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The East-West Center is a public, nonprofit educational institution with an international board of governors. Some 2,000 research fellows, graduate students, and professionals in business and government each year work with the Center’s international staff in cooperative study, training, and research. They examine major issues related to population, resources and development, the environment, culture, and communication in Asia, the Pacific, and the United States. The Center was established in 1960 by the United States Congress, which provides principal funding. Support also comes from more than twenty Asian and Pacific governments, as well as private agencies and corporations.
Editor's Note

If, as James Thurber once remarked, humor is emotional chaos remembered in tranquility, then the papers gathered in this special issue constitute humor remembered in tranquility. Humor is an important part of the film experience in the East and the West, but it is in many ways difficult to understand and analyze. The papers are a selection of those presented at the annual Film Symposium held in conjunction with the Hawaii International Film Festival.

The first paper, by Arthur Dudden, sets the stage for what is to come later. He discusses various facets of American humor in relation to cinema. Screwball comedy constitutes an important segment of American cinematic humor, and Duane Paul Byrge's paper deals with this topic. Japan possesses one of the most artistically rich cinemas in the world, and Ian Buruma discusses the place of humor in Japanese film. Ma Ning examines an important Chinese film produced in the 1960s in relation to the concepts of desire and discourse in Chinese comedy. Patricia Erens's paper is devoted to an analysis of what is most distinctive about Jewish humor in films. The next paper seeks to examine the films of Raj Kapoor – one of the most popular Indian film directors and actors – in relation to the comedy of Charlie Chaplin to demonstrate how Chaplin was Indianized. Ahn Byung Sup discusses the ways in which humor finds expression in Korean cinema. The role of humor in Australian cinema is the subject of Nadia Tass's historical account. This special issue on humor in cinema East and West concludes with some reflections on the articles as well as on the relationships among cinema, humor, and culture by Susan Sontag.

The objective of this symposium, as is that of this special issue, was to examine the concept of humor in cinema as it finds articulation in differ-
ent cultures. At one level, humor is one of the most universal modes of expression; at another level, humor is highly culture-specific. Our understanding of how this duality is played out in cinema, we hope, will be enlarged in some small way by these articles gathered here. As many of the writers in this special issue demonstrate, humor is, in the last analysis, no joke.
The Dimensions of American Humor

ARTHUR POWER DUDDEN

American humor and American humor studies are distinct and separate from each other. Humor rarely deviates from its comic purpose, but humor studies often have other fish to fry.

Certain scholars, for example, have pursued American humor's indigenous strains for signs of the republic's originality and its cultural maturing, while others were using humor as evidence to demonstrate traits of character for the parallel purpose of distinguishing American civilization from European. Recent studies have emphasized the humor of the past half-century or so to compensate for its neglect to date and to direct attention to its pervasive political, ethnic, feminist, and even sexual nature. This alienated and self-detached humor attacks society's follies and fools indiscriminately in tough and aggressive fashion. In fact, in the absence of any certain formula, the development and persistence of American humor's acidic strain gives one a sense of the nation's true history free of the homogenizing effects of consensus-making and the conventional wisdom of patriotic self-satisfaction.

America's humor has moved in the twentieth century into arenas beyond the lecturing rostrums, almanacs, weekly newspaper features, and their compendiums of early times to exploit the opportunities afforded by innovative communications media and new sponsors. Comic strips, standup comedians, mass circulated newspapers and magazines, motion pictures, radio and television, records and tapes have converted American humor into a multinational business enterprise with manifold outlets and rapidly changing models. Contemporary humorists generally work at or beyond the fringes of respectability in their heavy-handed reliance on ethnic, racial, and sexual themes, whose deliberate effects are iconoclastic.
and even anarchistic. The humorist who outlined the modern dimensions of American humor for his successors to explore was Lenny Bruce, the heroic antihero, who urbanized and ethnicized Mencken's boobs and Lardner's rubes to define most, if not all, Americans in Jewish metaphor as schmucks living in a land of schmucks. For President Richard Nixon to mold himself into a comic figure of archetypical lineaments was the logical next step in America's democracy, where pretensions have always so greatly outdistanced achievements as to afford a continuous natural flow of comic materials (Dudden 1985, 1987).

All too often, humor studies have overlooked the spontaneity of the national comedy in their preoccupation with the national celebration. But American humor, like the Mississippi River, just keeps on rolling along.

My particular concern is to advance beyond the stereotypes laid down by William Dean Howells, whose judgments have endured so long as to encourage the diversity and pluralistic efforts of modern humorists to be slighted by critics or overlooked altogether. Wrote Howells in 1888 of his countrymen's humor: "Smack of whom it would, it has always been so racy of the soil that the native flavor prevails throughout, and whether Yankee, Knickerbocker, Southern Californian, refined or broad, prose, verse, or newspaper, it was and is always American" (Clemens, Howells, and Clark 1888, x, xiii). His viewpoint that American humor was distinctively regional, rural, and backwoods in origin and significance prevailed until recently.

What's so funny about American humor? — this is the paramount question. Yet, as important as this question is, the answer is not readily susceptible to academic analysis, for humor has a tendency to evaporate in the heat of critical examination. Humor will also vanish if its intended thrusts are no longer timely. As the New Yorker's E. B. White once observed: "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." Divorced from all incentives for laughing, American humor, like any other topic, abruptly becomes sober. Example and analysis must contend in dramatic tension to sustain the context from which laughter springs. We should bear in mind that criticism of humor is a less well-developed genre than the criticism of fiction or nonfiction, drama or poetry. Criticism of humor is defined more often than not by highly personal tastes, that is, by gut reactions rather than by any widely accepted evaluative or analytical standards. What strikes one individual as hilarious can bore or disgust
another. Humor's vulnerability became painfully evident in a 1984 report by Jean Civikly and Ann L. Darling, two specialists in speech communication, which indicated that a teacher's use of humor in the classroom would be received defensively by the students, most likely "with suspicion and hostility." Whether or not the playing of canned laughter would have eased the tension, the report did not say.

There is a need to investigate American humor more systematically and intensely in all of its rich variety than literary scholars or American studies disciplinarians have managed to do so far. It is not enough to leave the field to popular culture studies or the enthusiasts of the American Humor Studies Association. Neither is it enough to rest the case with social scientists who stand in substantial agreement from varying disciplinary vantage points that humor relieves hostilities and aggressions through individual or communal outbursts of merriment, nor with physiologists who have determined humor's irrepressible laughter to be merely an involuntary reflex contraction of fifteen facial muscles. Only humor ignites the nervous system instantaneously. But why? Experts disagree among themselves. "Expert" – Knows 800 ways to make love, but doesn't know any girls.

And what are American humor's peculiarities? How have these evolved and expressed themselves? Which characteristics, if any, are distinctively American? Do the necessary cross-cultural comparisons sustain any possible claim for national uniqueness (especially if it is true, as is customarily asserted, that humor is relished universally by all of the earth's peoples)? These questions and the issues they generate are too important to treat lightly (Dudden 1985, 7-12).

It is instructive to be reminded at this point of the philosopher mathematician Descartes, whose proof of his own existence, as you will remember, was Cogito, ergo sum. "I think, therefore I am!" A story to my point places Descartes in an airplane. On being asked if he would like, "Coffee? Tea? or Milk?" replied, "I don't know," and instantly he disappeared.

An anthropological effort to define the dimensions of American humor will not be attempted here, but what it might involve to do so ought first to be summarized before proceeding. An efficient way to do this is to draw from Mahadev L. Apte's anthropological approach to humor and laughter published in 1985 by actually stringing a number of his leading theoretical propositions together into a single statement.

A sense of humor and the ability to laugh and to speak make human
beings unique in the animal kingdom, so goes our anthropocentric thinking, yet few activities have remained as puzzling as humor and laughter. Several theoretical propositions may be formulated however. Thus: (1) There is a fundamental dichotomy between kin and nonkin joking relationships in sociocultural systems. (2) Men and women appear to have unequal status across cultures. By restricting the freedom of women to engage in and respond to humor in the public domain, men emphasize their need for superiority. Men justify such restrictions by creating ideal role models for women that emphasize modesty and passivity. (3) The prevalence and range of humor among children indicate a society’s positive or negative attitudes toward humor in general. (4) Certain pan-human primordial emotions and attitudes, such as ethnocentrism, ingroup adulation, outgroup resentment, prejudice, and intolerance of the life-styles of others, constitute a broad base for the development and popularity of ethnic humor. Ethnic humor tends to reflect negative attitudes toward certain sociocultural traits, such as excessive sexuality, uncleanliness, and gluttony, which are projected onto other groups in order to make them the butt of such humor. Stereotypes constitute a significant basis for ethnic humor because they provide ready-made and popular conceptualizations of groups intended to be targets. (5) The degree to which humor is integrated in rituals, in religion, for example, seems to vary not only across cultures but from ritual to ritual within individual cultures. (6) The similarities between language and humor are significant for understanding their nature and interdependence. Both have evolved in humans to a much greater degree of complexity than in other animals. Both have general and culture-specific attributes, and both pervade social interaction. Language and humor are interdependent in two important ways: language itself becomes the subject of humor; and the use and function of language and the cultural attitudes and values associated with it considerably influence the occurrence, comprehension, and appreciation of humor. (7) The trickster is a major humor-generating stimulus in many societies, his personality being shaped by biological, psychological, behavioral, and sociocultural incongruities. (8) Laughter and smiling are evoked by different stimuli both across and within cultures, but the expressions of laughter and smiling need to be differentiated by sociocultural, linguistic, and contextual criteria, because anatomical and physiological criteria are inadequate for this purpose (Apte 1985, 13, 65, 81, 106, 148, 176, 211, 235, 259).

A contemporary example arises from the commonplace reliance of
nightclub comedians on jokes about the infirmities of old age, usually before audiences who are all too appreciative personally of the painful humor of geriatrics. One story concerns two elderly golfing friends and their efforts to cope with the debilitations of old age. One was nearly blind. The other could see well enough, but he was enfeebled and becoming too senile to strike the ball himself any longer. So he would tee up his dim-sighted friend’s ball and point him to hit it toward the hole. Together, in this fashion, they continued to enjoy their game. That is, they did until an especially well-hit shot one day by the nearly blind golfer prompted an outcry of delight from his seeing-eye companion. “Great! Where did it go?” the shotmaker eagerly asked about the ball he had so satisfyingly smacked. “Where did it go?” “I... I can’t remember,” came the inevitable admission.

Humor to the anthropologist, therefore – American humor or global humor, for that matter – is “a culturally shaped individual cognitive experience, culturally determined because sociocultural factors are the primary trigger mechanisms leading to its occurrence.” Humor is social in nature, functioning to reduce friction between human interactions or to express hostility or aggression. The sharing of cultural knowledge, obedience to the rules for interpreting it, and agreement on the validity of the incongruence and hyperbole involved measure the cultural bases of humor and are essential for its institutional development. The advent in the Western world of newspapers and periodicals, then of circuit-riding lecturers, and lately of motion pictures, radio, and television, has opened broad avenues for disseminating humor in ubiquitous and diverse ways. As Professor Apte (1985, 261, 264–265) sees it, humor pervades every walk of life in the United States.

Comedy shows dominate television programs; newspapers abound with cartoons and comic strips; cartoon characters and comic slogans appear on shirts, toys, playing cards, dishes, watches, and other commercial products; and humor columnists are syndicated in large numbers of newspapers. Technology has even reached the point where humor is available on a twenty-four hour basis: people can simply dial a joke. There appears to be a relationship between the mass media, which are responsible for this expansion of humor, and the increasingly complex nature of life. People have more leisure time, because technological development has freed them from working long hours – and more leisure time means more entertainment and pleasure, of which humor has become an important part.
Now, with the background in place, it is time to explore the dimensions of American humor, by which, it must be obvious by now, I mean American humor’s substantive dimensions both internal and external, both spatial and temporal.

Historically, comic writings, caricatures, and performances asserted themselves clearly enough in Great Britain’s colonies long before American independence. England’s satirical models contributed to the rise of revolutionary sentiments and later on to factional squabbles over the politics of the young republic. Folkways, dialects, and democracy’s ebullience supplied grist for American humor’s native mills. Self-employed wits commenced to earn money by comic lecturing, writing, and publishing before 1840. Artemus Ward, Josh Billings, Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby, Orpheus C. Kerr, Bill Nye, and others of their kind attained celebrity status during the dark days of disunion and reconstruction, while Mark Twain was establishing the importance of American humor permanently and helping to institute the emphases on political, ethnic, and even feminist humor that pervade our own times. Such humor almost invariably expresses its disbelief in conventional verities and has become increasingly contentious in tone. Since Will Rogers, the older genialities have become outweighed by the belligerent stridencies of the past four decades or so. Those gentle relishers of American humor, if indeed any remain, must now be forewarned of its vulgarity and violence in sexual, racial, social, or political forms.

Yet alienated, self-detached humor was always present in American life expressing itself in skeptical, sardonic, mocking, even deliberately cruel ways. Such humor was frequently racist or sexist, its political effects anarchistic, its style tough and enduring. His racist neighbors portrayed by Petroleum Nasby dwell in our own midst today. So do the corruptible, self-satisfied village elites Mark Twain vilified in “The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg” and those he uncovered with pretensions to godliness in The Mysterious Stranger. Twain’s leadership would be followed by Ambrose Bierce and H. L. Mencken, and variously thereafter by Ring Lardner, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and even James Thurber. One could laugh at Kurt Vonnegut’s imaginative direction, but never could the terrible interruptions of his fire-storm nightmares be overlooked. The primary function of such humor is antithetical, as Jesse Bier explains: “It is filled with skepticism, cruelty, and derogation, a means of perspective between exaltation and destruction.” No formula expresses American humor
except that of dissenting, and it separates itself unmistakably from serious protest writings and revolutionary doctrines. By attacking follies and fools indiscriminately, it reveals the highlights and lowlights between pretensions and achievements. One acquires a sense of the nation’s true history, as I indicated earlier, in the movement of American humor from its earliest formulations in colonial times toward its contemporary manifestations (Dudden 1985, 8–9).

Although significant, a temporal or historical dimension for American humor is not entirely sufficient for our inquiries. A graffito expresses the matter admirably, on the wall in the men’s room I frequent (that one which regularly displays the most reliable telephone numbers) thus:

- Time exists so that everything doesn’t happen at once.
- Space exists so that it doesn’t all happen to you.

The problem ultimately is one of the degree of universality of American humor, or, on the other hand, its parochialism.

Hence, to determine the dimensions or limits of American humor, two calculations must preoccupy us. First, what are American humor’s parameters, that is, its outer limits, not its limitations, in all directions – its effective cross-cultural communicability in other words? Second, what are its internal check points, its intramural barriers or resistances? Here, in the absence as yet of systematic studies, experience must serve us as our imperfect guide in both examinations, outward and inward alike.

Already it has been established that humor everywhere rests on sociocultural predeterminations, which include a shared cultural knowledge, adherence to its interpretive rules, and concurrence on the incongruence and exaggeration at stake. It follows that for American humor to leap beyond the water’s edge, to titillate as well the peoples of other countries and cultures, any particular expression of humor must share its human circumstances and problems widely in common with others beyond the seas. Mark Twain, Charlie Chaplin, and Laurel and Hardy convulsed their audiences completely around the globe to demonstrate that it can be done. But Americans, who were laughing at the Watergate affair to relieve the chagrin and humiliation President Nixon had caused them, learned to their surprise that the world outside, on both sides of the Iron and Bamboo curtains, considered Nixon’s policies of détente with
Soviet Russia and rapprochement with Red China realistically as more constructive approaches to world order than his critics’ efforts to restore the democratic purity of constitutional processes in the United States by uproariously mocking their transgressor. Jesse Bier once wrote with insight on the interplay of American and foreign humor, from an opening allusion to Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad* to the comprehensive and generally misanthropic madness of the Marx Brothers and Joseph Heller. “Influences and cross-influences have always been at work,” Bier determined for American humorists, as indeed they have from Chaucer and Shakespeare, Dickens, and the British mock historical style, from Munchausen exaggeration, Voltairean extravagance, and Rabelaisian ribaldry, and for foreign readers of Artemus Ward, Mark Twain, Mr. Dooley, James Thurber, and countless American comic strips reproduced in English and translations (Bier 1968, 415–453). “Our humor tends to greater concreteness and comic imagery than European,” Bier contends. “Its wit is not as discriminatory as the French. Its sexual component is less scatological than the English but not as instinctive or light as the French. And yet the irreverence of American humor is more comprehensive and consistent than French, English, or other Continental examples, without any powerful circumscriptions of subject matter or office – in this sense the freest of all” (Bier 1968, 452). The higher the flights of sophistication attempted, it would seem, the greater need there is for bridges of intercultural understanding to be erected to transport humor beyond the water’s edge. The Danes’ laughter at non sequiturs, which baffles outsiders, proves this point: “Which frightens you most; thunder or lightning?” Bo asks his friend Ib. “Buttermilk!” is Ib’s disconcerting reply.

However, humor that depends upon noncomprehension can be found right here at home, as in, once again a geriatric example, the exchange between two sweet old ladies on a porch rocking out their sunset memories. “My husband and I had mutual orgasm,” bragged one of them. “Oh really,” the other responded readily, “we had State Farm.”

So we come, at last, in our quest for the dimensions of American humor, to its internal check points or limits to laughter. These are conspicuously ethnic, political, and sexual in nature, and, by assessing the limitations or resistances that are opposing them within our society, we can readily draw conclusions as to their suitability or unsuitability for exporting them to other cultures elsewhere.

Ethnic humor can be found all over the earth directed everywhere
against supposedly inferior social groups. All too often it serves to sweeten
the substance of cruel oppression, as in the cheeky query of an English
correspondent recently — if I had heard of the newly opened Irish abortion
clinic that was “so successful one had to reserve a bed twelve months in
advance!”

In the same genre, Northern Ireland is characterized as the anus of the
world, with the British just passing through. Ethnic humor in the United
States arose as a function of white racial antagonisms and social class atti­
dudes of superiority toward immigrants, blacks, and other, generally, non­
white sub-citizens to be barred by the advantaged members of society
from the full opportunities for participation and productivity, though, in
time, as pointed out by Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, “mocking the
features ascribed to them by outsiders has become one of the most effec­
tive ethnic infusions into national humor, particularly by Afro-Americans
and Jews” (Boskin and Dorinson 1985, 81–97).

