

A COMPANION TO FILM COMEDY



Edited by Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Comic Introduction

“Make ’em Laugh, make ’em Laugh!”

Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf



Make ’em laugh

Make ’em laugh

Don’t you know everyone wants to laugh?

Donald O’Connor as Cosmo in *Singin’ In The Rain* (1952)

We need laughter more than we need a sheriff.

Larry Gelbart, *Laughing Matters*

Our goal is simple: we hope that our readers’ enjoyment of worldwide comedy will be enriched by insights offered in these essays. Comedy is important, as Preston Sturges reminds us in the conclusion to *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), when Sullivan gives up his desire to make the serious Depression drama *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and is ready to return to Hollywood and once more make comedies: “. . . there’s a lot to be said for making people laugh . . . did you know that’s all some people have? It isn’t much . . . but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan . . .”

Given the universality of film comedy, and its importance as a genre to the development of the motion pictures and as a reflection of social, political, and cultural trends, it was a natural subject for our anthology. It has been argued that all genres can be conceived in terms of dialectic between cultural and counter-cultural drives where, in the end, the cultural drives must triumph. But between the inevitable “fade in” and “fade out,” screen comedy has been free to

work its complex and often subversive purpose, revealing and commenting on the preoccupations, prejudices, and dreams of the societies that produce it.

Our collection celebrates both the variety and complexity of international film comedy from the “silent” days to the present. We are well aware that it is by no means comprehensive. There are huge gaps; we do not cover queer comedy, for example. But the genre is so vast, drawing on human behavior in its many and manifold forms, that our selection of essays can only touch on some areas, while ignoring others. Since Gerald Mast’s second edition of *The Comic Mind* (1979) went out of print with his lively and provocative “opening up” of cinematic comedy’s diverse nature and characteristics, there has been no complete history of comic film, and again, this *Companion* does not provide that. Like Geoff King’s *Film Comedy* (2002), ours is only a selective analysis of the genre, but it does ask us to take it seriously. Comic films raise questions that have no easy answers and explore social and personal problems that have no easy resolution. In short, they expose folly and present no cure, for folly is an incurable human disease for which, as Beckett wrote in *Waiting for Godot*, there is “nothing to be done.”

There are other useful anthologies, such as Andrew Horton’s *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (1991), Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins’ *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (1995), and Frank Krutnik’s *Hollywood Comedians* (2003), but our collection embraces not just American cinema, including Native American and African American, but also the comic films of Europe including Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, the Middle East, and Korea. Hopefully, this anthology will begin to map out some of the myriad ways in which comic films have helped to reflect and influence history, culture, politics, and social institutions globally.

There are many fine studies on specific film comedy topics including Neale and Krutnik (1990), Jenkins (1992), Harvey (1998), Dale (2000), on slapstick in American movies, and Glitre (2006), to mention just a few, along with recent studies by some of our contributors: Claire Mortimer’s *Romantic Comedy* (2010), Tom Paulus and Rob King’s *Slapstick Comedy* (2011), and Leger Grindon’s *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies* (2011). These works will be cited throughout this volume and referenced in the authors’ lists of suggestions for further reading.

As an overview of the significance of this wonderfully complex topic and of some of the myriad ways of approaching it, we want to lay out six of what could easily be dozens of observations on comedy in general that go beyond film, television, theater, books, or the Internet. Some of these were initially discussed in Horton (2000: 1–16).

1. *Comedy is a way of looking at the universe, more than merely a genre of literature, drama, film or television.* Scientists and psychologists all agree that each of us tends to have or to lack a “comic” view of life, which is in part genetically determined. Furthermore, studies have shown that laughter can often be a

healing factor in life as Norman Cousins (1979: 43) found in helping to cure his cancer through watching Marx Brothers' films and other comedies. "I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain free sleep." Those who laugh more live longer. As Allen Klein (1989: xx) notes, "humor helps us cope because it instantly removes us from pain."

