: the mockumentary and documentary, the parody, and the political satire. That genre functions as a kind of representational technology has been part of narratology for decades, especially amongst formalists, and has been an integral element of critical theory, as exemplified by Derrida’s analyses of law (nomos) as genre and genre as a kind of law. Such an approach to genre is codified, though not necessarily intentionally, in the touchstone work of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in their own classic categorisation of Hollywood production that they call ‘Classic Hollywood Narrative’ (CHN); this has sparked a flurry of discussion not taken up here, but which proves useful for considering the machinic production of narrative within the Hollywood factory system.

Further, the book places film within a set of theoretical writings that have import for thinking comedy and technology as enunciated through film, especially the writings of Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Friedrich Kittler and Jacques Derrida in relation to repetition, automation, complexity, material systems of information media, the level of address in a communicative act, and the shifting role of the image as the bases for considering comedy as integral for a critical engagement of the constructs of culture and identifying them as such. Many of these theoretical works, though, have no direct connection to comedy or film, but rather consider the conditions for the production of knowledge: the oppositional poles of the machinic and the event, which constitute both epistemology generally and cultural production specifically. The material (technological, existential, sensory) and immaterial (ideological, conceptual, systemic) roles played by cinema writ large, and the inevitable but not necessarily predict-
able disruption of their functioning (the comic), form the main topics of inquiry of the study that follows.

Sources Cited