Political humor, as I myself have emphasized in two compilations of the
stuff, The Assault of Laughter (1962) and Pardon Us, Mr. President! (1975), is itself parochial, in requiring of its readers or listeners abundant
knowledge of local or national politics in order to appreciate it, and it is
ephemeral. “Political humor diminishes itself with each ticking of the
clock. Subtleties of merriment and malice evaporate quickly, as the audi­
ences for whom they were intended lose their grasp on the essential points
of fact and then themselves sooner or later fade from the scene” (Dudden
1975, 15). For this reason, my second anthology runs backward in time,
instead of forward, from the latest selection to the earliest. It is arranged
by retrograde sections from President Ford’s pardon of his predecessor at
the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century all the way back to
George Washington in the eighteenth. Otherwise few holds are barred.
The American people have grown accustomed to laughing at politics and
politicians, not all of the time nor at every development, of course, but
enough for their sources of laughter to have accumulated an impressive
record, a body of testimony to their ultimate faith in democracy and the
relative freedom of expression they enjoy.

Finally, we come to sexuality in American humor. Before we go too far,
however, the sweat shirt emblazoned with the legend, DIAL 911 — MAKE A
COP COME, deserves special mention, as it is both quick and dirty, yet civic
minded. I am not really concerned with the so-called dirty joke on sexual
topics and taboos, which is found universally and often with ethnic
dimensions to amplify its ostensibly superior side. The sexuality of humor that concerns me is a product of the new feminism of America's contemporary women's movement. Sexuality was not even a proper subject of discourse until the women's movement forced scholars and the general public to confront sexuality in society. For sex is to women's role as skin color is to black personality. America's women are in the forefront of the movement for sexual emancipation worldwide, which means that feminist humor by women comedians is a fresh force for laughter wherever the women's movement has succeeded to some significant degree in creating an audience willing at least to listen, which is not everywhere by a long shot, not everywhere even in the United States, this land of Archie Bunkers. Among the first real generation of women comics, only Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and, perhaps, Robin Tyler are even now nationally known. Many of the feminists dress like cartoon characters and concentrate their routines in rowdy, loose, and aggressive fashion, primarily on women and the quarrels they undergo with men, their own bodies, family members, and government figures. "Red gash mouths, fright wigs, rainbow stockings – They bring a grotesque carnival aura to their sketches on gynecologists, nuclear fission, sanatoriums, masturbation, menstruation, intercourse. "Their humor is scarifying," Jan Hoffman of the Village Voice has written, "and it's meant to be."2 Indeed a wag has summed up their hostile viciousness evenhandedly: "With some of those women, it's strictly a case of dog eat dog. But with that other crowd, it's just the opposite."

At this point, we turn from considerations of American humor's dimensions to its expressions in the cinematic medium or form. The United States swept to an early lead in commercial film making and distributing. Throughout the silent era after 1905 and the talking pictures of the thirties and forties, American film comedies, along with homespun melodramas and romances, were enjoyed in every quarter of the globe. Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, and a number of other foreign-born actors and directors contributed to a well-nigh universal American comic triumph. In time the encroachments of television on the domestic patterns of family entertainment transformed moviegoers' habits and the films themselves. The makers of film comedies struggled to find audiences to replace the crowds they were losing to the more relaxing stimulations of canned laughter.

Comedy has been defined as tragedy that happens to somebody else. Nowhere does this definition resemble appearances more exactly than in
the popular American film comedies of the first half of the present century. The screens of neighborhood and downtown theaters afforded vicarious experiences for countless millions of ordinary men and women to share and enjoy. The eternally henpecked husband, the routine failure as a lover or, for that matter, anything else, the get-rich-too-quick fraud, the everyman character, in other words, who is always being put upon by friends, foes, and fickle fortune alike, is, after all, oneself, trapped in that bind of mild paranoia that most of us embody to some degree.

Everyone has his or her own favorite. Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton were alike in that they were both at odds, the one with society and its defenders, the police, the other with his props or the absurdity of life itself – like Jacques Tati. W. C. Fields unflaggingly demonstrated man’s helplessness, his frustrations and defeats, in a world where inanimate objects, children, and dogs display perverse wills of their own to thwart the most innocent intentions of daily life. Fields moved warily through the world protected by a flamboyant braggadocio until he was directly threatened by superior forces, an aura of false nonchalance conveying his apparent confidence that he would in the end prevail, and invariably obsequious or hostile therefore to all who contrived to get themselves in his way.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy were really a love story, and they were essentially babylike – like all great comedians, as Hal Roach, their producer, instinctively understood. Theirs was a hierarchy, but the difference between the one in power, Ollie, and the one not in power, Stanley, was so slight that sometimes the balance tilted with Laurel taking charge. In 105 films together commencing in 1926, the Laurel and Hardy persona invented an innocent merriment through visual comic devices, pantomime, and their own peculiar mannerisms. Each in his own fashion displayed an inbuilt physical contrariety adjacent to reality, yet which clearly placed them out of this world. Their ideogram was a pair of derby hats that inevitably switched themselves to add to the confusion. Laurel’s shock of hair resembled a fright wig, his eccentric lope, his eye-blink, his arm-fold-fall, and his outbursts of weeping and rhetorical incoherence accumulated into a cherubic otherworldliness, while his unexpected forays into magic, such as igniting his thumb in Way Out West as though it were a cigarette lighter, elevated him momentarily to first-place leadership. Otherwise it was Hardy’s “You-after-me-Stanley” syndrome abetted by his necktie-twiddle, the soul-deep resignation of his camera look, and
his triumphant derby at rest in the crook of his left arm, his signature of smug self-satisfaction, that broadcast his simpleminded conviction of his own superiority. Two fools of God, Marcel Marceau called them, Laurel and Hardy touched the child in us all. In a world full of contrasts, where violence, dreams, frustrations, and joys compete for each of us, Laurel and Hardy will live for us as long as it is necessary, for as long as banana peels are designed to be slipped upon, for as long as bottoms are meant to be kicked (Knight 1966, 17–18; McCabe, Kilgore, and Bann 1975, 7, 11, 13–19, and passim).

Nevertheless, the controversy over the film comedy Soul Man in 1986 served to remind us all, if reminder were needed, that innocuous misunderstandings can flare up into heated exchanges between the subcultures of American life and the prevailing white majority. Soul Man is about a white youth who darkens his skin color to win a scholarship to Harvard Law School earmarked for black candidates from Los Angeles. “It’s the [Bill] Cosby decade,” he cheerfully proclaims. “America loves black people.” Civil libertarians decried Soul Man, however, asserting emphatically that prejudice is still nothing to be laughed at. Samuel Myers, president of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, comprising almost 120 black institutions, declares that, “By taking programs that have a noble purpose, that are designed to correct inequities and help correct underrepresentation of blacks in society, it does disservice to those programs by denigrating them and also by casting an unfair light on the programs themselves” (Chronicle of Higher Education, November 19, 1986, 35, 37). His is an anguished commentary on passing oneself off racially for comic results, a practice that, ironically, has experienced a long and convoluted history in the opposite direction of light-skinned blacks passing as whites. Hence the episode can just as easily be interpreted as the latest revival of minstrelsy, with a white man appearing comically in black face yet one more time. Mort Sahl’s cheeky query comes to mind: “Are there any groups I haven’t offended?” At stake, it is clear, is that precious quality of free irreverence celebrated as American humor’s outstanding characteristic. There are virtually no limits to the dimensions of American humor even so. So it is “anyway onward,” as Sahl himself would urge, in the spirit of that profoundly American hymn: “Drop Kick Me Jesus Through the Goal Posts of Life!”

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Notes and References

3. With my gratitude to Professor Frank Tillman of Hawaii Loa College for his insights leading to this observation.

Apte, Mahadev L.

Bier, Jesse

Blakely, Mary Kay

Boskin, Joseph, and Joseph Dorinson

Clemens, Samuel Langhorne, William Dean Howells, and Charles Hopkins Clark, ed.

Dudden, Arthur Power

Hoffman, Jan
Klein, Julia

Knight, Arthur

McCabe, John, Al Kilgore, and Richard W. Bann
Screwball Comedy

Duane Paul Byrge

There have been rumors of a recent renaissance of the screwball comedy, a comedy form that flourished during the 1930s. Recently critics have called *Arthur, So Fine,* and *Desperately Seeking Susan* screwball comedies; similarly, others have referred to the comedies of Woody Allen as screwball, and even the comedies of Mel Brooks have been tagged as being screwball. In short, zany, wacky, or unconventionally structured comedies are called screwball by the general public or uninformed entertainment journalists. Of the aforementioned comedies, only *Arthur* and *So Fine* are screwball comedies, having elements particular to those comedies of 1934–1941 which were screwball comedies.

Although film historians have differed on exactly what constitutes a screwball comedy, it has been defined as “a type of romantic comedy which developed in the 1930s and is usually characterized by main characters from different social classes, an antagonistic relationship which becomes love, and fast-paced action” (Magill 1980, xiv). There has been general agreement that the period of screwball comedy did not begin much before 1934 or end much after 1941. Ted Sennett (1973, 16) notes that it was Frank Capra’s film, *It Happened One Night* (1934), a comedy that began shooting as an unwanted production, which launched the genre of screwball comedy. Further, he argues, *It Happened One Night* spurred the development of a body of films that gave a human dimension to film comedy and expressed the daffy, endearing quality of its lunatic fringe.

The screwball comedies continued into the forties, entertaining audiences with their humorous and sometimes witty approach to love, marriage, and other of life’s staples. Yet something had vanished from the genre, making
many of the films a little more forced, a little more mechanical than their predecessors, as if the atmosphere in which the thirties comedies had thrived could no longer be sustained. Most of the popular stars were still active and a few, such as Katharine Hepburn, were finding their stride again after years of neglect. But the air of strain was still evident (Sennett 1973, 18).

Other film scholars differ slightly on the time boundaries of screwball comedy. Andrew Sarris (1978, 15) states, “In 1939 Life Magazine announced that the screwball comedy was finished when Carole Lombard in ‘Made For Each Other’ began crying after she saw an oxygen tank being wheeled into her baby’s hospital room.”

The group of screwball comedies made from 1934 to 1941 includes: It Happened One Night (1934), The Thin Man (1934), Twentieth Century (1934), Theodora Goes Wild (1936), My Man Godfrey (1936), Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936), The Man Who Came to Dinner (1936), Swing High, Swing Low (1937), Live, Love and Learn (1937), I Met Him in Paris (1937), The Awful Truth (1937), Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife (1937), It’s Love I’m After (1937), Easy Living (1937), Nothing Sacred (1938), Holiday (1938), You Can’t Take It With You (1938), Ball of Fire (1938), Mr. and Mrs. Smith (1938), Midnight (1939), His Girl Friday (1940), My Favorite Wife (1940), True Confession (1940), The Philadelphia Story (1940), The Bride C.O.D. (1941), and The Palm Beach Story (1942).

Are there historical boundaries to the screwball comedy? Is the genre an anachronism or a vital, living film form? Although some entertainment writers have announced a revival of the screwball comedy in recent years, it is more likely that they have more precisely meant that there is now a revival of comedy itself. Some of the largest box-office smashes of the past few years have been comedies: 9 to 5, Stir Crazy, Animal House, Arthur, Tootsie, and Trading Places have all flourished in the marketplace. Certainly movie producers have been preoccupied recently with capturing the youth market; they hope to snare the teenage moviegoer, and the best method, many of them believe, is through the production of low-budget youth comedies, usually involving rites of sexual initiation. The producer of Cheech and Chong’s earliest movies, Howard Brown, has talked of updating It Happened One Night, setting it in Mexico and updating it sexually (interview with Howard Brown, 30 July 1983).

Actor Ralph Bellamy, who played in two of the leading screwball comedies (The Awful Truth, His Girl Friday) and more recently performed in
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Trading Places, feels the screwball comedy fit a particular time in history, appealed to a particular audience nourished by those times and updating it would not translate well to the sensibilities of the 1980s moviegoers (interview with Ralph Bellamy, 14 August 1983).

Whether screwball comedies are a genre which fit only one particular historical/cultural period will be analyzed. Certainly, the United States in the 1930s was at a unique historical juncture; it was the time of the Depression, and these comedies, along with the comedies of other such extraordinary performers as the Marx Brothers, Mae West, and W. C. Fields, served to take people's minds off their troubles, served as healers and reassurances.

In the 1930s, in a gray and troubled America, the laughter that bubbled up from screen comedy was all of these; it poked fun at our absurdities and eased our tension, while concealing a deep-rooted hopelessness (Sennett 1973, 13).

Other benefits came from these comedies: they left audiences with a "glow of satisfaction" (Bergman 1971, 132). While the comedies of the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, and Mae West were wildly iconoclastic and acerbic, the screwball comedies were gentler and, in most cases, less caustic. Not denying that many screwball comedies had very dark underpinnings (especially those penned by Ben Hecht and Billy Wilder), their brisk and breezy dynamics and their characteristically upbeat endings had audiences leaving the theaters with warm feelings.

The screwball comedy flourished during a precise moment in United States social and film history. It was popular during the Depression, during the early years of the sound film. It gave way, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, to Preston Sturges's increasingly cynical social satires. In short, the screwball comedy seemed to fade from the screen during World War II; it has revived sporadically during the following decades.

In the comedy of manners tradition, the screwball comedies were most immediately nurtured by the Broadway farces of the 1920s as well as the silent film comedies of the same decade. They were an amalgam of two seemingly disparate forms - drawing room comedy with slapstick farce. With screwball comedy, the pratfall made its entrance into the drawing room, with style.

Significantly, many of the directors of screwball comedy got their professional comic training in silent comedy. Such directors as Frank Capra,
Howard Hawks, and Leo McCarey had backgrounds with either Mack Sennett or Hal Roach. And many future screwball stars, notably Carole Lombard, played extensively in silent comedies.

Stylistically, the screwball comedy moved at a frantic but fluid pace. Hawks and Capra, in particular, refined their directorial techniques to speed up the comic pace. They encouraged players to overlap their dialogue – the screwball leads were invariably articulate and fast-talking – which gave an allegro tempo to the proceedings. In addition, needless exits and entrances in scenes were lopped in the cutting room. As such, there was little wasted movement in the screwball comedies. They moved rapidly, both visually and verbally.

With the exception of Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, screwball comedies touched only peripherally on the economic conditions of the time. While there are a few minutes' worth of scenes in *My Man Godfrey* concerning the Depression and a wacky automat scene in *Easy Living* alluding to the unemployment of the 1930s, the nation's economic state at the time was not central to the screwball stories. The hard conditions were, at most, tangential to the plots of screwball comedy. These movies were “intended and received as escapist entertainment, improbable stories set among the irresponsible, often hard-drinking rich” (Magill 1980, xiv). As such, the screwball comedies were, for the most part, set in upper-class Manhattan surroundings. Their lead characters were most often wealthy and thus free from mundane monetary worries. They were free to behave in a manner that common people, having to put bread on their tables, were not. Their free-wheeling and free-spirited ways provided a light entertaining escape from the struggles of the day for the average 1930s moviegoer.

Yet screwball behavior and screwball values were not limited to those with Park Avenue addresses, as the antics of the Vanderhof family in *You Can't Take It With You* showed. Indeed, anyone who had the desire and the moxie to act as he or she pleased and who further had the savoir faire and imagination to make society's institutions work to their advantage was worthy of the appellation “screwball.” Accordingly, the humor in these comedies sprang from intelligent and frustrated character reactions to dull conventions and narrow expectations. Human energy, fueled by intelligence and propelled by an urgent need for personal expression, supplied the comic dynamic for these hilarious, high-speed films.

For the screwball hero and heroine the outside world was a nonsensical
world of mind-numbing conventionality, a world which Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer have perceptively noted was a world “where economic crisis and the threat of approaching war burned all the conventional roads to achievement and happiness” (Griffith and Mayer 1957, 324). And so, the screwball leads set out to achieve their personal happiness by disregarding or circumventing all behavioral norms that got in their way. Non-conformist by nature, the screwball leads resolutely and blithely took on society, not in a spirit of reform (except for the case of Longfellow Deeds), but in a high-spirited mission of self-survival. Their need was to discover and create “a world of their own making” (Griffith and Mayer 1957, 324). In most screwball comedies the attainment of this happiness, this world, was realized through coupling with a suitable, equally intelligent and highly vital mate.

One of the screwball comedy’s most winning ingredients was the intelligent, spirited nature of the female leads. They were often more daring and lively than the male and were often the romantic instigator. Certainly, having the woman be the wooer was a novelty that made for a nice comedic plot spin. The female lead roles were plumb roles, roles that most actresses today would envy, should they be aware of them.

While the female leads may have been strong, there was no concerted effort to foster female awareness. Screwball comedy was not message comedy; it was not didactic or issue-oriented. Quite simply, screwball women were strong because the love stories were better and far funnier with bright and strong lead characters, whatever their sex. The variations in behavior were richer and the plot parameters wider when extended by the wit and grace of such leads. In short, the comic success of these movies depended on the strength and intelligence of both the sexes.

Accompanying the attractive screwball stars were a colorful group of eccentric supporting characters who added a nutty glow to the fringes of the films. Supporting such stars as Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, William Powell, Myrna Loy, Carole Lombard, Jimmy Stewart, Claudette Colbert, Barbara Stanwyck, Gary Cooper, and Jean Arthur were such skilled and memorable character actors as Eugene Pallette, Franklyn Pangborn, William Demarest, Charles Coburn, and Charlie Ruggles.

While one may readily accept the notion that screwball comedies were escapist entertainment, one does not, however, agree to the premise that these comedies were less important or less worthy than those carrying overt social messages. The greatest comedies, be they film or stage plays,
are most effective and funniest when they are not preachy. Comedies that sermonize or proselytize are often more banal, less significant than those that appear to be completely wacky.

The screwball comedies all involved the individual's attempts to realize personal happiness. This involved necessarily the circumvention of society's rules and, in most cases, involved finding a mate with whom one could share the fun of life. Life was made to be fun, according to the screwball credo. Jobs that made one a slave to a schedule or mates that put happiness secondary to the accumulation of wealth were anathema to the screwball way of thought. Primary screwball plots involved comedies of courtship, involving on-the-surface antagonistic parties getting together or lovers reuniting after either a separation caused by misunderstanding or physical happenstance. While these comedies utilized a diversity of plotlines — from the detective story of *The Thin Man* series to the fantasy antics of the *Topper* series — all were shaped by the screwball philosophy that one must have some fun in life. That marriage could be fun specifically was a new notion to the movies — it still may be. The banter and good humor, for instance, between William Powell and Myrna Loy in *The Thin Man* series proved to be the most winning ingredient of those films, with the actual detective plots being secondary.

Invariably, and perhaps not surprisingly, the screwball comedies all but disappeared with the advent of World War II. It was not, of course, a sudden disappearance but rather a perceptible fade. The war discernibly affected the outlook of some of screwball comedy's most important creators. Such directors as Preston Sturges grew increasingly cynical, bringing a more jaundiced perspective to his postwar work. While Sturges's own cynicism was evident in certain Juvenalian thrusts in *The Lady Eve* (1938) and *The Great McGinty* (1940), his wartime films, such as *Hail, The Conquering Hero* (1944), cast derision on a multitude of national institutions. The tone of Sturges's work became increasingly biting.