2. *Comedy is a form of "play" that embraces fantasy and festivity.* As part of the larger category of "play," comedy shares what Huizinga (1950) and others have pointed out is a form of activity in which individuals (*Homo ludens*) do not feel threatened because all forms of play have their boundaries that must be followed while in the "game." The festive and fantasy level of comedy as celebrated in communities around the world also points to the spirit of *carnival* during which participants have "fun" and do not feel threatened as they act out fantasies. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1968: 7) has written about carnival, it "is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people." In this carnivalesque spirit, we can better understand the Greek origin of the word "comedy" as *komos*, which meant a drunken chorus in the Dionysian spirit, singing, drinking and calling out insults while dressed in costumes that Aristophanes' comedies suggest could be frogs, birds, angry women, and more. There is also the Latin origin, in *Comus*, the playful and lecherous god of springtime revelry, emphasizing that there is in comedy the essential idea of "rebirth" and "renewal."
3. *Comedy and tragedy are near cousins whose paths often cross.* Plato's *Symposium* ends as Socrates and Aristophanes agree that comic and dramatic moments often come very close to each other in life. This observation helps us better appreciate so many comedies including Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) in which George Bailey (James Stewart) wishes to commit suicide on Christmas Eve but is saved by Clarence (Henry Travers), a gentle angel sent from Above, who not only saves George, but his family, the town, and the Spirit of Christmas in a festive "happy ending." But comedies differ from tragedies in their emphasis on the social rather than on the individual. Indeed, as Kathleen Rowe (1995: 45) has rightly observed, "comedy often mocks the masculinity that tragedy ennobles." In a similar vein, we can observe that comedies are seldom simply "comedies," but are often a mixture of genres, moods, and implications. Many would call George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) a western comedy but others would label it a western with comic moments, while it can also be called a "buddy film," and even a "loosely biographical" film as William Goldman's script is based on real outlaws.
4. *Comedy implies a special relationship with and to its audience.* Whether directly or indirectly, comedy through the ages has delighted in breaking down the "fourth wall" so that the actors can see and communicate with the

audience, thus acknowledging the sense of “play” or gamesmanship that comedy creates. In many of Aristophanes’ comedies, characters talk to and even walk into the audience to make a point. Similarly, when a comedian such as Woody Allen faces the camera and thus “us,” the audience, in *Annie Hall* (1977), he is directly involving us in the laughter that is generated. This was a common technique in even early “silent” comedies, where Roscoe Arbuckle, for example, gestures to the camera (and thereby us) to look away as he is undressing in films such as *The Knockout* (1913) or *Little Band of Gold* (1915). Drama and tragedy, on the other hand, depend on being complete narratives that do not acknowledge the presence of an audience.

5. *In the world of the truly comic, nothing is sacred and nothing human is rejected.* Comic filmmakers, like comic writers and performers throughout history, have had to deal with censorship in many cultures for political, social and religious reasons, yet within the spirit of carnival and the truly comic, everything and everyone is potentially “on camera” for laughs, be it satire, parody, or an open celebration of sex and life itself. Certainly this celebration of “nothing is forbidden” from laughter helps us appreciate and enjoy films such as Luis Buñuel’s *Phantom of Liberty* (1974) and Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian* (1979), which take on religion with much outright humor, or *Sweet Movie* (1974), directed by Dušan Makavejev of the former Yugoslavia, which looks comically at sexuality and the horrors of real warfare as we witness cross-cutting between an orgy of group sex in a vat of sugar and documentary footage of digging up the bodies of hundreds of Polish officers murdered by the Russians in World War II.
6. *Comedy is one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself.* No study is needed to underline that people in every nation enjoy laughing and that, even if festival awards such as Oscars tend to go to “serious” and/or “art” films, the box office in each country reflects the popularity of comedy. And sometimes the awards and popularity do cross paths. Danis Tanovic’s dark comedy about the Bosnian War, *No Man’s Land* (2001), for example, won the Best Foreign Film Oscar in 2001. It begins with one soldier asking another, “Do you know the difference between a pessimist and an optimist?” The soldier answers, “A pessimist says things are as bad as they can be and the optimist says they can always be worse,” and throughout the film, everything does get worse. The point is that in many ways one can learn as much or more about the Bosnian crisis in this comedy made by a young Bosnian who had been through the war himself as through a traditional TV documentary.