The war also greatly affected the work of Frank Capra. Capra, of course, devoted his wartime filmmaking to the *Why We Fight* series, an endeavor that interrupted his outpouring of comedies. The comedies Capra made following World War II did not have the same breezy grace as those he made in the 1930s, although, unlike Sturges, his career did flourish.

In creating the *Why We Fight* series to help the war effort, Capra was forced to deal with soul-killing material, with proof of the atrocities of war.
that experience, Capra told an interviewer that the war had 'burnt me out . . . The war was a terrible shock to me . . . I hated the unnecessary brutality. Women and children being killed, terrified, huddling in fear. Going around dropping bombs on women and children. "What the hell is wrong with us?" I used to think . . . I thought that perhaps I had put too much faith in the human race you know, in the pictures I made. Maybe they were too much as things should be. I began to think that maybe I really was a Pollyanna' (Basinger 1982, 81).

In the screwball world, there were no moral blacks or whites. Life was seen as a "cockeyed caravan" but was a journey worth making, a trip made to be fun for the participants. While there was a darker underside to many of the screwball movies, laughter itself was the raison d'être for these films. To make people laugh was their single and lofty goal. "There is nothing wrong with making people laugh," discovers the filmmaker hero of Preston Sturges's 1941 release, *Sullivan's Travels*. "For some people it is the only thing they have." Ironically, screwball comedy itself stopped almost coincident with the release of *Sullivan's Travels*. Understandably but unfortunately, the importance of laughter was lost during the war, when the comic aesthetic of screwball comedy seemed out of place even to its own creators. Its demise was gradual – Sturges's films during the war years continued to have high-speed screwball elements – but its tone had darkened, and, with the case of Capra, its breezy elan would give way to a more traditional Populist theme.

While there have been numerous attempts to recreate the screwball style, most noticeably in remakes such as Peter Bogdanovich's *What's Up Doc?* (1972) and Andrew Bergman's by-the-numbers 1980s recreation of a prototypical screwball romance in *So Fine*, the genre has not made a comeback.

Despite the lack of screwball films being made, the screwball comedies have held up amazingly well. Today, fifty years after the release of *It Happened One Night*, the film still captivates audiences. The same might be said of such screwball classics as *Bringing Up Baby, My Man Godfrey, The Thin Man, You Can't Take It With You*, as well as several others.

But these are not the thirties. Fifty years have passed. As we today watch a screwball comedy of that era, our laughter is not less than those who saw those films in first-run, during hard times. That's the ultimate triumph of the screwball comedies of the 1930s and early 1940s. Whether those comedies return as a popular form is a matter of conjecture. "There's certainly the talent there," states Jimmy Stewart. "We've got a lot
of talented people making comedy today, and I think that comedy is something that doesn't change all that much over time” (interview with James Stewart, 5 February 1985).

Certainly there is abundant comic talent in the filmmaking community. Directors Colin Higgins, Andrew Bergman, and Robert Zemeckis are three current directors who have personal loves for screwball comedy. Higgins lists My Man Godfrey as being among his all-time favorites; Bergman, in addition to writing the 1930s film book We’re In The Money, has penned the screwball comedy So Fine as well as The In-Laws, which had numerous screwball elements, and Zemeckis acknowledges watching It Happened One Night over and over as a model for one of his most recent films, Romancing the Stone (interview with Robert Zemeckis, 9 May 1984).

Among players, Dudley Moore seems to have a particular talent for the genre, both in terms of the intelligence he conveys and of his talent for slapstick. Among actresses, Kathleen Turner has the combination of beauty and comic ability to play a screwball heroine.

Television shows have tapped screwball elements. A recent series, “Hart to Hart,” starring Robert Wagner and Stefanie Powers, was clearly an updated version of The Thin Man. ABC’s “Moonlighting” features the give-and-take sparkling banter between its male and female leads which, in the screwball tradition (and which ABC hints), will lead to romance.

It was fifty years ago that the first screwball comedy was released. The creative writers/directors and players who made these delightful movies realized, like the lead character in Preston Sturges’s Sullivan’s Travels, “that there is nothing wrong with making people laugh.” Why should we be different?

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Humor in Japanese Cinema

IAN BURUMA

Do the Japanese have a sense of humor? There is a general feeling, among Westerners as well as Asians, that they do not. Japanese laugh a lot, to be sure. But laughter is not always a sign of humor. It can be a sign of social embarrassment, for example. The lady who rushes to catch a subway train only to see the doors slam into her face and her shopping bags crash to the ground might giggle, but not because she sees anything funny in the situation. Her laughter, she hopes, preempts others from laughing at her. People laugh to save others from social embarrassment, too, or to put them at ease, or to be ingratiating. These various forms of laughter say much about the rules of Japanese social life, stressing “face” and avoiding, almost at any cost, direct confrontation. But they tell us little about humor.

A sense of humor is not the same as a sense of fun either. Certainly the Japanese have that. Things that appeal to a universal sense of fun – funny faces, cute animals, children – appeal to the Japanese. As do the many varieties of the banana-skin gag. The mechanics of this have been described often: the joke lies in knowing that the man will slip before he knows himself. The confirmation of this knowledge comes as a kind of release, which is expressed in laughter. Predictability is very much part of Japanese comedy. One sees this in TV variety shows where the same gags are repeated endlessly, to the point that the audience knows certain lines by heart. The other kind of humor much appreciated in Japan is the sentimental combination of laughs and tears. Charlie Chaplin was by far the most popular foreign comedian in prewar Japan. And the endless Tora-san series still cranked out today is a modern, very Japanese version of the same mixture of humor and pathos.
But that is not what we mean by a sense of humor, for this implies irony. It is a humor that masquerades as seriousness. Irony is often saying something while meaning the opposite. It is a subversive kind of humor, as it refuses to take reality at face value. Like dandyism – which takes irony to its logical extreme by taking nothing seriously except dandyism itself – ironical humor is based on individualism and a strong sense of social rules and role-playing. It is the gap between the individual and these rules and roles which produces irony. Irony flourishes in countries with long histories, where social roles have become entrenched. Americans, perhaps because social mobility is still more fluid and the sense of history less strongly developed, tend to have a less ironical sense of humor than, say, the English or the French. The Japanese have a deep sense of history, and social life is rigidly structured.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Japanese have a well developed sense of social satire. Japanese jokes tend to bring social roles and pretensions down to earth. They have a humanizing effect. The great comic figures of Edo-period fiction are pretentious pedants, corrupt, pompous officials, arrogant warriors, or wealthy fools, exposed by their very human weaknesses. A typical and not very elegant poem of the period goes: “I am at a loss about the lavatory, says the warrior in armor.” The idea of an earnest samurai having to dispense with all his social trappings for such a simple human function must have seemed extremely comical to the Edo townsmen. And indeed the stupid lord (baka tono) is still a stock comic character in Japanese vaudeville, to be seen nightly on TV.

The pompous father trying to uphold his public image in the home is clearly part of this tradition. Many comedies are about cutting father down to size. A good example is the so-called Company Director Series, made by the Toho company in the 1960s. The format, as usual in these series, is utterly predictable. The company director, always played by an actor called Morishige Hisaya, is invariably a foolish, blustering figure, ordering his subordinates around in an absurd manner. He has his shoulders massaged by obsequious underlings; he makes long, unwanted speeches on public occasions. The joke lies, of course, in the contrast between his public and his private persona. At home the director is suddenly reduced to a pathetic, whining creature, who depends entirely on the women in his life: his wife, his mistress, even his daughters. The mistress, moreover, is more like a mother in whose presence he becomes a petulant little boy, making her cut his toenails and clean out his ears. His sub-
ordinates often behave in an equally absurd manner to the people under them. There was a famous cartoon in Punch (in the 1950s, I believe), in which an admiral bellows at the captain, who bawls out the lieutenant, who yells at the boatswain, who shouts at the sailor, who screams at his parrot. The Japanese would appreciate this joke.

There is a scene, endlessly repeated on Japanese TV, that involves one man coshing another over the head with a rolled-up fan, newspaper, or anything that might come to hand. He will frequently shout something like baka!, “you fool!” This might not strike one as especially hilarious, but many Japanese appear to find the gag irresistible. This, too, is based on the subversion of social rules. Hitting people over the head, shouting “you fool” is irregular, not to say scandalous behavior in Japan. But this is just the point. Humor is a way of safely, almost ritually breaking taboos. The clown is a kind of masochist, a scapegoat who acts as a ceremonial victim of our aggression. The stronger the social restraints, the stronger pent-up aggression naturally becomes. This might explain why the Japanese (and possibly the Germans) tend to laugh at violence so readily. It is common to see cinema audiences in Tokyo, even (or perhaps especially) audiences consisting of young girls, in peals of laughter when somebody dies in a particularly horrible manner.

Few film directors have deliberately taken black humor to such extremes as Suzuki Seijun, especially in the gangster films he made for the Nikkatsu company. These are brilliant films, which have benefited, I think, from the tension between the company formula for these entertainments and Suzuki’s bizarre imagination. His films are ironical in the sense that he plays with the rules of the genre, which he appears to take seriously, while in fact subverting them. This is true of a masterpiece like Tokyo nagaremono (1966), ostensibly a straight gangster movie, but really a black farce. He stretched the rules of the game a little too far and was fired by his company. His later films, such as Zigeunerweisen, made in complete freedom, are less interesting, and certainly less humorous. They are not ironical, because there was nothing to subvert.

Satō Tadao used the Buddhist word mujō, the transience of life, to describe Suzuki’s black farces. Suzuki himself calls them nihilistic. And he relates this nihilism to his wartime experience. As he remembers it, life was not only cheap when he was sent with his friends to die for emperor and country, but also quite absurd. The sight of death even appeared comical at times. In an interview with Satō (1974, 147), he remembered:
HUMOR IN JAPANESE CINEMA

When they sunk your ship, you had to be saved by other ships. I shall never forget the sight of those men climbing up the ropes, swaying from side to side, hitting their heads all over the place. By the time they got on board they were black and blue . . . Some of them died, of course and they were buried at sea. Two sailors would take the corpses on either side and the trumpets would go tatata and then they'd throw the corpse overboard: tatata, another corpse, tatata, another one . . .

It could be a scene from one of his films. He could not but become a nihilist, for whom humor is an antidote to the fleetingness of life. The tragic sense of mujō can only be relieved by laughter.

Japanese social taboos are often associated with purity, mentally and physically. Sin is to be unclean. In their rather obsessive hygienic habits, the Japanese resemble the Germans somewhat. Certainly there is a preponderance in both countries of what could be termed brown humor: if a man is not coshing another over the head with a rolled-up newspaper, you can be sure he is letting out a loud fart. Here too one notes the reversal of social rules, the comic transgression of taboos. One sees this in religious Japanese festivals, which often involve rolling about in mud baths and other such activities. One sees it in Japanese comedy, where much use is made of food, dirt, and farting. Gross eating habits were displayed, for example, in the excellent comedy Family Game (directed by Morita Yoshimitsu in 1983). People were forever noisily sucking eggs, and the climax of the film was a food fight.

Pornographic films (or any other kind of pornography) in Japan tend to be scatological; women are dragged through mud or otherwise humiliated with dirt. This was especially true of the more “serious” erotic films of the avant garde by such directors as Wakamatsu Koji. Wakamatsu, in such works as When the Foetus Goes Poaching (Taiji ga mitsuryō suru toki, 1966), intended to explore not just male-female relations but the popular Japanese spirit. This exercise meant, quite literally, getting down into the muddy reaches of the national soul. Wakamatsu’s films are not meant to be funny. Equally obscene films, such as those directed by Yamamoto Shinya, are. Yamamoto – often in the company of the photographer Araki, who shares the same obsessions – is a curious figure, always appearing on TV in sunglasses and a baseball cap. His films, as well as his TV appearances, are a mixture of farce, scatology, and pornography. By making the natural human functions appear absurd, he elicits a kind of nervous laughter, which one is told is especially Japanese. It is not, of
for such laughter is shared by all men who feel uneasy about the bodily functions, especially sex. Such laughter is particularly common in countries with stringent social rules and an obsessive concern with cleanliness.

This kind of comedy does not display a fine sense of irony. Judging from Japanese cinema, one must conclude that irony is indeed not common in Japanese thinking. The reason may be that individualism, a vital element of irony, is not fostered in Japanese society. Ironical humor does exist, however, but the exceptions, as always, appear to confirm the rule. Many of these exceptions were made by Kinoshita Keisuke in the early part of his career before he turned to tear-jerkers. His first film deserves to be mentioned in this context for its remarkable boldness. It was entitled *The Blossoming Port (Hana saku minato)*. It was based on a play sponsored by the Office of Public Information, and it was made in 1943. It is ostensibly a piece of wartime propaganda, about two swindlers who are turned into honest men, doing their bit for the war effort. I said ostensibly, because it is also a social satire, which subverts the rules of the genre; the gap between the way reality ought to be presented and the way it is, is plainly visible.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign in what is otherwise a very lackluster period in Japanese cinema is the emergence of more sophisticated comedy films. I have already mentioned *Family Game*. My favorite is *The Funeral (O-sōshiki)*, directed by Itami Juzō in 1984. It shows the confusion of a fashionable married couple (he is in advertising) when one of their parents dies. In Japan, where marriage ceremonies, often orchestrated like TV variety shows, are becoming more and more absurd, funerals are still highly traditional affairs. The problem with the young middle-class couple is that they no longer know the rules, and they have to buy a video program especially designed to teach young people the rules of the last rites, down to such details as how many tears to shed and what to say when offered condolences.

The satire has two clear targets: the confusion of modern Japanese when faced with their own traditions, and the propensity of Japanese to learn everything mechanically. The film is ironically funny about the very things Japanese hold near and dear: hierarchy, conformism, and ritual.

The film was shown at the Cannes Film Festival that year, which shows that the Japanese have come a long way since they were afraid to show modern films abroad lest Westerners laugh at Japanese habits. The film
makes one thing very clear: the Japanese, contrary to what many people think, are quite capable of laughing at themselves.

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Satisfied or Not: 
Desire and Discourse 
in the Chinese Comedy of the 1960s

Ma Ning

Comedy has been the most popular and yet least developed film genre in China. During the three decades after the founding of the People's Republic (1949–1979), its flourishing and prosperity were largely confined to the early 1960s, especially the period generally known as the second Hundred Flowers period (1961–1962). Although the production of comedy films began in the mid-1950s during the first Hundred Flowers period when a number of satirical comedies directed at the bureaucracy, corruption, and mismanagement within the Chinese Communist Party and the government were made, this second Hundred Flowers period is generally considered by critics in the People's Republic to be the golden age of Chinese comedy films since 1949. Tracing their source back to the early 1960s rather than the 1950s, it is argued that the basic patterns and characteristics of the comedy films now produced in the People's Republic were formulated in this period (Guo 1985).

Categorized as socialist new comedies, films made in this second period are considered by critics in the People's Republic to share some common characteristics. First of all, they all have a strong political and moral purpose, which can be related to a long moral tradition in classical Chinese literature and arts. “The aim of comedy is to praise not to expose. Laughter should be healthy and constructive. It is evoked to affirm life. And the depiction of life should concentrate on the construction of positive characters embodying the spirit of socialist new man and a positive environment symbolizing the new society under socialism” (Guo 1985, 67). Secondly, these films avoid any direct representation of social contradictions and conflicts. As one critic describes them: “The comic technique employed is
not satire which is considered ‘outdated’ and ‘dangerous’ for the purpose of socialist new comedy is to praise not to expose. The major comic techniques are humor, wit, coincidence and mistaken identity which are categorized as the basic techniques of the ‘eulogic’ comedy” (Guo 1985, 67).

Under these general headings, the comedy films of the period are further divided into two subcategories: new romantic comedy and new social comedy. The new romantic comedy is characterized by its depiction of love in the new society. The emphasis is on the new type of human relations in China, and love is more often than not a reward to the positive characters for their altruistic endeavors. The prototype of this kind of comedy film is a 1959 film produced by the Shanghai Film Studio, My Day Off (Jintian wo xiu xi). It relates how a Shanghai policeman finds that his day off, which he has planned to fill with recreation and a visit to his fiancée, is instead filled by unexpected emergencies that finally involve his fiancée’s family. When his fiancée blames him for being late and threatens to break away from him, she finds out that he has been delayed by helping others, including her own father. The film historian Jay Leyda describes this comedy as “a film that one can’t imagine having been made anywhere but in China, no matter how familiar its situation,” and he praises it as “the best comedy I had seen from Shanghai since 1959” (Leyda 1972, 284–285).

The new social comedy functions basically as a social corrective with some mild satire. Like the romantic comedy, it deals with types rather than individuals, and its aim is to reform individual transgression of acceptable social behavior through laughter. The comedy and the humor exhibited in these films are usually directed at potentially positive characters with some minor flaws. The most successful film of this type is Li Shuangshuang, which centers on the dispute arising between a young couple when the wife, Li Shuangshuang – a woman of unusual caliber: outspoken, courageous, and with a strong sense of justice and social responsibility – starts to criticize the leader of the production team, who happens to be a close friend of her conservative husband. To make the matter worse for the husband, her criticism not only wins support from her fellow commune members but also enables her to be elected the new leader. To save face, he leaves home with the former leader to do business in the city. After a long separation, he is persuaded to return and is surprised to find that under her leadership the commune has become more prosperous. Realizing that she has acted in the interest of the commune rather than her
own, he becomes reconciled with her. Enlightened by her, he exposes the wrongdoings of his close friend and engages in self-criticism. The British film critic Tony Rayns points out that the film involves such issues as sexual politics and that “the film’s humor is aimed squarely at the heart of male egos and their pretensions” (Rayns and Meek 1980, F61).

The above characterizations of Chinese comedy films of the 1960s by Chinese film critics, despite their usefulness in defining the genre, shed little light on how the comic elements in these films work. Humor, among other comic elements, is first and foremost a process in human behavior, the whole dynamics of which involve not only such aspects of human communications as articulation and reception but also the specific social context within which it occurs. In other words, there is no such thing as universal humor. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to illuminate some of the component aspects of Chinese comedy, its structure of address, and the comic mechanisms involved by examining the various social, ideological, and institutional factors determinant in the production and the reception of the Chinese comic text. As the production and prosperity of comedy films in the People’s Republic are largely confined to periods that are also known for their intense internal struggles and conflicts, this discussion, despite the fact that it mainly concerns the formal aspects of Chinese comedy, is inevitably linked with politics. Emphasis, as can be expected, is placed on the conflicting ideological and political positions available in Chinese society in the early 1960s and their inscription in the text. The conclusion is that humor among other comic mechanisms in Chinese comedy films is historically, socially, and culturally specific. Disguised as a form of popular entertainment, it has its specific political function in a social formation in which maximum social and political conformity is required.

In China the study of comedy is often limited to the definition of the comic in film, while little attention is paid to the form and meaning of comedy as a whole. But if we seek to explore the specific workings of Chinese comic texts, we have to go further than just pondering over the question of the comic. Steve Neale, in “Psychoanalysis and Comedy,” points out that comedy in film is first of all a mode of signification. It is “a string, a sequence, a narration of jokes and joke-like structures (e.g., gags, comic segments)” and “the gags, jokes and joke-like segments which the narration inscribes are not ultimately separable from the narration itself. The narration transforms their status and meaning by acting as the agent of
their articulation and by providing the context of significance in relation to which they are read" (Neale 1981, 34).

The consideration of the comedy film as a mode of signification with its specific social function in a social formation inevitably leads us to a consideration of the specific social, historical, and institutional factors that define its distinctive formal aspects in the various stages of its development. It is more so in the case of Chinese comedy film. Cinema as a cultural institution has been under the tight control of the Communist Party and has functioned as a propaganda tool to disseminate the dominant ideology of the new society. But a unified, ideologically consistent cultural practice is a myth. Comedy film as a genre has been the site of continuous ideological struggle. So the question of articulation in Chinese comedy film is thus linked to the power relations in this ideological struggle.

As we have stated, comedy film in the People’s Republic first appeared in the first Hundred Flowers period and flourished in the second Hundred Flowers period. But it should be pointed out that although both periods are characterized by strong internal struggle and conflicts, these two periods were markedly different in terms of political and economic circumstances. As a result, comedy films of these two periods took quite different forms: the former assumed the form of social satire with corruption and bureaucracy as its explicit themes, while the latter presented itself as popular entertainment that eulogized the social system.

The first Hundred Flowers period was basically a period of open criticism of the dark side of socialism from the grass-roots level with encouragement from the highest authorities. By the end of 1955, the socialist transformation of industry and agriculture in China had been successfully completed. The whole nation was about to embark on a full-scale socialist construction. However, after several years of trial, the Soviet model, which the Chinese leadership pursued after 1949, had revealed many of its drawbacks. It was at this point that Mao Zedong put forward the slogan, “Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend,” in the hope that a democratic political atmosphere could encourage intellectuals outside the Party to criticize and expose these drawbacks that existed within the various social institutions. The film industry, governed by the strict demand that it serve the interests of the people by increasing popular support for the Party’s policies, produced in 1956 and 1957 a number of comedies such as *Before the New Director Arrives*, *The Man Careless of Details*, and *The Unfinished Comedy*. 
Ostensibly much of the satire is directed at such social phenomena as bureaucracy, corruption, and mismanagement. But the criticism has the unmistakable implication that the phenomena mentioned above are the very product of the social institutions and the social system itself. Take *Before the New Director Arrives* (*Xin juzhang daolai zhi qian*) for instance. It reveals through its comic technique of mistaken identity the emerging of a new social hierarchy. The new director, who arrives ahead of schedule in a workman’s clothes, is mistaken for a repairman, and he is thus implicated in his subordinates’ efforts to provide him as well as the subordinates with more privileges.

Discussing the effect of the satire in *Before the New Director Arrives*, Jay Leyda (1972, 220) points out:

> The unaccustomed deluge of satirical portraits in his film - bureaucrats, toadies, time-wasters, amateur art authorities . . . , big planners, and (perhaps worst of all) the large number of underlings habitually saying Yes to anything the boss wants - was too much for those people in the film and culture administrations who had sat for these portraits. In spite of Liu Pan’s [Lü Ban] softening touches, everything was spelled out, unmistakably: the rift between people at the top and the people who do the work; the cultivation of words as a substitute for work. This is as cruel a picture of bureaucracy as Eisenstein’s in *Old and New*, and the efforts to balance it with “positive” elements – modest good-hearted new director, conscientious young people, and a moral epilogue spoken directly to the audience (as at the end of the similarly dangerous satire, *Don Giovanni*) – do not remove the deeply embedded sting.

The humor in these films, usually of a highly intellectual nature, is done at the expense of the Party leadership, especially those cadres with poor family background and with little or no schooling. For instance, in the office-decorating scene in *Before the New Director Arrives*, the revolutionary cadre represented is so ignorant that he has no idea what a cold color means and decides to paint the office walls with lotus flowers and fish.

The potentially subversive nature of these films is indicated by Leyda (1972, 222), who notes that Lü was advised by his scriptwriter when making *The Unfinished Comedy* (*Wei wancheng de xiju*) “that in order to make satirical films he must begin with everyday situations, and by no means to touch the social system. Liu Pan followed this advice, but then felt confident enough to go beyond everyday situations. . . ."
The leadership was soon to discover that satire as an art form could easily endanger people’s belief in socialism. With the first Hundred Flowers period brought to an end in the summer of 1957, when the same authority that had initiated the movement launched the antirightist campaign, whose target was exactly those intellectuals who had aired criticisms, these comedies were immediately under criticism. According to Leyda (1972, 221–222), when Lü was attacked in the antirightist campaign, “it was his ‘mask of humor and his appeal to the superficial laughter of the audience’ that concealed his true antiparty and antisocialist ideology.”

The comedy films of the early 1960s, unlike those of the 1950s, were produced under quite different political and economic circumstances and took quite different forms. At the end of the 1950s China suddenly found herself in severe economic trouble. The Great Leap Forward movement initiated by Mao Zedong in 1958 to implement communism with political and ideological work failed. From 1959 onward China suffered from a succession of three years of crop failures. Mao Zedong was obliged to retire to let Liu Shaoqi take over. Under the new leadership, some modifications were made in the radical policies pursued by Mao. Thus a new period of deradicalization marked by the processes of decentralization, privatization, and the introduction of the market economy began. The new leadership saw economic development as a precondition for social change and stressed the importance of individual initiative and responsibility in economic development. In the film industry, there was a similar process of loosening up of official control and encouragement for the artists to develop their individual talents.

This readjustment of the Party’s policies concerning arts was in accordance with the general policies of deradicalization pursued by the Party conservatives headed by Liu Shaoqi, for whom the failures of Mao’s radical policies were not just associated with economic matters but also with the arts. The combination of “revolutionary realism” and “revolutionary romanticism” put forward and carried out during the Great Leap Forward had resulted in films of poor quality, narrow subjects, and lack of variety in style. Bill Brugger (1977, 231) reports:

There was also much debate at that time arising out of the issue of ‘socialist realism’ and ‘revolutionary romanticism’ in literature and art. In the old days of the Soviet model, considerable attention had been paid to stereo-
typed ‘socialist realism’, which in 1958 had been criticized by Kuo Mo-jo [Guo Moruo] ... who insisted that ‘socialist realism’ should be combined with ‘revolutionary romanticism.’ In 1961–2, however, intellectuals insisted that neither of these two models were wholly adequate and suggested experimentation with other artistic forms. In reality this often meant no experimentation at all but a return to more traditional forms and genres in Chinese art.

The shift in both the form and content of films from education to entertainment is indicated in a speech given at the national filmmakers’ conference in June 1961 by Xia Yan, who was in direct charge of film production in China:

The subject matter should not be limited to educating people to love the socialist motherland and Chairman Mao. People’s interests are varied. We should try very hard to satisfy them. We have to take into consideration the difference in people’s cultural backgrounds and tastes (Xia 1962, 5–17).

It was under the auspices of this conference that comedy films, which are considered a major form of popular entertainment, began to flourish. This return to the more traditional art forms was appropriately reflected in the fact that in 1961 and 1962 hundreds of traditional operas and plays were restaged and filmed, and the number of comedy films produced increased dramatically. However, like the first Hundred Flowers period, this second period did not last long either. Of the films made during this period, Leyda (1972, 310) writes:

Analysts of modern Chinese culture regard Chou En-lai’s [Zhou Enlai] speech to the film conference of June 1961 as the announcement of a year’s comparative relaxation in the arts, and not only in the film industry. It is in films, however, that this respite shows most clearly, though with the slowness of decision and manufacture the good films that seized the opportunity often appeared only after the respite had passed – and suffered hard knocks then.

The actual tightening up began in the latter part of 1962 at a Party conference when Mao Zedong, coming back from retirement, raised the issue of class struggle and the importance of political and ideological work again. The policies of deradicalization pursued by the Party conservatives were regarded as encouraging individualism in China and as a sign of the restoration of capitalism. According to Mao, the Party as a whole should
step up political and ideological work to combat individualism. Film, among other art forms, was considered an essential part of this political work. As a result, the Party’s policy concerning literature and arts changed again. By the end of 1962, the traditional plays and their film versions had been withdrawn from exhibition. Some of them were openly criticized as “poisonous weeds” that disseminated feudal and bourgeois ideologies. The Party conservatives who had openly encouraged the production of these art works were in retreat. But the conflict was not resolved. For the next decade, a fierce battle was fought by the two different lines of policies. Bill Brugger indicates the seriousness of the battle in his book, Contemporary China (1977, 229, 235):

In 1961–2 the old slogan of ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend’ was once more put forward. The ‘blooming and contending’ of the early 1960s was, however, very different from that of 1956–7. In the middle 1950s, it was quite clearly Mao Tse-tung who inspired the movement, seeking widespread criticism of the Soviet model throughout Chinese society. In 1961, however, the inspiration seemed to come from the Party conservatives who may have sought some kind of ‘liberalisation’ of science and art but who seemed to be concerned mainly with discrediting the Great Leap Forward. . . . In 1961–2, both the Great Leap Forward and Mao himself had been ridiculed by people in very senior positions within the Party. What Peng The-huai [Peng Dehuai] had tried to do very clumsily in 1959, others were trying to do with perhaps greater skill. There was a battle to be joined and, to wage it, Mao could only return to the ‘first front’. It was to be an incredible battle quite unlike anything yet seen. It was to last a full decade and in some ways still continues.

It is within this socioeconomic context that I examine Satisfied or Not (Manyi bu manyi), a comedy film produced in 1963, one year after the political situation had been reversed, to show how the conflicting political positions represented by the radicals and the conservatives respectively are inscribed in the text and how much of the humor in the film has to do with this conflict. The discussion is limited to a single text, but what is exemplified here can also be applied to other comedies made during the early 1960s. For instance, the change of leadership and the recurring motif of criticism and self-criticism in Li Shuangshuang can be seen as symptomatic of the combat and changes in power relations between the conservatives and the radicals in 1961. In fact, production of this film was halted
halfway through so that major changes could be made in the story to suit the changes in Party policies.

The story in *Satisfied or Not* takes place in a famous restaurant in Suzhou in South China. Yang Yousheng as Waiter No. 5 does not like the job of waiting on people. He is surly, slams the plates on the table, brings the wrong dishes, barks at the guests, and snarls at them if they show any displeasure. When criticized by both his customers and colleagues, he justifies himself by asking why he should debase himself by serving people in a restaurant when, in the People’s Republic, all men are freed from servitude. Both his teacher, Waiter No. 3, and colleagues try to make him see the point that in the new society all human relations are governed by mutual service based on equality rather than servitude, which is based on inequality. To regard waiting on people as a form of servitude is to subject oneself to the ideology of the old society. After this criticism, he promises to change his work attitude and to greet his customers with smiles. However, his forced smiles scare more customers out of the restaurant than ever before, and as a result he gets more complaints from the customers. His mother becomes worried about him and asks her neighbor, Uncle Ma, to introduce a girl friend to him in the hope that marriage will eventually put him on the right track. However, the girl Uncle Ma arranged for him to meet happens to be the customer he has most offended. In desperation, he tries to find another job in the countryside. During his adventure in the countryside, where, because of an accident, he is helped and served by the very people – bus driver, doctor, and nurses – whom he refuses to serve in his restaurant. To bring about his reformation, his colleagues in the restaurant use the method of “recollecting the past and contrasting it with present happiness” to make him realize the difference between the old and new societies and urge him to learn from Lei Feng, a soldier hero who devoted all his life to the service of the people. Meanwhile his teacher, Shen, Waiter No. 3, is elected the people’s representative for his good work. However, because Yang mistakenly puts on Shen’s work clothes, he is invited to give the report on work attitudes. This event makes him realize that waiting on people is also a noble profession and that in the new society everyone is equal. Before long, he is the friendliest and most helpful waiter in the restaurant.

The film, unlike other comedy films of the period such as *Better and Better (Jinshang tian hua)*, contains a great deal of moralizing. But it still retains the form of popular entertainment. Like other comedy films pro-
duced during the early 1960s that draw on the traditional art forms and values, it is derived from a comic play, called *huajixi*, originating in an area around Shanghai. The play is characterized by a combination of different art forms. The comic actors in *huajixi* not only imitate different regional dialects and accents, some of which are considered uneducated and therefore funny, but also other performers like singers, dancers, and storytellers. The mode of representation it assumes is basically a combination of story and spectacle.

As a result, in *Satisfied or Not*, a constant shift from the “once upon a time” of the fictive narrative to the “here and now” of the comic spectacle is created. This shift in the process of narration precipitates the shifting position of the spectator in the text. On the one hand, the narrative operates from an initial equilibrium of order through a temporary disorder to a new equilibrium of order. The final resolution, which introduces a new equilibrium, is created by mechanisms that “suture,” “bind,” and “contain” the spectator in the fiction. On the other hand, the comic spectacles foregrounded by the codes of performance and music, as well as many of the comic mechanisms the narrative contains, distance the spectators from the fiction. As we know, spectacles are closed units within the larger narrative. In these spectacles the spectator is awakened to the “here and now” of the performance and to the awareness that events of the narrative are fictional representations. Drawing an analogy between film and dream in his essay, “The Fiction Film and its Spectator,” Christian Metz (1982, 78) comments: “Certain nightmares wake one up (more or less), just as do certain excessively pleasurable dreams.” The comic spectacles can be regarded as excessively pleasurable moments that waken the spectator and allow his intellect to see parallels, ironies, and contradictions in both the events and the characters represented in the film. This is possible because the comic spectacle also coincides in the film with the moments of maximum spectator alertness. The major characteristics of the spectacle are the foregrounding of performance and the dramatization of the look. In *Satisfied or Not*, these comic spectacles not only offer themselves as entertainment that builds the desire and then represents the satisfaction of what they have triggered (that is, they are represented as the site of spectatorial pleasure) but also produce double meanings in the context of the narrative. This doubling effect is an essential element of humor in Chinese comedy as a whole. It can be explained by the phenomenon of “bisociation,” which Arthur Koestler (1964, 35) identifies as involving “perceiving of a situation
or idea . . . in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference.” A given situation is first perceived in one frame of reference, within which it makes one kind of sense, and then it is abruptly transferred to a second, incompatible frame of reference, within which it makes an entirely different kind of sense. Our intellect recognizes the sudden bisociation and comprehends it, but the suddenness catches our emotions unprepared, to which laughter becomes our natural response. It should also be noted that in *Satisfied or Not* the process of bisociation takes the form of a confrontation between two conflicting ideological discourses because a film’s view of human experience is more a function of its comic techniques than of the narrative that encloses them. The comic techniques employed in the film posit a series of contradictions in our perception of human relationships in Chinese society: difference versus sameness, individuality versus collectivity, and the like.

The film title, *Satisfied or Not*, is itself rather ambiguous. It can be read as a question addressed either to the customers in a restaurant as to the quality of the service rendered by the waiters (when they have worked out their ideological problems due to the emphasis put on them by Mao) or to the spectators in the cinema as to the quality of the film as a commodity that satisfies their need for entertainment. Although the film story confirms the former reading, the film ends with an unusual shot in which Waiter No. 5, after addressing the customers, turns to face the film audience directly and bids it goodbye as well. Here two different conceptions of film are posited: film as an educational discourse that tries to convert people versus film as entertainment that tries to conform to people’s desire for pleasure.

Contradictions are also implied by the different comic techniques employed. Coincidence and mistaken identity are the most frequently used comic techniques in Chinese comedy. Their frequent use has often raised objections from the critics, as they are highly conventional. But what makes them viable, at least in this film, is exactly their illustration of the contradictions inherent in the social representation of human relations in China: sameness versus difference. In *Satisfied or Not*, what plays the key role in implementing change in Yang is not so much the various discourses praising the altruistic hero Lei Feng as his “actual experience” in the countryside, where he is helped and served by the same people whom he refuses to serve. So the comic technique of coincidence becomes the most effective instrument of the ideology of collectivism. In the report
scene, what the comic technique of mistaken identity plays on is exactly this sameness, which is maintained at the expense of difference in needs, tastes, and interests. The comic in the report scene is created by people's confusion between Little Yang's Teacher (Waiter No. 3) and Little Yang the teacher (Waiter No. 5). The comic effect is achieved at the expense of the institutionalized discursive processes, which are used to convert people into the same type as exemplified by the altruistic soldier hero Lei Feng. It is this pressure of conformity to the ideal type that makes this often abused technique viable and fresh in this comedy. Some of the comic effects generated by the play on the difference in language can also be seen in this light. For instance, one of Yang's quarrels with the customers is the result of the refusal to recognize the difference in people's needs and tastes (as the Party radicals did during the Great Leap Forward in the form of the communist kitchen, where people were fed with the same food, or in the form of cinema-going, where people saw the same picture again and again).

FATTY CUSTOMER: You have brought me the wrong dish. What I ordered is the spare-rib noodles not pork noodles.

YANG: Isn't spare-rib pork?

FATTY CUSTOMER: Of course it is.

YANG: Then it is not the wrong dish. And you must eat it.

The disruption of the dominant discourse of the radicals on political and ideological work occurs mainly in those comic moments of the film. In fact, the tension between serious narrative and comic spectacles itself can be seen as the result of two conflicting ideological positions and discourses. Like the classic text, Satisfied or Not can also be identified as containing a hierarchy of discourses which establishes the "truth" of the story. The hierarchy works above all by means of a privileged discourse that not only effaces its own discourse but also subordinates all other discourses. In Satisfied or Not it mainly functions at the level of narration. As a social comedy, the film deals directly with the process of socialization in the People's Republic. The narrative is so organized that it posits the question of ideology as the most important issue in the process of socialization. This is hardly surprising. As Franz Schurmann correctly points out, what has held Chinese society together since 1949 is precisely ideology and organization. Ideology here is more than just a belief system that expresses
basic social values. It is also a system of institutionalized discourses whose main function is to support the whole social organization, which is a structure of differential roles requiring the ordered exercise of power.