Comedy is obviously a slippery genre, as is the language used in describing it. “Comedy” and “humor” are often seen as interchangeable, although etymologically the words have quite different meanings, with “comedy” coming from the Dionysian *komos*, as described above, while “humor” has its origin in the

ancient idea that the body is made up of four “humors” – black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood – which control a person’s temperament. Categories or types of comedy overlap. Romantic comedies can contain slapstick elements and they often deal with gender, for example. Because of this element of pastiche or *mélange*, readers may wonder why some of the chapters in this volume fall under one heading and not another. Some headings are clear. We begin at the beginning, with “Comedy Before Sound,” and the development of the slapstick tradition as it carried into the sound era in the American slapstick short. We end with “Animation,” another obviously distinct category, and one that is perhaps growing in significance in our digital age. In between, there is a certain amount of fluidity, although the titles of the chapters identify the focus.

Beginning with French audiences laughing at the Lumière Brothers’ *The Gardener and the Little Scamp* (1895), cinema has created comedies that have made the world laugh. In France, George Méliès was making trick films and Max Linder became the first internationally known comic film star at the turn of the century, while in the United States, the Biograph Company was soon turning out one-reel comedy shorts. Although D.W. Griffith is sometimes said to be “the father of film,” at least in the United States, it might well be argued that it was in the area of comedy that film experienced its most spectacular growth and popularity worldwide, as Frank Scheide’s chapter covering key performers in Europe and America during the so-called “silent era” from 1895 to 1929 clearly suggests. Like other chapters in this volume, Scheide talks about the tradition of the *Commedia dell’Arte*, and he emphasizes some of the early comic films before the heyday of Max Sennett and the Keystone Kops, with sections on Max Linder, Bert Williams, Flora Finch, John Bunny, and Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew; he ends with Charlie Chaplin. Kristen Anderson Wagner also discusses Finch and Drew, but her chapter, “Pie Queens and Virtuous Vamps,” is a more complete look at many of the largely neglected women comics who were so popular in those early years.

Donald Crafton and Tom Gunning have identified the “pie” along with the “chase,” the gags that disrupt the narrative, as defining elements of early slapstick. Rob King, writing on early sound shorts, such as those produced by Hal Roach and Educational Pictures, looks at the waning “pie tradition” as sound begins to dominate. He traces the distinction between speech and noise in these films – speech aligned with sophistication and culture, noise with the “lower” aspects of life and suggestively argues that “the history of film comedy might finally be said to have ‘begun again’ with sound . . . sundering once again standards of ‘low’ versus ‘sophisticated’ comedy that it was the legacy of the silent era to have mediated and reconciled.”

Representing the kind of comedy defined by Steve Seidman (1981) as “comedian comedy,” four essays discuss comedy in the era of sound with the Marx Brothers, Jacques Tati, Woody Allen, and Mel Brooks, although Jacques Tati, of course, does not rely on dialogue, as the others do, but is a master of sound (noise). Kevin

Sweeney identifies the pattern of repetition in his gags – gags that help us to see the comic in the mundane. Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, Frank Krutnik puts the Marx Brothers in the anarchistic tradition of carnival, quite different from Tati, and explores a critique of hegemonic orthodoxy that bubbles beneath their fun. Seeing Woody Allen as a modern incarnation of Charlie Chaplin, not in his style of comedy but in the fact that he writes, directs, and stars in his films, David Shumway examines two fairly distinct Allen personae: “the Nebbish,” more characteristic of his earlier films, and the “Artist,” predominating in his later, more realistic comedies. With Mel Brooks, Henry Jenkins uses J. Hoberman’s concept of “vulgar modernism,” a style of comedy he sees emerging after World War II across a range of media, to look at how Brooks plays different media against each other for comic effect. He centers his discussion around a close analysis of *Silent Movie* (1976).