The narrative in *Satisfied or Not* opens with a problem. A young waiter does not like his job. It then proceeds to resolve this problem. The final resolution is carried out by Yang’s total acceptance of his defined role within the social organization when he rejects individualism as a principal human value. It should be noted that individualism, which had been depicted negatively as identifying with persons who seek personal advancement, interest, or satisfaction with no concern for others or society as a whole, was temporarily rehabilitated during the period of deradicalization to support private enterprises on a self-employment basis. To combat the conservatives, Mao Zedong in 1962 reemphasized the important task of anti-individualism. The theme of collectivism exemplified by the fiction of an altruistic soldier hero named Lei Feng prevailed in literature and the arts, and the organization of the People’s Liberation Army, which this ideology supports, became the model organization for national emulation throughout the 1960s. The process of narration can be seen as an articulation of Mao’s position on the importance of political and ideological work in implementing social reform. The narrative shows that Yang’s conversion is due to the political and ideological work emphasized by Mao. Political and ideological work in China involves a set of institutionalized discourses. In talking about the relationship between ideology and behavior in the People’s Republic, Franz Schurmann (1966, 48) points out the discursive nature of political work: “If articulation and analysis are characteristics of everyday life, this applies even more so to the ‘Party life.’ Party life is mostly talk, discussion, group interaction, criticism and self-criticism.” Furthermore, any participation in these discursive processes should be accompanied by acting. Only when correct speech is accompanied by correct acting can an individual be considered having developed “correct behavior.”

As a social comedy whose aim is to reform individual transgression of acceptable social behavior through laughter, the narration in *Satisfied or Not* also works along these two lines: speech and acting. The political and ideological work as shown in the film consists of various institutionalized discursive processes such as group discussions, group meetings, the told memories of the elderly who suffered in the old society, fiction such as the story of the altruistic soldier hero Lei Feng, public speeches such as the
one given by his teacher, and lastly the news media. Some of the comic effect of the film is generated through the discrepancy between correct speech and incorrect acting. And this is conveyed by the codes of the camera shots as well as performance. It should be noted that the concept of acting in Chinese culture is both aesthetic and moral. Take the first scene of the film for instance. In this restaurant scene, the above-mentioned codes not only specify the range of performances in Chinese society but also the moral attitudes the spectator should adopt: The first shot introduces us to Little Yang’s Teacher, Waiter No. 3, who is marked by his graceful performance as a waiter. The camera first presents him in a medium shot in a high angle with him smiling to the viewer and then tracks as he moves among the tables and customers holding a big tray full of dishes with great ease. The shot ends when the old waiter is introduced. In the second shot, the old waiter with a fan in hand is noted for his graceful speech accompanied by no performance of duty. As he is in his eloquent speech about learning from the workers and peasants who dine at the restaurant, the camera pulls away from him and rises up high above him. It then introduces two other major characters. The whole sequence ends with a shot focusing on Little Yang’s work clothes hanging on the wall. He has neither graceful speech nor performance; he is absent without leave. The film then goes on to show how Little Yang tries to acquire the correct speech without really understanding it. The result is that both his speech and performance become mechanical and therefore laughable. Only when his “actual experience” in the countryside makes him really understand the correct speech does he start to talk and act gracefully. Although some of the comic effects of the film come from the discrepancy between speech and acting, the film itself is about more than correct behavior in the new society.

Despite the fact that a number of films produced under the auspices of the conservatives were withdrawn in 1962, in Satisfied or Not, the repressed traditional art forms these films represent return in the disguise of the comic spectacle, which foregrounds the spectatorial pleasure as well as “the disturbances of socially institutionalized discourses.” As such, they can be seen as moments of subversion representing the discourse of the Party conservatives.

For the purpose of illustration, let us examine two scenes that present themselves as comic spectacles: the garden scene in the middle of the film and the report scene at the end of the film. In the garden scene, both
Yang’s mother and Uncle Ma believe that sexuality lies at the core of his problem and marriage is a possible cure. Despite the fact that arranged marriage is a feudal practice and is totally repressed in the new society, the two contrive to manage it in a modified form. Yang’s mother will take her son to the garden, where Uncle Ma is going to introduce his niece to Yang. Though the spectatorial pleasure of the scene largely comes from its implicit sexual themes, it also has to do with the audience recognition of the disguised return of the repressed. In this instance, the repressed is the traditional values and their representation. Many of the conventions familiar to the Chinese audience of traditional operas are reintroduced in this scene, which begins with shots accompanied by folk music of the intricate design of the garden, the conventional setting for romantic comedy. The characters present in this scene represent two families: mother and son as one party and uncle and niece as the other. As an essential element in an arranged marriage, both the son and the niece are ignorant of the nature of their visit to the garden.

What is crucial to this scene is the introduction of the girl. The introduction sequence is organized on the axis of symmetry in shot arrangement, which foregrounds the look through the shot-reverse shot as well as point-of-view shot format. This arrangement is not unlike the textual mechanisms of a classical Hollywood film that produces visual pleasure by relegating the female to an object of male gaze and desire. In this sequence, what intensifies the spectatorial pleasure is the constant delay of the satisfaction of the desire by the masking effect the sequence produces. In the first shot, the three characters, Uncle Ma, Yang’s mother, and Yang, are looking in her direction. The reverse shot reveals a female figure walking down the corridor in the distance. The third shot reveals them looking again to find out who she is. However, in the reverse shot, her face is masked by her parasol. When her face is finally revealed, the masking effect is displaced onto the lookers. As soon as Yang recognizes the girl to be the one he has verbally assaulted in the restaurant, he picks up a newspaper and hides himself behind it. Meanwhile, this masking effect is reinforced by the displacements in language that stand between desire and its fulfillment. In the next shot, Uncle Ma greets his niece and gives an excuse for the occasion: “The reason for inviting you to the garden is that I am celebrating my birthday, and I would also like you to meet some of my neighbors.” Here what is totally repressed in the scene – sexuality – is signified by its verbal metonymy, such as birth (sex) and neighbor (lover).
Desire is built up by this displacement in language. When Uncle Ma leaves to order food, Yang's mother acts as the surrogate for the look. The sequence ends when his mother lifts the newspaper that Yang is holding. The disappearance of the mask signifies the disappearance of desire.

Pleasure in this scene also comes from the disruption of the institutionalized discursive processes. Newspaper reading was in the 1960s and 1970s the most mobilized form of public address in China. But in this sequence it is ridiculed. It shows what Yang really wants to read is not the articles in the paper but the girl's face, which he manages to read without being discovered by tearing a hole in the newspaper.

This disruption in the institutionalized discursive processes can be further exemplified by another scene toward the end of the film. As we know, a great part of the film is devoted to the conversion of Yang through different institutionalized discourses. And what is most decisive in his conversion is the public report. Prior to this scene, we have seen how Yang is educated by Teacher Shen's memories of his deceased father's sufferings in the old society, by the story of the altruistic soldier hero Lei Feng, and by the newspaper report that Shen has been elected the people's representative for his good work. In the report scene, it is these institutionalized discursive processes, especially the public talk, that is held up to ridicule. The supposed addressee is mistakenly presented as the addressee and the real addressee as the addressee. As a result, the normally boring moralization is replaced by a lively, humorous (recognized as such by the inscribed laughter in the hall) talk, which is represented in the film as a speechless speech. Here again the disruption is present as the unrepresentable, as the unsayable, or as the nonsense that his teacher is afraid that he might talk. When his teacher arrives on the scene, he finds Yang in eloquent speech on his work attitude. But what he talks about refers the audience to a previous scene where what is ridiculed is exactly this talk about attitudes. In that scene, he goes to his sister's tea farm and talks with the leader about his willingness to work there. To his surprise, he is warmly welcomed by the leader. When he promises that he will do the job well, he learns that he is supposed to serve at the tea workers' canteen. He leaves the leader in a hurry on a bike and hits a group of geese on the way back. When criticized by the geese-tender, he exclaims: "I didn't realize that I even have an attitude problem with the geese." The report scene ends rather abruptly when Shen, the invited speaker, steps on the stage and starts to talk.

In both scenes, humor comes from the double meaning of the text. And
this double meaning is directly linked to the two different ideological positions held by the radicals and conservatives respectively. Both the garden scene and the report scene were articulated as part of Yang's "actual experience" in real life to drive home the point of mutual service in socialist society. However, this manifest content also functions as a cover under which the disruption of the dominant discourse occurs.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the use to which the process of narration in the comedy film Satisfied or Not is put resembles what Freud (1960, 131) terms the dream-work and, to a certain extent, the joke-work. In Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud notes: "The psychogenesis of jokes has taught us that the pleasure in a joke is derived from play with words or from the liberation of nonsense, and that the meaning of the joke is merely intended to protect that pleasure from being done away with by criticism." Likewise, the comic spectacles in Satisfied or Not create pleasure, and through their form, they are protected from criticism. And the pleasure the comic spectacles contain comes from the audience's recognition of the disguised return of the repressed and the disruption of the institutionalized discursive processes. It seems that the same impulse that first found expression in the satirical comedies of the mid-1950s, such as Before the New Director Arrives, also lies behind these comic spectacles in Satisfied or Not. And the Party radicals sensed that the battle with the conservatives could not be won until they had banned all comedies, as they did during the cultural revolution, a fact that reinforces the argument that the Chinese comedy is intimately linked with politics.

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As we well know, American comedy reflects a multitude of sensibilities: the humanity and grace of Charlie Chaplin, the somber fortitude of Buster Keaton, the urban sophistication of Ernst Lubitsch, and the zany anarchism of the Marx Brothers. Each made a mark on American film comedy. I would like to focus on the contribution of two contemporary comedians—Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, who came to dominate American film comedy during the 1970s—and to demonstrate how their works reflect an obsession with death (and allied themes such as disease, oppression, suffering, and persecution and psychic responses such as paranoia, hypochondria, phobic behavior, and anxiety).

In his article, “Humor With a Mortal Sting,” Conrad Knickerbocker (1964, 3) makes a distinction between white humorists and black humorists. “‘White’ humorists . . . are as harmless as Lucille Ball or the Flintstones. They chuckle at our foibles, but when the chips are down, they support the familiar comforts of the status quo. Their adherents are many, for everyone agrees that a good laugh—moderate of course—is a wonderful tonic in this careworn world of ours.” He goes on to describe black humor as “bitter, perverse, sadistic and sick . . . black in its pessimism, its refusal of compromise and its mortal sting.” Audiences find in black humor “no tonic, but the gall of truth.” Clearly the works of Woody Allen and especially Mel Brooks are cinematic equivalents to the Black literary humorists of the 1960s as described by Knickerbocker.

I suppose no one who has studied comedy can avoid a reference to Freud’s Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious; therefore, I will be brief. The relevant ideas here are few. All human beings repress. Civilization is built on such repression. However, too much repression leads to
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severe neurosis or healthy psychosis. The ideal is to find a balance, to become a healthy neurotic. In positing an unconscious, Freud specified various signs which not only pointed to the reality of an unconscious, but which also provided access to this realm. Among these are dreams, word slippages, inadvertent actions, and jokes. In the last chapter of his book on jokes, Freud refers to the defensive nature of joke telling. He writes (Freud 1961, 233), “Defensive processes are the psychical correlative of the flight reflex and perform the task of preventing the generation of unpleasure from internal sources.” That is, jokes are one way in which we protect ourselves from the painful knowledge (unpleasure) of death, for as Freud wrote elsewhere, the primary repression is death, not sex (La- planche and Pontalis 1973).

Before moving on to film, I would also like to refer to another text, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s On Death and Dying (1969), which deals with the emotional stages of dying experienced by terminally ill patients. She sets them out as follows: (1) denial and isolation, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression, and (5) acceptance. I will refer to these stages later in the discussion of Hannah and Her Sisters.

The title of this article, “You Could Die Laughing: Jewish Humor and Film,” refers not simply to the relationship between humor and death, but also to the impact of a Jewish sensibility. Writing on this issue, Stephen J. Whitfield (1983, 167) stated, “No student of American popular culture gets extra points for observing that, for most of the twentieth century, Jews have contributed disproportionately to the national treasury of humor. They have been ubiquitous, and conspicuous, and too humorous to mention.” Elsewhere, however, he does name names, going from A to Z (Whitfield 1984, 115-116). Included in this list are ninety-eight funny men and women. There is no question of the fact of American Jewish humor. The question is what does it mean and how did it change the face of American comedy, more specifically, American film comedy.

During the silent period in America, few Jewish comedians emerged. There are some exceptions like Larry Semon (whose comic persona was not Jewish) and minor clowns like George Sidney, Max Davidson, and Sammy Cohen, but the giants of the silent screen, Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and Langdon, arose from other traditions. During this period, Jewish comedians were making their contributions on Broadway, in vaudeville, or in the Borscht Belt.

With the coming of sound, this changed as Jewish comics crossed the
country from east to west, bringing with them their verbal dexterity — comic accents, quick word play, and sarcastic wit. To avoid a long list of names, the Marx Brothers represent the best of this tradition. Poking fun at the institutions often held nearest and dearest to many Americans, the Marx Brothers, products of an immigrant society, saw America from the position of an outsider, the quintessential stance of the Jew in almost every culture. Still, in none of their films did the quartet appear as Jews, even if viewers as far away as Podunk, Iowa, might have known the truth. The same can be said for Jewish comedians like Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, and Jerry Lewis, whose comic personas were never ethnic.

It was only during the 1960s, after the reemergence of ethnicity and after several decades of television stand-up comics like Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, and Carl Reiner that film audiences were prepped to receive the comic sensibilities of Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, who thrust Jewish culture onto center screen.

Like their predecessors, Allen and Brooks (both of whom wrote for the television stars) often deal with difference, especially religious and racial difference — difference between insiders and outsiders, those who belong and those who don’t. As descendants of a long line of men and women with a history of persecution in alien communities throughout the world, they are almost genetically aware of the precarious position of those who live on the margins of society — thus Allen’s constant anxiety and depression and his desire to belong; thus Brooks’s manic behavior and fantasies of both destroying the monsters of authority and of assuming a charmed position in a Gentile world.

As outsiders, both perceive the world ironically, seeing what others cannot or will not see, most specifically our vulnerability in a world so preoccupied by war and destruction. For both men, Auschwitz and the Holocaust are realities that do not fade with time. These realities are worked through in a personal confrontation with death which appears in the works of both men.

As Allen has stated in an interview (Rich 1977, 76), “As Camus wrote, it’s not only that he dies or that man dies, but that you struggle to do a work of art that will last and then realize that the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time. Until those issues are resolved within each person — religiously or psychologically or existentially — the social and political issues will never be resolved, except in a slapdash way.”

In many films, Allen treats the subject of death casually, with comic
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one-liners or visual jokes. A typical example is the separation scene in Annie Hall, where Annie, finding a copy of Ernest Becker’s The Denial of Death, quite appropriately, puts it in Alvy’s box. Although the book has not appeared before, we smile because we know from previous action and from previous Allen films that anything related to death and dying must belong to him. The joke continues a few shots later when Alvy, discovering the book, puts it back in Annie’s pile unobserved. Our smile broadens now because implied in this action is the understanding of how important the subject is to Alvy/Allen and of his obsessive need to be sure everyone, including Annie, grapples with these issues. More on Becker later.

Two works that deal with death as a central theme are the comedy, Love and Death (1975) and the drama, Interiors (1978). I will not stop to discuss these works, but rather move to his latest film, Hannah and Her Sisters, which seems in many ways to be a paradigm for Becker’s book.

In Hannah and Her Sisters, the confrontation with death becomes a central issue, constituting the entire subplot. Of interest is the fact that as Allen structures the work, the principal narrative dealing with the shifting liaisons between the romantic couples (another Midsummer Night’s Dream) is treated with bittersweet seriousness, while the death theme is treated comically.

We enter in medius res, while Hannah (Mia Farrow) and her family celebrate a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. We do not even meet Mickey Saks (played by Allen) until the next scene, which is entitled “The Hypochondriac,” a communiqué to the audience from director/author Woody Allen, which is by way of introduction and evaluation.

The announcement of hypochondria is the first indication of the theme. As defined in the Webster’s dictionary, hypochondria is “a morbid depression of mind about one’s health, with conjuring up of imaginary ailments.” Oddly it expresses the notions of fear of bodily disintegration, as well as the contradictory self-fulfilling prophecy. Here is one expression of subconscious anxiety bubbling up from below to make itself manifest in a sensual perception of pain – in Mickey’s case, dizziness and loss of hearing.

The anxiety soon becomes more focused. The doctor recommends doing some tests. It could, after all, be a brain tumor. The next two sections follow other characters, serving among other things to keep us in suspense about Mickey’s diagnosis. We come back to his problems in sec-
tion four, entitled “The Anxiety of the Man in the Booth” (a reference to Robert Shaw’s play about a Nazi, or seeming Nazi, on trial for his life). Mickey is told that there is a gray area and the doctor wants to do a cat scan, reaffirming Mickey’s worst fears. He tells himself not to panic and immediately has an anxiety attack. His next move is to make a deal with God (Kübler-Ross’s third stage of coming to terms with death – bargaining). Part of the comedy or pathos results from Mickey’s claim not to believe in God. Nonetheless, he will try to strike a deal.

After an intervening episode, we return to Mickey in a section titled “The Abyss,” calling to mind the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, especially his Fear and Trembling (Kierkegaard 1954). Next we are treated to a fantasy interlude in which Mickey envisions the doctor’s fatal words; he is relieved to find that it is merely a slight hearing loss in one ear. He leaves the hospital jubilant, but not for long. As he soon realizes, if he is not to die now, still he is to die. Like all of us, he is a terminal being. It is at this moment that Hannah turns into a work dominated by the shadow of Kierkegaard and Becker’s The Denial of Death (1973).

“The whole order of things fills me with a sense of anguish.” Thus wrote Kierkegaard in his journal (12 May 1839). The “whole order of things” refers most specifically to an order which leads inexorably to death and perhaps nothingness and reflects Mickey’s mental state.

As a precursor and grandfather figure of the post-World War II existen­tialists, Kierkegaard grappled with the impact that the knowledge of one’s death has on one’s life. For him, this knowledge led to dread and anxiety. Coming to terms with this final terror became the major struggle of one’s existence. As Kierkegaard pointed out, most of us live in a state of half-obscurity, of “shutupness,” which blocks our consciousness of our ultimate demise. Yet despite the pain, he believed that we must each come to terms with this and become “authentic men” (and women).

This dilemma is also the central concern of Ernest Becker’s The Denial of Death. Drawing upon the writings of Kierkegaard, R. D. Laing, and Norman O. Brown, Becker lays out the strategies that individuals use to avoid the anxiety already identified by Kierkegaard. Becker lists the ways in which individuals try to transcend the knowledge of death by attempting to control their lives through various manners of what he calls hero­ism, by creating various forms of immortality, by investing others with a sacred quality through love, or by belief in a religious system that offers assurance of a life beyond death. He also points out that one can become
depressively psychotic from too much concern about one’s death and the present state of one’s body, what Kierkegaard called “too much necessity.”

However, awareness does lead to a search for alternatives, a balance between our awareness and our ability to get on with our lives, a healthy neurosis, or perhaps faith. Although we can never fully banish anxiety, we can use it as a well spring from which to draw strength and renewal. Becker quotes Otto Rank, who avers that the neurotic is the finder of truth. He points out that all of the traditional ideologies that once disguised or distracted us from coming to terms with our own death, have, in modern times, fallen away. Yet we go on trying to create the “vital lie,” because we don’t want to admit that we do not really have control of our lives.

I have digressed here not because these ideas are new, but because they are central to the film comedy of both Woody Allen and Mel Brooks. Allen has acknowledged the issues in his writings, interviews, and films. As he confessed to Yvonne Baby (1979, 14) in an interview for The Guardian, “Maturity has borne out my childhood. I’d always thought death was the sole driving force: I mean that our effort to avoid it is the only thing which gives impetus to our existence.” In a more Jewish context, Allen has also said, “Life is a concentration camp. You’re stuck here, and there’s no way out, and you can only rage impotently against your persecutors” (Rich 1977, 75).

Brooks has also talked about various forms of anxiety and fear, although never in such an intellectual manner. Rather he prefers to hide behind his comic mask. Yet his film work, like that of Allen, is imbued with a sense of angst as described by Kierkegaard. It is my contention that both Allen and Brooks use comedy as a strategy for both avoiding the ultimate truth and as a means of coming to terms with this knowledge. Now to return to Hannah and Her Sisters.

Mickey returns to his television studio to inform his assistant that “We’re all hanging by a thread.” He realizes that he has repressed this knowledge up to the present and that now he can no longer go on deluding himself, disguising the truth. So he quits his job and sets out on a quest to find the answer to life (and death). As Kierkegaard has noted, anxiety and neurosis lead to truth. The doctor’s words have become a stay of execution. This reprieve has led to despair – the sickness unto death.

The next section begins with a quotation from Tolstoy, “The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless.” As Becker
has pointed out, the older verities no longer suffice in the modern era. Thus Mickey discounts the inherited wisdom of Socrates, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche. Hope upon hope, Mickey turns to other religions, especially Catholicism, whose belief in the afterlife affords meaning to this world and soothes the pain of dying, unlike Judaism, which focuses on the here and now, despite Orthodox belief in an afterworld. As Mickey’s father says, “When you’re death, You’re dead.”

Unfortunately Catholicism cannot provide the proof Mickey is looking for, so he moves on to Hare Krishna, a philosophy that holds out the hope of reincarnation, another denial of death. Both Catholicism and Hare Krishna thus have created structures to transcend the meaninglessness of death and its finality. The Krishna to whom Mickey comes with questions goes right to the heart of the matter, asking Mickey, “Are you afraid to die?” Mickey responds, “Yes; I’m Jewish . . . sure.” His religion has failed him, providing insufficient delusions, disguises, supports.

Finally, Mickey hits bottom, having found no God he can believe in. Loading a gun, he sets about to commit suicide, only to realize that he can be no surer of God’s absence than of his presence. At this timely moment the gun goes off, missing Mickey but shaking him back into life. Wandering the streets of New York, he comes upon a movie theater. Taking a seat inside, he is treated to a comic scene from the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup*. Little by little, the anxiety of the last year falls away; joy is restored, finally laughter. Mickey concludes, “What if the worse? You only go around once. Maybe this is the best we have.” So at last, he has come to accept death in Kübler-Ross’s terms. He has become an authentic man in Kierkegaard’s view. And how is this achieved? Not through religion or philosophy, but through art, specifically comedy. Perhaps it is stretching too far to say that he has found God, and God is a comedian, but certainly one cannot avoid the implication that comedy gives meaning to life, if not all the answers. Certainly for Allen it is not a form of escape, but rather the way in which he confronts the big questions and the means whereby he finds some of the answers.

The story picks up one year later. Like a Shakespearean comedy, the characters have all been restored to their proper order. To our surprise, Mickey has now married Holly (Hannah’s sister), and she is pregnant. Mickey is thus not only restored to healthy neurosis, but he has transcended death with love and the creation of new life – a very Jewish response – L’Chaim.
In a profile written by Kenneth Tynan for the *New Yorker* in 1978, Tynan tells how Maximillian Kaminsky, Mel Brooks’s father, died suddenly of a kidney disease in 1926 when Mel was two and a half years old. Brooks learned early that death is ever-present and real. As he relates it, during the Depression he came home to find the corpse of a woman who had jumped from the roof, lying under a sheet in front of his building. Mistakenly he thought it was his mother, and although this proved not to be the case, the initial trauma remained embedded in his psyche.

Tynan (1978, 66) concludes, “To be Jewish, Brooklyn-born, fatherless, impoverished, and below average stature – no more classic recipe could be imagined for an American comedian. Or, one might suppose, for an American suicide.”

All of these factors have played a part in Brooks’s films. His movies are peopled with threatening authority figures, often Nazis, as well as dangerous and anxiety-producing situations. In his comic world, loss of life and limb is always imminent. However, to ward off the evil spirits, Brooks, the author/director, creator, and ultimately the controller, is able to defeat the villains by making them ridiculous and comic. By raising the ghost and annihilating him, he compulsively confronts and overcomes his vulnerability and the ultimate threat – death.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Inquisition scene of *History of the World, Part I*, released in 1981. Here Brooks takes up the subject of torture and death and turns it into a musical comedy. Received as outrageous, courageous, and offensive, Brooks, nonetheless, treats an uncomfortable topic, focusing on the specific situation of his own Jewishness, the cause of death in fifteenth-century Spain and in twentieth-century Europe.

It seems to me that in depicting the Inquisition, Brooks is also commenting upon the more recent Jewish tragedy, an event that makes almost every Jew think about his or her destiny. This reality, inescapably present, reminds survivors that but for luck or the fortune of paternal immigration, the camps would have been their final resting place.

The Inquisition scene opens amid Gregorian chants, the sound of the whip, groans of victims, and Orson Welles’s resonant voice explaining the fate of heretics and nonbelievers, all of whom are at the mercy of “the most fearful specter to ever sit in judgment over good and evil” – Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor. And who does this awesome figure turn out to be? None other than Brooks himself. In a wonderful example of wish fulfillment, Brooks has turned the tables, become the victimizer rather
than the victim, turning tragedy into comedy, and deflecting the trauma, anxiety, and fear of death.

Brooks’s first number deals with his mission to convert the Jews, their religion being the cause of their persecution. He sings, “It’s better to lose your skull cap than your skull,” a bit of gallows humor. The song ends with the lines, “We know you’re wishing that we’d go away. But the Inquisition is here to stay,” encouraging a contemporary interpretation.

The next song, sung by two Orthodox Jewish prisoners in shackles, mixes pain, obscenity, and ethnic humor in a manner intended to make many people flinch.²

The number moves on to instances of Torquemada/Brooks inflicting pain on his Jewish victims – hitting human knees with hammers as if playing a xylophone, using bald heads like tom-toms, pushing prisoners into spiked boxes, and turning men on the rack into human slot machines. Why is this funny? Why do people laugh? Obviously the incongruity – the clever conceit – the cartoonish nature which leads us to conclude, “It’s only a movie.”

Still, with all the torture and oppression, the Jews do not convert, so Torquemada shifts to another tack. He will seduce them with women. We never know for sure if this works, but the scene ends as a large silver menorah supporting seven women à la Busby Berkeley rises from the water and Brooks shakes hands with the unsmiling Hassids. We assume they have been won over. The scene concludes with Torquemada singing, “So you’d better change your point of view cause the Inquisition is here to stay.”

What are we to make of all this? Is Brooks proselytizing for Christian conversion? I doubt it. Who is he speaking to anyway? Facing the camera, he addresses the audience, in the main a Christian body. The ending, to my mind, is ambiguous. However, one possible interpretation is that for Brooks the Inquisition with capital letters is death itself, the recognition of which no one will escape. If we accept this premise, and I realize it is a leap of faith, then “changing one’s point of view” is not forsaking Judaism, but an awakening, a coming to terms with death. However one wants to deal with the scene, it remains uncomfortable. Whether we laugh or refuse laughter, it is a confrontation with death and dying normally not a fit subject for comedy, but one Jewish comics seem unable to avoid.

In summing up, it seems to me that Allen and Brooks represent two responses to the same problem, namely, death. Allen, more introverted,
uses a form of self-deprecation to make his point, exposing his fears and neuroses, with which many viewers can identify. His message, if one can call it a message, has remained rather consistent over the last ten years. *Annie Hall*, released in 1977, opened with two jokes. In one, Allen told the story of the guest who complained about how terrible the food was at her Catskills hotel, ending with the comment, “And in such small portions.” Allen muses, “Life is like that: full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness and it’s all over much too quickly.” At film’s end, Allen tells another story. This time about a man who reveals to a psychiatrist that his brother thinks he’s a chicken. When the psychiatrist asks why he doesn’t turn his brother in, the man replies, “I would, but I need the eggs.” In short, despite the deal we’ve been handed, we have to make the best of it and keep trucking. Such is the Jewish sense of fatal optimism. Alvy has lost Annie and has opted to deal with his pain by turning their romance into art: first the play within the film, second *Annie Hall*, the film we are now watching. Comic art thus becomes one solution for Allen. The narrative structure exactly parallels the movement in *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

Brooks, on the other hand, extroverted in the extreme, deals with his fears by turning aggression against others. We seldom experience any personal anxiety in his films, but his manic behavior seems to mask the anxiety that lies just beneath the surface. As Brooks (1975, 68) has revealed,

> If you’re alive, you got to flap your arms and legs, you got to jump around a lot, you got to make a lot of noise, because life is the very opposite of death. And therefore, as I see it, if you’re quiet, you’re not living. I mean, you’re just slowly drifting into death. So you’ve got to be noisy, or at least your thoughts should be noisy and colorful and lively. My liveliness is based on an incredible fear of death. . . . Most people are afraid of death, but I really hate it! My humor is a scream and a protest against goodbye.

Both men are responding to the limitations of and to the special burden of being Jewish in the modern world.

Why have the works of these two men found such a wide audience, an audience that by and large is not Jewish and that in many respects can only respond to the films as an outsider who has been let in on the jokes. Allen provides one possible answer. In a recent translation of an extended essay by the French critic Robert Benayoun (1985, 135), Benayoun quotes Allen as follows: “You don’t have to be Jewish to be traumatized, but it
helps,” thus both affirming and denying the special relationship between Jews and neurotic anxiety.

Perhaps one of the best explanations has come from Maurice Yacowar (1979, 212), in his book on Allen. Summarizing Allen’s contribution to American culture, he concludes, “For like Kafka, Allen makes Jews of us all. What he calls, ‘the urban Jewish mentality . . . of being racked with guilt and suffering, of feeling one step ahead of trouble and anxiety’ is no longer limited to the Jews.” For better or for worse, Jewish comics are making us confront these issues and encouraging us to laugh about them. But as always, for the privilege of laughing, we are going to have to pay the price; we are going to have to think about the “big question.”

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Notes and References


2. I’m sittin flickin chickens
   And I’m looking through the pickins
   And suddenly these goys break down my balls
   I didn’t even know them
   And they grab me by the scrotum
   And they started playing ping-pong with my balls
   Oy the agony! Oy the shame!
   To make my privates public for a game.

3. As summarized by Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), “The death instincts are to begin with directed inwards and tend towards self-destruction (Allen), but they are subsequently turned towards the outside world in the form of the aggressive or destructive instinct” (Brooks).

Baby, Yvonne

Becker, Ernest
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Benayoun, Robert

Brooks, Mel

Freud, Sigmund

Kierkegaard, Soren

Knickerbocker, Conrad

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth

Laplanche, J., and J.-B. Pontalis

Rich, Frank

Tynan, Kenneth

Whitfield, Stephen J.


Yacowar, Maurice
Raj Kapoor and the Indianization of Charlie Chaplin

Malti Sahai

That Charlie Chaplin is the greatest comedian in cinema is a statement that few would contest. It is a measure of his artistry that he has become the yardstick by which to evaluate other screen comedians. He was popular among all classes and influenced the art not only of later comedians but also of such distinguished film directors as De Sica and Fellini, such playwrights as Brecht, such mimes as Marceau. Chaplin was immensely popular in the United States as well as in England, in Japan as well as in China, in India as well as in Southeast Asia. In short, Chaplin became a phenomenon unparalleled in international cinema.

His unprecedented popularity is attributable to a number of unusual characteristics that his films possessed. Brilliant use of pantomime, focus on the common, average man, the challenging of authority, and the portrayal of men of rural origin struggling against the hostile forces of the city are but a few of them. Therefore, at one level it could be said that Charlie Chaplin’s comedies displayed a magnetic universalism. However, one must also bear in mind that Chaplin’s comedies arose out of a distinctive cultural discourse in Western society. The carefree years preceding World War I, the still lingering influence of Victorian morality, the arrival of immigrants from Europe in the opening decades of the present century, the First World War and its impact on society and consciousness, the “boom” years and “bust” years, the increasing influence of technology, and the rise of dictatorial regimes all formed a part of that cultural discourse (Gifford 1974). Hence, one can justifiably say that in Chaplin’s comedies there is an interesting interplay between universalism and culture-specificity, one giving definition to the other.

The objective of this paper is to illustrate how Raj Kapoor – one of the
most popular actors and directors of India – sought to draw on Chaplin-esque comedy and in so doing capitalized on the universalistic elements while Indianizing the culture-specific ones. The Indianization of Charlie Chaplin by Raj Kapoor forms an important moment in Indian film history; it is also a phenomenon of considerable theatrical interest.

Raj Kapoor is by no means Charlie Chaplin’s equal in terms of conscious art and serious purpose. Chaplin was an innovative actor and trailblazing director who garnered the highest plaudits of film theorists and serious scholars of cinema the world over. Raj Kapoor, on the other hand, has been severely criticized by many of the leading film critics of India for being meretriciously sentimental and excessively melodramatic. Raj Kapoor himself, on more than one occasion, has publicly stated that his intention has been to make films that would go down well with the masses. In a word, Raj Kapoor does not aim to be a Satyajit Ray. However, it needs to be stated that both Chaplin and Kapoor achieved phenomenal popularity, the former as possibly the greatest comedian in international cinema and the latter as a sensation among popular audiences not only in South Asia but also in Southeast Asia, East Africa, the Caribbean, and Soviet Russia. The initial impetus for this exercise in comparison grew out of this shared popularity and not out of a perceived parity of achieved art.

Raj Kapoor’s cinema and Chaplin’s comedy are united by the latter’s immortal creation, the tramp. The tramp is central to an understanding of the art and the philosophy of life of both men; he provided them with a character to whom audiences could relate spontaneously. Commenting on the image of the tramp, whom Roger Manvell (1974, 29) described as “probably the most universally recognized comic character the world has ever known,” Chaplin (1922, 8) said:

One of the happy consequences of electing myself to this post of the average man is that the public has unconsciously confirmed me as a kind of unofficial representative. The average man naturally finds great delight in seeing himself on screen. Dashing and romantic heroes may provide him with a momentary thrill, but they sooner or later fill his soul with despair. Their ways are far from his ways. He will never come vaulting tempestuously into romantic situations dressed immaculately in evening clothes, silencing men with a proud glance while fair women almost swoon at the gallant spectacle he makes . . . then he spots me shuffling along in my baffled and aimless manner, and a spark of hope rekindles in him. He begins to straighten up
and take heart. Here is a man like himself, only more pathetic and miserable with ludicrously impossible clothes, in every sense a social misfit and failure, at whom it is impossible to look without laughter and pity. And yet this impossible person without the build, the air, or any of the usual equipment of the hero seems through sheer blundering and circumstances to get on very well indeed. . . . It is a gratifying picture of the average man coming at last into his own.

It is interesting to observe that when Raj Kapoor was asked what made him give up his popular romantic image in favor of the deglamorized tramp, his reply bore an uncanny resemblance to the sentiments expressed by Chaplin.

Because it had a greater identity with the common man. The element of hero worship is totally alien to the kind of sense of belonging I aspire to. Everybody can’t be a Don Juan. When they see me in this image, they say: This man is like us. That sense of identification has greater influence and acceptance and belonging. I found that the image helped in my work and thinking. India has a vast population of subjugated common men. In [Shri] 420 there is an argument over my right to sleep on a footpath. I say, this belongs to the Sarkar, who is both your revered guardian and mine.

When I tell him my name, he says to the Kelewali, “Listen I told you the poor man’s ‘Raj’ will come some day.” Sentences like this greatly appealed to the people.

These concepts grew within me and made me play the deglamorized roles. People accepted it beautifully. They belong to me and I belong to them. I was one of them. If I was happy they were happy, if I was unhappy they were unhappy. . . . It was that kind of a relationship that I established with my audience (interview with Raj Kapoor).

This relationship was needed in a country like India with its distinctions and disparities.

Balzac has characterized Chaplin as a “true personality of the screen,” that is, one of those whose heavy viewer identification is a product of the fact that the “old acquaintance” turns up in each new film. Raj Kapoor, too, is a “true personality of the screen.” He says:

I created an appreciation for Raj Kapoor’s films by being the common man and dealing with the problems of the majority of the people. . . . I try to communicate with them in the simplest manner possible. This has been my yardstick (interview with Raj Kapoor).
Comedy, like all other forms of artistic communication, draws its sustenance from, reflects, and shapes the society that it inhabits. Hence, one can best understand the meaning systems and structures of signification of Chaplin’s comedy only in relation to the society that gave rise to and encouraged it. The tramp was born at a time when the business ethic reigned supreme. It was the time of Calvin Coolidge and Henry Ford, a time that gave rise to such sentiments as “the business of America is business” and “the man who builds a factory builds a temple.” While business flourished, there was much resentment among the downtrodden and the underprivileged, whose living conditions were rapidly declining. Charlie Chaplin’s films sought to give creative expression to this conflict.

Raj Kapoor’s tramp, usually named Raj or Raju, much in the manner of Charlie Chaplin’s Charlie, was created in the middle of the period generally referred to as the Nehru years, 1945–1965 (Edwardes 1970). The tramp was clearly there in Awaara (1951), Shri 420 (1955), Jagte Raho (1956), and Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai (1960). Traces of him are discernible in Sangam (1969) as well. The Nehru years witnessed the welling up of postindependence optimism as well as its ebbing away. It was Nehru’s vision to create a modern India that combined the traditional values of the land with the spirit of modern science, the essence of tradition and modernity. Indeed, taken as a whole, Raj Kapoor’s oeuvre constitutes a harmonizing of the two discourses of tradition and modernity.