Romantic comedy, as opposed to comedian comedy, obviously involves comic pairs and it tends to be narrative oriented rather than episodic. Celestino Deleyto’s essay deals with this sometimes uneasy balance between comic moments and narrative in three films, *The Smiling Lieutenant* (Lubitsch 1931), *The Palm Beach Story* (Sturges 1942), *Man’s Favorite Sport* (Hawks 1964), his remake of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), and *Green Card* (Peter Weir 1990), noting changes in the genre as it developed through evolving social, cultural, and political climates, and how the comic moments he analyzes are also narrative in nature and contribute to the overall structure of the films. Romantic comedies are founded on what may be an irrational belief in the ability of human beings to transform a drab reality into a “utopian scenario.” Drawing on this idea, Leger Grindon takes this genre from the twentieth century into the twenty-first with two films from 2004: *Before Sunset* (Richard Linklater) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry). Celestino Deleyto has called *Before Sunset* a romantic comedy “on the margins” (Deleyto 2009: 157–74), but Grindon explores them specifically as comedies of infidelity, portraying doubts about romance without abandoning completely something of the utopian vision seen in their predecessors.

The chapters by Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Lucy Fischer both look at variations of romantic comedy from a male perspective. Jeffers McDonald identifies what she calls the “Homme-com Cycle,” comedies that center on the humorous misadventures of a male pair or ensemble but preserve an allegiance to the generic tropes of romantic comedy, such as *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg 2009) and which feature what is known as the Man Cave or the Lair, and she makes a distinction between them. Lucy Fischer, on the other hand, gives an in-depth reading of *Flirting with Disaster* (David O. Russell 1996), a comedy about the search of a young man (Ben Stiller) for his birth parents. The search becomes fertile ground for a good deal of topical humor on race, religion, and politics. Fischer observes that although adoption comedies are rare, in recent years they have proliferated on that harbinger of what is new and important: *YouTube*.

Like Celestino Deleyto, Charles Morrow also examines the *Smiling Lieutenant*, and his essay might seem to belong, at least in places, under the category of “Romantic Comedy,” but he is more specifically concerned with a unique genre he calls “Ruritanian Comedy” – comedies about mythical kingdoms that flourished between World War I and the years of the Great Depression. Some of these comedies, such as Harold Lloyd’s *Why Worry* (1923) are gag-oriented, while others, such as Lubitsch’s *Love Parade* (1929) are indeed romantic comedies. Morrow gives us an invaluable survey of this genre, through the 1920s and 1930s, including Will Rogers in *Ambassador Bill* (Sam Taylor 1931), W.C. Fields in *Million Dollar Legs* (Edward Cline 1932), and, of course, the Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup* (Le McCarey 1933). Morrow speculates on some of the reasons for the fascination with these fantastic places, and like William Paul in his essay on *You Can’t Take It with You* (Frank Capra 1938), sees the need for escapism during the dark years of America’s Depression. Paul’s essay might fall under the category of “Romantic Comedy” too but it is specifically “topical” in its concern with what he calls an “aesthetics of escapism,” seeing romantic comedy not simply in terms of Deleyto’s “utopian scenario,” but as a way of engaging with the real world.

The “real world” emerges vividly, darkly, and comically in Ernst Lubitsch’s wartime farce, *To Be or Not To Be* (1942). Maria DeBattista’s detailed analysis of this film that she calls a “totalitarian comedy” is deliberately “disquieting.” As other essays in the *Companion* suggest, laughter can sometimes be the best way of saying something about dictatorship, the slaughter of civilians, the repression of individual freedoms, all kinds of human atrocities. Totalitarian comedy, she writes, is a modern marriage of “the not-serious and the dreadful.” They are comedies that “refuse to silence their insolent wit or suspend their unruly farces just when they are most needed and least tolerated – during reigns of unfreedom.” Such a comedy is *To Be or Not To Be*. In conclusion she cites both Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (1939) and Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) as two other films that show totalitarianism as vulnerable to farce, and it is Kubrick’s film, along with some of the work of the Coen Brothers, that concludes this section in our volume on “Topical Comedy, Irony, and *Humour Noir*” in the essay by Mark Eaton.

Using André Breton and Matthew Winston to define what is known as *humour noir*, Eaton distinguishes it dramatically from romantic comedy, for example, in its unsentimentality, and its emphasis on the fantastic, the surreal, the grotesque, its shattering of expectations, and the way it disturbs our sense of moral certainty. These characteristics, he argues, made it a natural form of comedy for that period of antiauthoritarian upheaval, the 1960s and early 1970s, as antiwar protests proliferated. In this context, he looks specifically at such films as *Dr. Strangelove*, *M * A * S * H* (Altman 1970), *Catch-22* (Mike Nichols 1970), and *Slaughterhouse Five* (George Roy Hill 1971). To illustrate the re-emergence of dark comedy over 20 years later, but with less political emphasis, he focuses on *The Big Lebowski* (Coen Brothers 1998). Eaton concludes with some reflections on the state of the post-9/11 world, with the “war on terror,” and other wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,

and wonders why they seem incompatible with the moral disturbance of black comedy. He cites *Four Lions* (Christopher Morris 2010) but, as pure farce, that film may fall more into a genre of “escapism” than social critique.

We offer three essays touching on comic perspectives regarding race and ethnicity. Catherine John writing on African Americans and film comedy builds on Mark Reid’s innovative study, *Redefining Black Cinema* (1993) with three objectives as she examines how white stereotypes of African Americans continue, how Tyler Perry’s films have opened a variety of truly Black levels of comedy, concluding with a close-up analysis of Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000) and Tim Story’s *Barbershop* (2002). Joshua Nelson similarly notes the past Hollywood stereotypes, in this case of American Indians including John Ford’s films up through more contemporary films such as *Dances With Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), and he explores how, as he explains, “Indian comedic film takes aim at mainstream misrepresentations and their tried-and-true caricatures of Indians,” using examples such as Chris Eyre’s *Smoke Signals* (1998) and Sterlin Harjo’s *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007). Dan Georgakas focuses on Greek Americans appearing in American film comedies covering *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), of course, and also others. It is important that he emphasizes that “Genuine cultural patterns only emerge by looking at how they manifest themselves over a very long period in a multitude of films,” an observation that clearly could be used in taking on many other immigrant identities in American film comedy.

Film comedy is so much a part of every nation’s cinema, as we have noted, and while the majority of our essays focus on American film comedy, we include a selection on international comedy. Claire Mortimer treats us to insights about the comic ambiguity between myth and reality reflected in the Ealing Studio comedies such as *Whisky Galore* (1949) and *The Ladykillers* (1955), directed by the Scottish American director Alexander Mackendrick who, as she observes, “brought a sensibility to Ealing Studios which reflected the fractured times in the wake of the Second World War, with shifting populations having lost their roots and connections.” Jane Park introduces us to film comedy that developed in Korea after the Korean War and a period of censorship. She gives a close reading of two comedies, *301,302* (1995) and *200 Pounds Beauty* (2006), focusing on how urban Korean women are portrayed. Roberta Di Carmine takes on comedy “Italian style,” explaining how comedies between the 1930s and 1970s were able to be both satirical and supportive of social and cultural changes that Italy was experiencing during and after World War II. Her analysis of Mario Monicelli’s *I soliti ignoti* (*Big Deal on Madonna Street*, 1958) allows her to depict clearly the double vision of such a comic style, which, as she observes, “although inclined to provoke laughter,” also “offers a dark portrayal of the illness of society.”