Chaplin’s tramp, from its very inception, represented an ongoing conflict with the society that stood in the way of the realization of his ambitions. Raj Kapoor’s tramp (Raju) borrowed certain features (although not identical) from Chaplin’s: the gait, the hat, the cane, the ill-fitting clothes and shoes, all creating a sense of incongruity. He also derived from Chaplin the images of the downtrodden, the vagabond, presenting a foil to the rich and the comfortable (Bhatt 1985). An outstanding feature of Charlie Chaplin’s films is the fusion of comedy and pathos in a way that would captivate the audience. Raj Kapoor adopted this method, which he believed held a greater fascination for his audiences than pure comedy. The image Kapoor developed is that of a comic tramp who succeeds in the end in overcoming the overwhelming odds against him. This image defines Raj Kapoor’s vision of himself and society as well as the leading edge of his art. Like Charlie, Raju is an outsider, a deracinated man who is perpetually in search of the warmth of belongingness; he is the little man within all of us, being pushed and pulled by forces larger and stronger.
than we can muster. Victimized and misunderstood, he must live as best he can; in this effort, he becomes an emblem of the underprivileged in India’s teeming cities, especially in the postpartition era. These shared features plus the occasional use of pantomime few characters had used up until then exemplify some of the ways in which Raj Kapoor drew on Charlie Chaplin.

It must be noted, however, that despite these affinities, there are considerable differences between the two tramps; these differences illustrate the way in which Chaplin’s tramp was Indianized by Kapoor. One interesting difference between the two tramps is that while Raju, given a chance, would like to live a conformist life, Chaplin’s tramp is never comfortable with conformity. Raju is there because fate and society have conspired to put him there; Charlie is there, we suspect, because a part of him likes being there. Another difference is that despite his appearance – small hat, large shoes, baggy pants – Charlie has about him a self-confidence and also a latent gentility that has the effect of making him superior to the contexts and persons with which he has to contend; his dexterity serves to reinforce this impression. Raj Kapoor’s Raju, on the other hand, seems to metamorphose with each film into an ever simpler character. In Awaara, he is a shrewd manipulator with a certain measure of sexual appeal which Chaplin’s alter ego lacks. Raj Kapoor gradually sloughed off this element with the intention of generating closer identification with the people. In Shri 420, Raju wears the same clothes and sings a song celebrating this, but he is certainly not the slick operator that we saw in Awaara. In these films, Raj Kapoor had been following Charlie Chaplin’s tramp fairly closely, but in Jagte Raho, the tramp is totally Indianized: he wears a dhoti and has a naive peasant’s rustic look about him. The perceptions of the character are also simplified. He is a naively innocent man from the village who is being pushed and shoved by the forces of the city, forces that are beyond his comprehension. In Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai, Raju is a complete simpleton, at times straining our sense of credulity. He cannot distinguish cops from robbers, men from women; he is mortally frightened of stuffed tigers, and his language is laced with a childish lisp. What is interesting to note here is that the audience may laugh at his naivete, but at the same time they are impressed by and respectful of his unmistakable sincerity. Indeed, this sincerity is the hallmark and redeeming feature of his character.

The basic differences in the make-up of the two tramps can best be
understood if we examine them from the perspective of capable hero as opposed to the antihero (Gehring 1983). Usually, the capable hero is employed, engaged in political issues, successful, confident, and dextrous. A close study of Charlie Chaplin’s films reveals that the image of defeated tramp has been overstated and that he was in many ways a highly capable tramp. Chaplin’s tramp first appears in 1914, when the capable hero was still dominant in the American comic imagination; despite the presence of certain features associated with the antihero, the qualities of the capable hero are unmistakably there.

Chaplin’s tramp is usually employed; in Chaplin’s years with Mutual, his tramp was a foreman, a floorwalker, a carpenter, a pawnshop clerk, a waiter, and a cop. Raju, on the other hand, is usually unemployed and is a social outcast seeking a better life in the face of overwhelming odds. In Awaara, he is a thief who is eager to reform himself if only society would allow him to do so. In Shri 420, he is portrayed as an honest and educated man seeking employment, who is lead astray into moral lapses by his inability to secure a job that will support him. In Jagte Raho, he is a village yokel searching for a symbolic drink of water – the search being the ultimate expression of helplessness.

Charlie Chaplin’s films dealing with the tramp often explore social and political themes that had a direct bearing on society at the time the films were made. Harry A. Grace (1952) informs us that of the seventy-six films made by Chaplin, as many as 57 percent are concerned with job situations and economic behavior. In eleven of the twelve Mutual films, Chaplin places the tramp in situations that deal with progressive social issues. These usually center on urban corruption (The Floor Walker, 1916; The Foreman, 1916); the plight of the urban poor (The Pawnshop, 1916; Easy Street, 1917; The Immigrant, 1917); the life of the idle rich (The Count, 1916; The Rich, 1917; The Adventurer, 1917); elitism (Behind the Screen, 1916); or alcoholism (One A.M., 1916; The Cure, 1917).

The themes that concerned Raj Kapoor are also social and political in nature. Awaara deals with the conflict between heredity and environment, nature and nurture. Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai explores the question of nonviolence as it relates to the rehabilitation of social outlaws. However, in his case, there is a far greater emphasis on questions of morality and metaphysics. In Shri 420, Raj Kapoor has sought to bring out the moral and metaphysical dimensions of urban corruption. The redeeming power of love is also given much emphasis. An additional theme that con-
cerns him is that of appearance and reality, a theme central to traditional Indian philosophical thought. Clearly, Raj Kapoor is interested in Indianizing Chaplin's image of the tramp. What seems to be is not what is. Raju is not the repulsive vagabond that Vidya, the heroine of Shri 420, mistakes him for. "My outward appearance misled you," he tells her. "In this world, georgette saris, sharkskin suits, and silken robes are held more precious than human sentiments. . . . Man wears clothes, clothes don't wear man." The theme of appearance and reality is articulated with his characteristic preachiness. In a rather interesting picturization of this mode of thought and feeling, Raju stands cavorting behind a dress suit in the laundry window while Vidya looks on; he then steps out to meet her in his tramp attire. "You were fooled by clothes again," he says. "The man is the same, the clothes are different."

Charlie is the master of most situations and shows a great sense of confidence and capability in handling them. As Huff (1972, 36) remarks, "Super Waiter, Super Boxer, Super Policeman, Super Tight-rop Walker. . . . Chaplin's best efforts have been gained through super expert professional dexterity." In The Rink, he skates rings around Eric Campbell. The police usually find him uncatchable because of his ingenuity. At one point, he succeeds in evading them by imitating a hall lamp. Charlie's encounters with technology, with mechanical objects, are legendary. Even here, his defeats are counterbalanced by various victories as is amply demonstrated by the day-care center he builds for the "kid." On numerous occasions Charlie emerges as the loser in love; but even this is largely illusory, as, for example, in The Circus (1928).

Raju is also successful in what he does, but gradually the dexterity and self-assuredness that characterized Raju in Raj Kapoor's early films give way to a kind of naive innocence. He remains successful, not on account of his cleverness and agility, but because of his deep-seated sincerity and because of the help and support he receives from the women whose love and loyalty are never in question. This is true of all of Raj Kapoor's tramp films with the possible exception of Mera Nam Joker.

Chaplin's tramp is generally altruistic in that he cares for others instead of being cared for by others as a normal antihero almost certainly would be. His attitude toward women is generally one of protectiveness and caring. In The Vagabond, he washes Edna's face and puts curlers in her hair; in City Lights, he lovingly takes care of the blind girl. Raju is different: in his case, women for whom he develops a liking are a morally
cleansing force that helps him to walk a straight and narrow path. In Shri 420, for example, Vidya throughout the film employs gentle persuasion and loving advice to free Raju from the clutches of Maya, who embodies selfishness, greed, and immoral living.

Charlie Chaplin’s tramp concretizes the early twentieth-century view of the city – dirty, corrupt, dangerous. Much of the humor in Chaplin’s films dealing with the city arises out of the quick-wittedness with which the tramp rises to its manifold challenges; these range from street fighting (Easy Street) to social masquerade (The Idle Class). Raju’s view of the city is much the same, embodying as it does the anxieties and ambivalences that characterize the mind-set of new migrants to the city. For example, in Shri 420, the darker side of the city is introduced to Raju by a beggar – the first person he chances to meet in Bombay. The beggar, in a tone of unconcealed irony, says, “This is Bombay, a barren world of stone-hearted people who worship only money.” Again, he remarks, obviously addressing himself to Raju, “There is no work for a literate, hardworking, honest man here. You cannot live by truth whereas there are 420 ways of living by dishonesty.” The beggar tells Raju that in the city people laugh when others fall, but lose their sense of humor when they themselves fall. All of these statements are supported by Chaplinesque scenes. For example, in his eagerness to talk to the people who hurriedly pass by him in the teeming city, Raju pulls out his degree certificate and medal of honor to attract their attention. In another scene, he shares a banana with a child in a “Kid”-like situation, sitting under a lamp post, and then throws the peel over his shoulder. People slip and fall on it one after the other until Raju himself becomes the victim. Each time, everybody except the victim laughs. The words of the beggar take on a prophetic note.

Despite the broad similarities in how Chaplin and Kapoor approach the city, there are also obvious differences. Charlie, as compared to Raju, takes a more politicized view of urban issues; Raju blunts the political edge of these issues with comic absurdities. The image of Charlie has its roots in the capable hero associated with American comedy, and hence his agility in meeting the challenges that the city offers. The way he battles with the spreading technology, workers shut out from factories, and the like, bears testimony to this fact. In Raju, on the other hand, Raj Kapoor is more interested in maintaining the status quo and hence shows his tramp more accommodating himself to than challenging city life. Raju, in many ways, sees the city as a place that offers up opportunities to discover
his true self. These differences in attitude toward the city can be explained partially in terms of the different sociocultural discourses prevalent in the two countries.

The sense of incongruity is the cornerstone of much comedy in film, drama, and literature; this is certainly the case with the films of Chaplin and Kapoor. The discrepancy between the social context and the nature of Charlie gives rise to a sense of incongruity, as is evidenced in films like *The Count*, *The Adventurer*, and *City Lights*. For example, in *City Lights*, which many take to be one of Chaplin's finest films, Charlie rushes out of a luxurious limousine in order to reach a discarded cigarette butt before another tramp gets to it, then gets back into the limousine and drives away. To cite another example, the tramp becomes a cop in *Easy Street*, and an escaped convict becomes a minister in *The Pilgrim*. In some of Charlie Chaplin's films, this sense of incongruity is given greater emphasis by "dual focusing." Actions repeat or offer parallels to the doings of another important character in the film, as is clearly illustrated in films like *Easy Street* and *The Great Dictator*.

Much of the humor in Raj Kapoor's films arises from this sense of incongruity, whether at the physical, verbal, or situational level. Raju is constantly placed in situations that are in direct opposition to his character. For example, in *Awaara*, he is a thief who, while running away from the police, seeks shelter in a house that turns out to belong to a judge, the guardian of Raju's childhood sweetheart. While Raju is there, he pockets an ashtray lying on the table. Rita, his old flame, enters the room and, recognizing him, says, "I thought you were a thief." He replies instantly, "That's what I am" and quietly replaces the ashtray on the table. Similarly, in *Jagte Raho*, Raju, a simple country yokel desperately looking for a drink of water, is mistaken for a thief and is forced to hide in a building where he encounters various forms of lawlessness and immorality. In *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*, he is a naively innocent man who wanders into the life of a group of outlaws.

At one level, we perceive a similarity between Charlie Chaplin and Raj Kapoor in the way they make use of incongruity to generate humor. However, in their approach to incongruity we can also observe certain disaffinities. For example, Raj Kapoor relies very heavily on verbal incongruity as a means of engendering humor in a way that Chaplin does not. Moreover, the narrative style in which these incongruities are captured is different: Chaplin, with his great reliance on pantomime, adopts a stylized nar-
rative form, whereas Raj Kapoor adopts a characteristically Indian form of narrative presentation. Another point of interest is that while the sense of incongruity and the resultant humor are the essence of the film, in Raj Kapoor’s case they lead to a larger romantic experience, in keeping with the essence of Indian entertainment. In other words, romance and humor are connected to a far greater degree in Kapoor’s films than in Chaplin’s. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that Raj Kapoor was working within the Indian romantic-musical tradition of filmmaking.

Henri Bergson (1911) found repetition to be an integral element of the process of comedy, and one finds this prominently in Chaplinesque comedy. The notion of dual focus that we referred to earlier is closely related to the idea of repetition. For example, in Easy Street, Charlie seeks to repeat the behavior pattern of someone quite unlike him. Then again, quite contrary to the quintessence of the character of the tramp, he tries to act as the stern policeman, conforming to the stereotypical image we have of him. This contrastive repetition, then, generates humor in Chaplin’s comedies. Raj Kapoor, too, makes use of repetition, but it is an affirmative repetition rather than a contrastive one – that is to say, he repeats, in thought and behavior, the popular images moviegoers harbor of different types of characters. This can be graphically seen in the contrast drawn between Vidya and Maya in Shri 420.

One of the real sources of strength in Chaplin’s comedy is his uncanny gift for pantomime. Here he drew on the Western theatrical tradition with great ingenuity and directed his indubitable pantomimic gifts toward energizing the defining features of the silent cinema. Pantomime, comedy, and pathos, which characterize both Chaplin’s cinema and our image of the tramp, are inextricably linked in the imagination of the audience. A typical example illustrates this point. In The Pawnshop, Charlie is fired from his job for ineptitude and for undesirable behavior. Sadly, he pantomimes his hunger and that of his children, which results in his boss’s deciding to take him back. Thrilled by this decision, Charlie jumps on the back of his boss and rides him as if he were a pony. Here we see how pantomime, comedy, and pathos – the image of the tramp – are beautifully and functionally linked.

Although Raj Kapoor occasionally makes use of pantomime, he is more interested, in keeping with the Indian theatrical tradition, in making use of song and dance. Charlie controls the sentimentality likely to arise out of excessive pathos by breaking into a joke at the critical point. On the other
hand, Raj Kapoor is generally inclined to stretch the pathos to its limits through song and dance. Moreover, whereas pantomime substituted for speech in Chaplin’s films, Raj Kapoor developed a distinctive, stylized mode of speech for his tramp, one deeply reminiscent of children’s speech. Indeed, much of Raju’s humor is speech-based. Indian humor is characterized by puns, double entendre, metaphorical speech, and innuendo, and Raj Kapoor liberally draws on this tradition. Therefore, one could say that despite Raj Kapoor’s fondness for pantomime, he replaces it in his films with song, dance, and verbal humor.

The concept of power is central to the comedies of both Charlie Chaplin and Raj Kapoor, in which the respective protagonists are victimized by the existing power structure. The concept of power has assumed great theoretical significance in recent times in both the humanities and the social sciences as a consequence of the writings of Michel Foucault, and his work has become a point of reference for any discussion on the subject. Foucault (1980, 98) says:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed or exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.

It is quite evident that Foucault is urging us to see power not as an object that someone possesses, but rather as a relationship; he was interested not in what power is, but how it works. He saw power as a relationship in which one person’s actions shape the field of possible actions of another. When we compare Chaplin’s films with those of Kapoor, we see that the notion of power is indissolubly linked to humor in both cases. In Chaplin, what we normally find is an inversion of the traditional power relationships; the tramp, who is always victimized by society, mocks those who dominate him and in the end, through the sheer force of his iconoclastic humor, emerges as the “powerful,” transforming the existing flow of power. In Raj Kapoor’s case, he maintains the existing power relationships; the tramp is where he is on the social ladder, but by adhering stead-
fastly to his ethical and moral values indicates his superiority to those in power who are more materialistically minded. Here, the humor arises from the hyperbole that goes with the depiction of stereotypes. In the end, Raj Kapoor’s tramp is no different in terms of material progress from where he was at the beginning, but by his unflinching fidelity to the traditional ethical values, he receives a kind of moral power. This ties in very nicely with the traditional Indian concepts of righteousness and action – dharma and karma.

There are some additional points of difference that merit closer study. While Chaplin is only partially melodramatic, Kapoor is overwhelmingly so; indeed this is a distinguishing trait of his mode of entertainment. Women in Chaplin’s films are often ancillary to the protagonist, serving to give depth and definition to his personality; on the other hand, women in Kapoor’s films are largely a morally cleansing force assisting the protagonist in acquiring strength of character and purposiveness and illuminating his moral vision. In Chaplin’s films a measure of violence is associated with the tramp, while Kapoor’s creation bears no traces of violence.

So far we have been discussing the ways in which Raj Kapoor’s tramp and comedy differ from Charlie Chaplin’s, despite the fact that the former manifestly sought to draw on the latter. These differences can be schematically summarized as follows:

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<tr>
<th>RAJ KAPOOR</th>
<th>CHARLIE CHAPLIN</th>
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<tr>
<td>Conformist</td>
<td>Nonconformist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis on innocence and</td>
<td>Emphasis on self-confidence</td>
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<td>sincerity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antihero</td>
<td>Capable hero</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis largely on moral and metaphysical issues</td>
<td>Emphasis largely on social issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependent on others</td>
<td>Altruistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>City as a metaphor of</td>
<td>City as a metaphor of</td>
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<tr>
<td>opportunity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical and verbal</td>
<td>Situational incongruity</td>
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<td>incongruity</td>
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<td>Realistic presentation</td>
<td>Stylized presentation</td>
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<td>within Indian narrative</td>
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One can best understand these differences in Raj Kapoor in terms of his proclivity to Indianize Chaplin. That Kapoor was inspired by, and in certain clearly discernible ways modeled himself on, Chaplin is quite evident. At the same time, he made an attempt to Indianize Chaplin’s tramp. This Indianization was motivated partly by his desire to reach an ever wider segment of Indian society and partly by his desire to draw upon, and locate himself in, the inherited tradition. Here I am using the term “Indian tradition” in its widest sense to include artistic, philosophical, and religious thought. The emphasis on moral and metaphysical dimensions, the absence of violence, can be related to the religious and philosophical tradition; the emphasis on song and dance and on melodrama, the style of presentation, and the like, can be best understood in relation to the evolving traditions of Indian art; the preachiness, the excessive pathos, and the physical and verbal incongruities gain greater definition when seen against Raj Kapoor’s proclaimed desire to reach more and more people. In the case of Charlie Chaplin, there is no real conceptual evolution of the tramp; however, in the case of Raj Kapoor, there is a conceptual evolution in that the tramp becomes more and more Indianized as a consequence of conscious effort on Kapoor’s part.