Finally, in our international section, Najat Rahman clearly depicts how recent Palestinian films have made constructive use of comedy in taking on the difficult realities of the Middle East. Building on film scholars of Middle Eastern cinema such as Hamid Naficy who observes that Palestinian cinema is “. . . one of the rare

cinemas in the world that is structurally exilic . . . made either in . . . internal exile in an occupied Palestine or under the erasure . . . of displacement and external exile,” he provides insight to the surprising humor of films such as Rashid Mashrawi’s *Laila’s Birthday* (2008), Elia Suleiman’s *Divine Intervention* (2002), and Abou Assad’s *Paradise Now* (2005). Rahman’s conclusion touches on how multifaceted film comedy can be to a nation that continues to endure a complex reality. As he states, “the films discussed in this essay push through humor and beyond humor to reconfigure the assault on senses and lives delivered by occupation and by discourses that maintain it, to an aesthetic that neither harmonizes the violence into a simple effect of the beautiful nor falters on its innovative possibilities.”

Our volume concludes with a section on “Comic Animation.” Paul Wells reminds us that, while animation does share many techniques of comic construction with other kinds of comedy, it also offers “particular and distinctive forms of visual and verbal ‘gags,’” and his chapter, along with Suzanne Buchan’s, illustrates this uniqueness. Wells discusses early animation in the United States, from *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) to productions at Disney and Warner Brothers during the golden era between 1928–45. But he also emphasizes animation elsewhere, in Canada, Japan, Poland, Eastern Europe – notably the Estonian animator, Priit Pärn, and the innovative work done in this area by women such as the Czech animator Michaela Patlatova and the English animator, Joanna Quinn. Suzanne Buchan covers some of the same ground as Wells with the early years but her approach is more theoretical, using Henri Bergson, Freud, and even James Joyce to illuminate some of the comic techniques animation exploits. A primary feature of animation’s film form is its unique ability to express metamorphosis, and a wonderful example of this is *Porky in Wackyland* (Bob Clampett 1938). She discusses the figures in this film as “visual portmanteaus” that can be compared to the way James Joyce uses language. Tex Avery’s *King-size Canary* (1947), she argues, utilizes ideas of Freud and Bergson, while also suggesting some of the grotesque characteristics of black comedy and surrealism. The idea of the surreal and the dark are integral to her essay as she quotes from Samuel Beckett’s *Watt* (1959) where he describes the *risus purus* as the highest laugh in the world, “the laugh that laughs at the laugh, the laugh at that which is unhappy.” Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, Bob Clampett, and others covered in her essay, were all masters of this *risus purus*, exploiting a range of comedy as only animation can do, from the silly to the absurd, from the whacky to the dark recesses of *humour noir*. Her essay, along with Wells’ international perspective, reveal how varied and provocative animation can be, and how, like its human forms, it points to new ways of seeing the world. Today sources of laughter include everything from video games to cell phone gimmicks but especially the comic websites and worlds offered on the Internet including the ever-increasing number of *YouTube* films. Perhaps there may well be a *Companion to YouTube* down the line (and online too!). But in the meantime, cinematic laughter has offered audiences everywhere, and will continue to offer them, a chance to escape and transcend the often harsh failures,

losses, disappointments, fears and despair in the huge gaps between the ideal and the real. Since movies began, filmmakers from Hollywood to Hong Kong and everywhere else have been working and playing hard to “make ‘em laugh.” As we have been suggesting, comedy that celebrates the human capacity to endure rather than to suffer, is, as François Truffaut once said, “by far the most difficult genre, the one that demands the most work, the most talent, and also the most humility.” We hope this *Companion* will help to illuminate that difficulty, expose that talent, reveal that humility, and celebrate our capacity to endure.

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Part I

Comedy Before Sound, and the Slapstick Tradition

The Mark of the Ridiculous and Silent Celluloid

Some Trends in American and European Film Comedy from 1894 to 1929

Frank Scheide 

Fred Ott's Infectious Sneeze (1894)

Throughout its history silent film comedy was affected by the technology with which it was produced, the culture and mindset of the filmmakers, and the intended audience's desires. When Thomas Edison expressed interest in combining moving pictures with his phonograph in 1888, other inventors around the world were already experimenting with sequential imaging. Edison's approach to inventing was to encourage his "muckers" (technicians, machinists, and engineers) to come up with new ideas by "playing" with state-of-the art resources at his lab (Spehr 2008: 75–82, 649).

Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze/Fred Ott's Sneeze, the studio's nineteenth film, was produced from January 2 to 7, 1894. Fred Ott was an engineer credited with making major contributions to Edison's early Kinetograph movie camera, but most film historians remember him for sneezing in an early motion picture. Initially considered a comic novelty for the way it used technical innovation to make much ado about nothing, the title of this film succinctly informs us of its content. The filming of an entire action from conflict to resolution, although only a few seconds in duration, gives the movie a kind of narrative structure. One reason this documentary is associated with comedy is that the subject's loss of bodily control, a condition that theorist Henri Bergson described as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," makes Fred Ott a comic figure characterized by the "mark of the ridiculous" (Bergson 1956: 92).

In his *Poetics* of 330 BC, Aristotle identified a comic character as someone who bears a “mark of the ridiculous,” which enables the observer to feel superior to this individual. Where the “tragic flaw” of the dramatic hero suffers real pain that brings about the ruin of this protagonist and his followers, the ludicrous condition of the mark of the ridiculous “. . . may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain” (Aristotle 1962: 194). Ott’s mark of the ridiculous was not as pronounced as a physical deformity but the loss of control during his sneeze was considered comically incongruous by the filmmakers. As a consequence the playful Fred Ott is not remembered for his accomplishments as an Edison engineer but for being human. According to silent film historian Luke McKernan, “in later years Ott was happy to claim that he was the first ever ‘film star,’ which in a way was true”(McKernan 1996).

A Plot Underfoot: The Lumière Brothers’ *L’Arroseur arrosé* (1895)

L’Arroseur arrosé (*The Hoser Hosed*) (1895), produced by Louis and Auguste Lumière, is credited with being one of the first comic sketches in the history of the cinema. The sons of a French manufacturer of photographic plates, the Lumière brothers were already versed in imaging technology when they sought to develop an alternative to the Edison Kinetograph. Using Edison’s invention as a model, Louis Lumière perfected a workable lightweight camera in 1895 that could also be converted to develop and project the footage. International recognition was achieved on December 28, 1895 when ten Lumière motion pictures, including *L’Arroseur arrosé*, were projected on a big screen to a paying audience in a rented Paris basement.

While *L’Arroseur arrosé*, like *Fred Ott’s Sneeze*, is primarily a cinematic depiction of a gag, there is enough of a rudimentary plot to characterize this film as a comic narrative. Because the gardener possesses a “mark of the ridiculous” – an incapacity for ascertaining why a hose might not function, the capacity for becoming curious, and the capability to peer foolishly into a nozzle that can douse him with water – he is susceptible to becoming the victim (comic butt) of a practical joke. When the boy (comic wit) recognizes the gardener’s mark of the ridiculous he exploits this deficiency by stepping on the hose, which sets the comic narrative into play. The incongruity of the loss of control suffered by the gardener while sprayed – something mechanical encrusted upon the living – makes this situation humorous.¹

L’Arroseur arrosé has been identified as one of the first film narratives, but the Lumières would primarily be associated with non-fiction film during their short career as pioneer producers. The documentary would, in fact, be the prevalent form of motion picture until early filmmakers determined how to use the new