The concept of the tramp as an object of fun and a generator of humor is alien to the Indian tradition; on the contrary, the tramp carries with him certain religious and philosophical connotations, as one in quest of truth and wisdom. To make the tramp a comic figure and also the protagonist of the film is something that was inspired by Chaplin. In the Indian tradition, protagonists are almost always noble, heroic, handsome, and charismatic. For example, a classical Indian treatise on dramaturgy written in the tenth century (Dhanamjaya 1962, 40) says:
The Hero should be well-bred, charming, liberal, clever, affable, popular, upright, eloquent, of exalted lineage, resolute, and young; endowed with intelligence, energy, memory, wisdom, [skill in the] arts, and pride; heroic, mighty, vigorous, familiar with the codes, and a just observer of laws.

This image of the traditional protagonist has survived up to the present time in popular theater and cinema. It was indeed highly innovative of Raj Kapoor to make a tramp, lacking almost all of the traditionally stipulated qualities, the protagonist of his films.

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Humor in Australian Cinema

NADIA TASS

A USTRALIAN I D E N T I T Y of humor has been largely shaped by the specific nature of the first settlers, their circumstances, and their interaction with the Australian landscape.

For about the first half century of its existence, “white Australia” was primarily an extensive gaol with convicts, ex-convicts, and native-born people. A significant proportion of these poor, working-class people were Irishmen who brought with them a strong antipathy to British rule, which in turn sped up the growth of nationalism by weakening attachment to England. They willingly adopted Australia morally as their country and resented strongly the government’s granting land to rich newcomers. This resentment led to the elevation of the bushranger as a folk hero. The bushranger as folk hero is central to the development of the early Australian film industry. What was widely considered to be the first feature-length film ever was Charles Tait’s The Story of The Gang (1906), which retold yet again the story of Ned Kelly.

Alongside the bushranger as folk hero grew the myth of the bushman. During the 1880s the writings of Banjo Patterson, Henry Lawson, and others promoted the bushman as the “typical,” the real Australian. The hazards, hardships, absence of women (men outnumbered women 3:1 during the nineteenth century), and extreme loneliness of life in the bush encouraged the practice of the mateship legend and the view of the “typical” Australian. Russel Ward, in his book, The Australian Legend (1958, 1–2), wrote that the typical Australian is

a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation. . . . He is a great improviser . . . willing ‘to
have a go’ at anything, but . . . content with a task done in a way that is ‘near enough’. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard. . . . He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. . . . [H]e is usually taciturn . . . endures stoically. . . . [is] sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master, but . . . probably a good deal better, and so he is a great ‘knocker’ of eminent people unless, as in the case of his sporting heroes, they are distinguished by physical prowess. He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority – especially when . . . embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin. . . . He tends to be a rolling stone, highly suspect if he should chance to gather much moss.

The most current example of this type of character in Australian cinema is Mick Dundee from *Crocodile Dundee*.

A rough, ready, hard existence in which one often needed to rely on his male companions to the point of survival created an atmosphere out of which grew a distinctive humor that was irreverent, broad, and crude, a humor acceptable from men living amongst men. Another quality of this humor was irony and understatement. T. Inglis Moore says in his *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (1971, 174):

> On the one hand, the humour tends to have a robust crudity, to be simple, direct, and obvious in its humour of action as shown in tall stories, tales of tricksters, and farce. On the other hand, the humour holds as its keynote an irony which demands a sophisticated detachment and an intellectual assessment of conflicting factors calling for a degree of subtlety.

Moore goes on to argue that the ironic quality of Australian humor is a result of the “unpredictable variability of the seasons.”

Literature promoting the ideal of the bushman was the inspiration for many early Australian films. By the 1920s, however, an image of the urban Australian was beginning to be created. C. J. Dennis’s poem, “The Sentimental Bloke,” was transferred to the screen most successfully by Raymond Longford in 1919. His Bloke is a gambler and drinker, simple and unsophisticated, naive and clumsy in the presence of women. This urban bloke has continued to reappear in Australian films in a variety of forms as the Alvins and the Bazzas of the 1970s renaissance. Films based on these
Australian characters and incorporating typically Australian humor were very popular amongst Australians. However, the smallness of our population demanded overseas sales if films were to be financially successful. This in turn led to filmmakers' incorporating characters and settings designed to appeal specifically to British or American audiences.

During the 1930s George Wallace wrote and appeared in a series of very popular comedy films aimed at British audiences as well as Australian. His vaudevillian slapstick routines successfully appealed to both. With the reemergence of the Australian feature film industry in the early 1970s came a rush of films incorporating the Australian ethos but maintaining the very British mode of an individual who is out of step with society – the two Barry McKenzie movies, Stork, Alvin Purple, and A Slice of Life, a comedy in step with the Doctor at Large series in Britain. Most of these films achieved commercial success in Australia and British theatrical distribution. American taste and formulae have also been a serious consideration since the inception of our industry.

During the 1920s and 1930s Australian filmmakers looked to America for guidance. Technicians were sent to observe and learn from the American motion picture makers. Many Australian actors also left the country to seek careers in Hollywood, for example, actor Cecil Kellaway and Jocelyn Howarth/Constance Worth.

More recently we have tended to completely adopt American formulae in some of our films, including The Coolangatta Gold, Sky Pirates, and Razorback. Each of these failed miserably both filmically and commercially. In other films, we have tended to cater to the American curiosity about the "land down under" by providing them with images and situations they want to see.

The appeal of Australia for Americans seems to be in its frontier nature. As Mark Twain said, "Australian history does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh, new sort; no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises, adventuring and incongruities, contradictions and incredibilities; but they are all true; they all happened."

To America, Australia is still a land that offers adventure and challenge as the American west once did. A land in which men can be men and women, women. The most recent examples of this are Crocodile Dundee, currently breaking all box-office records in the United States, and the tele-movie The Last Frontier.

It would seem that too often Australian filmmakers have been unable to
resist the whims of either the British or American markets, which have been allowed to dictate the flavor of the season.

Phillip Adams in 1976 said, “The trouble is that Australia is such a bland, easy-going nation, whereas the significant film industries develop in countries with social problems, where there are class wars and political despotism. . . . To make significant feature films you need content.” Opinions such as those have to be eradicated from Australian society if more filmmakers are to feel free to produce films that not only appeal to Australian audiences as Australian, but also win respect from overseas markets as offering valid insights into Australian society rather than American or British visions of Australia.

Australian society today is as simple and complex as any other in the world. Despite Phillip Adams’s statement, directors such as Paul Cox, in his film Lonely Hearts (1982), are already showing the way. Cox’s film is indigenously and distinctively Australian and reveals sensitivity and respect for the qualities of Australian society and culture. He has been able to move away from the Australian stereotype and examine today’s urban society, situations, and individuals in a gently comic and sympathetic light.

Australian films have picked up on and elaborated the ideal Australian of Lawson and Ward from before Bill in Longford’s The Sentimental Bloke (1919) through Barry McKenzie in the 1970s to Mick Dundee and Malcolm’s Frank in 1986.

Australian comedy is present in many forms from episodes in otherwise serious narrative films, such as Charles Chauvel’s 1940 film, Forty Thousand Horsemen, to pure ocker/slapstick, sex comedy, gentle humor, and social comedy.

In our films we have also created characters such as the Chips Rafferty character, which provided a familiar local stereotype to vary the regular supply of stock characters from American and British studios.

In The Sentimental Bloke, Arthur Tauchert as Bill offers a sensitive portrayal of the urban larrikin – a simple, naive, unsophisticated man who is at home drinking with his mates and enjoying a game of two-up, but who is clumsy and inept with women. Based on C. J. Dennis’s poem, Longford’s Bloke is a working-class man living in Sydney’s dockside suburb of Woolloomooloo who falls in love with Doreen, a middle-class girl who works in a pickle factory. The Bloke pursues her, marries her, gives up his drinking mate, Ginger Mick, and becomes a faithful husband. He and
Doreen depart the “sinful” city for the “purity” of the country, where Bill manages his uncle’s orchard. Their bliss is completed by the birth of a son, “And so, ‘livin’ and lovin’ . . . life mooches on’ ” (Pike and Cooper, 1980, 119).

Both lead and supporting characters are refreshingly free of caricature and even today appear spontaneous and genuine. Directing with disciplined understatement, Longford avoided the obvious invitation for a display of jokes. It is a warm, subtle human story that’s funny. Despite its success in Australia and England, it failed miserably in America.

The bloke reappears in different forms in later comedies. Peter Thompson in Cox’s 1982 film, Lonely Hearts, is a lonely, middle-aged bachelor who eventually succeeds in forming a relationship with a thirty-year-old spinster (Patricia). The humor is built into the homely naturalistic style that pervades so much of Paul Cox’s work.

When looking at early mainstream comedy we pay tribute to George Wallace, who in the 1930s had people “rolling in the aisles” with laughter in Australia and Europe. Reviews of the 1930s indicate that he was well loved and the audiences appreciated vaudevillian slapstick humor. The Sydney Morning Herald review of Gone to the Dogs (1939) comments that

> Audiences did not seem to mind the absence of a clear plot or sequential dramatic structure. The favourite comedian George Wallace performs exuberant antics. The most successful of Wallace’s work ‘His Royal Highness’ is a burlesque operetta which tells the story of a “rough diamond” who was proclaimed king of a small duchy totally committed to insurrection. Many of the sequences were extremely humorous – especially those where Wallace as king, plays poker with liveried servants, and demands the royal prerogative of winning every hand!

By today’s standards it is often crude, but a similar crudity and larrikinism are major elements of Bruce Beresford’s The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972) and its successor, Barry McKenzie Holds His Own (1974).

Bazza McKenzie is the complete antithesis of sensitivity and sophistication. His is the story of a gauche young “Aussie” visiting Britain for the first time. This now comedy was defining itself in relation to particular factions of Australian society. It moved Australian society away from the nostalgic rural Australian beauty and confronted the vulgarity, philistinism, and energy of an urban contemporary Australia. Both Bazza McKenzie movies are visions and zany comedies of the present.
Both Barry McKenzie and Stork (Tim Burstall, 1971) define anything outside the male vernacular into an object of spectacle, a mere exhibit to be ridiculed, misrecognized, and consumed if from the outside. There is little room for women in this world because of the ocker's antiglamour discourse; however, the commercial success of the movies indicates that audiences appreciated this style of humor. Tim Burstall has said: “One of the best ways of getting an Australian audience to accept itself, . . . is the ‘send up’, we’re prepared to look at our life and laugh at it in a way that we’re not prepared to look at our life and be serious about it.”

The general popularity of these films tends to endorse his views. Hidden behind the vulgarity and cynicism of The Adventures of Barry McKenzie is an attack on male sexual problems and stereotyped characteristics attributed to both Australian and decadent British society. When Barry attempts to develop his sexual technique in Britain he reads in a sex book that British girls don’t like it “simple and clean,” so while Caroline Thighs waits for him in bed, Barry excuses himself and pours a tin of curry down the inside front of his boxer shorts. The treatment by the British of the naive colonials is sent up in one scene where Edna and Barry are taken from the airport to the city via Stonehenge and Scotland. The mother country is sent up in another scene where a newspaper heading that reads “Leprosy Panic Sweeps Birmingham” is followed by a newscaster who says there’s no need to panic as the leprosy cases can be counted on the finger of two hands. Barry Humphries is the closest thing to a genius that has come out of the Australian entertainment industry. Behind the vulgarity, absurdity, very funny scenes and dialogue, Humphries has lampooned Australian awkwardness and prejudices with irony and inventiveness. His dialogue is hilarious. It’s full of colloquial expressions, which sometimes makes it difficult for non-Australians to understand euphemisms, for example, urination, which is referred to as “splashing the boots” or “shaking hands with the wife’s best friend.”

The sequel, Barry McKenzie Holds His Own, is just as funny, and in some cases Edna is more acidic and poignant. “Lesbianism has always left a nasty taste in my mouth,” she quips.

Contrary to popular opinion, Humphries was not celebrating the ocker male; he presents him in an image that discourages the majority of the Australian society from identifying with him.

David Williamson, a keen observer of human behavior, has been a
dynamic force in a similar type of comedy, with *Stork*, *Don's Party*, *The Club*, *The Removalists*, and most recently, *The Perfectionist*. John Clarke, a well-respected comedy writer and actor, said: “Williamson is the most objective of dramatists. He never makes a moral judgement and he refrains from comment. His characters are drawn with cool detachment.” Williamson invites his audience to understand first and then judge if they wish. David Williamson’s work is poignant, socially satirical, acidic, witty, and takes the myth of the early Australian brutish, bawdy comedy of the male “sort” into the middle classes, suburbia, university graduates, and local football club boardrooms.

*Don’s Party* takes place on election eve 1969, in Don and Kathy’s home, where they play hosts to eleven guests, eight of whom are part of the new educated middle class (Labor Party supporters), whilst the other two are Liberal (conservative) supporters. The guests arrive, gradually falling into the still inevitable separation of the sexes: the men with their beer, jokes, and leering abuse at the possibly acquiescent women, and the women on the sidelines are a bitching, buzzing chorus of frustration.

*Don’s Party* is an incisive social satire of “bourgeois pseudo problems” such as status, materialism, and esteem. These are represented in some very funny scenes. Don, beer in hand, fiddles with the television and resents Kath’s request to put out the peanuts and chips. When Kath ridicules the purpose of the party – to celebrate the ALP’s election to power – Don, watching the ABC election telecast, cites friend Cooley as being one guest with a sincere interest in the election result. Juxtaposed against this, we cross to Cooley in a motel with his latest girlfriend, Susan, watching a television channel not covering the election. Some of the very funny moments portray a pompous middle-aged man trying to seduce a foxy young thing, the men walking around the house naked, arguing about politics, and the promiscuous Susan asking the hostess for permission to sleep with her husband. The rest of the film is consistently cynical and funny; finally the only relationship to survive the party is the mateship between Don and Mal, which Williamson ridicules. The two characters are slumped on the floor agreeing heartily with each other when Kath remarks to Mal’s wife, Jenny, “You won’t stop them now. They’re into the mutual admiration stage.”

*Don’s Party* was successful in both Australia and America. *The New York Daily News* headlined: “‘Don’s Party’ A Success.” Kathleen Carroll
wrote, “Tongues loosen, wives rebel, husbands flinch and marriages disinte­
grate in ‘Don’s Party’, a bawdy rip-roaring 100-proof comedy . . . This is one saucy comedy.”

Williamson captures those uniquely Australian comic traits evident in
our earlier characters and juxtaposes them with serious themes.

Also in this genre, The Odd Angry Shot (Tom Jeffrey, 1979) does to sol-
diers in Vietnam what Williamson’s Don’s Party does to upwardly mobile,
middle-class suburbia, attempting to express through irony the futility
of war.

In 1973 Hexagon productions made the most successful of the Austra-
lian sex comedies, Alvin Purple. There’s always an audience for sex-
exploitation films; even the worst of them, like The Set, made its money
back. However, during the early seventies some successful sex comedies
were made, including Tim Burstall’s Peterson (1974), which managed to
get distribution overseas, as did The Naked Bunyip, Alvin Purple, Alvin
Rides Again, Fantasm, Fantasm Comes Again, Number 96, and The Box.
The most successful sex comedy at the box office was Alvin Purple.

With Alvin the Australian stereotype of larrikin male is dropped in
favor of a rather ordinary urban naive young male who finds himself the
object of every woman’s desires. This wish-fulfillment fantasy of the male
shows us Alvin from his school days, through various jobs as water-bed
salesman, sex therapist, and eventually convent gardener, always in pur-
suit of true love but unable to resist the initiatives of the women who inex-
orably pursue him. He is quite puzzled as to why he should in such high
demand, and most of the comedy, which seemed to be very popular during
the 1970s, is derived from his reaction to each new seduction. Not only
was it a box-office success in Australia and overseas, but it was well
received by some countries as an unpretentious sex comedy. With Alvin
Purple and the sequel, Alvin Rides Again, we see traces of the vaudevillian
tradition of George Wallace from the 1930s.

Where the Alvins can be related back to the vaudevillian tradition, The
Picture Show Man (Joan Long, 1977) combines the same tradition with
the bush ethos, creating a gentle mood of nostalgia heightened by equally
gentle humor. Its an episodic narrative that centers on the activities of
Maurice Pymm, “Pop,” who travels around outback towns with his son
and their combination of a moving-picture show and song-and-dance rou-
tine. Miss Lockhart performs creative freestyle dancing in conjunction
with Freddy Graves, and they are in liaison with Mrs. Duncan, a lonely
widow. This trio is the focus for much of the gentle humor based on double entendre. The film is disarming in its simplicity and its lack of pretension. There is nothing extraordinary that happens, no serious message – just a string of events that culminates in a portrait of a man and his time. The scenes have been put together nostalgically, beautifully, and comically.

_The Picture Show Man_ was deservedly received very well overseas and took out the Dauphin d'Or by overwhelming popular vote at the Festival of Comedy Films, Chamrousse, France, in 1978. International critics said it was “A rollicking, charming, often very funny and sometimes extremely moving account of the Australian showmen who brought movies to the bush and outback country in the silent days” (Films in Review) and “An enchanting comedy” (Sight & Sound). And the French also acclaimed it as a marvel of humor with originality, liveliness of presentation, and intelligent acting.

Amongst the comedies that have been made in Australia in the last five years, the most obviously Hollywood type is _Starstruck_ (Gillian Armstrong, 1982), which drew better reviews in America than Armstrong’s previous film, _My Brilliant Career_. The narrative is light-weight, the characters are all pleasant and positive, everyone looks interesting, all the kids are dressed well, and every day is a nice day. At the sound of the band tunes, they can all burst into fluidly choreographed movements. The film is about an adorable bunch of punk-rockers led by heroine Jackie, who desperately wants to be a singer and takes the necessary steps to achieve her dream. Reminiscent of the modern sit-coms, it is fresh, funny, optimistic, and tailored to and was accepted by American audiences.

_Starstruck_ is an example of Australian modern comedy that has left the bush ethos and strives for a moment of utopian integration. The humor in _Starstruck_ is light and up front. Angus’s dad doesn’t miss an opportunity to grope at Jo’s constantly surprised mum. Old Nana is a fortune teller, which carries for some light, colorful scenes and humor. _Starstruck_ certainly introduced a Hollywood genre into Australian comedy and musicals.

Over the period of 1984–1986 there have been at least sixteen comedies produced in Australia. The type of comedy they represent ranges from the very ocker slapstick and culturally based, such as _Wills and Bourke – The Untold Story_ (Bob Weis, Margot McDonald, 1985), which is a send up of a historical event, through to _The Australian Dream_ (Jacki Mckinnie, Susan
Wild, 1985), which is a contemporary comedy set in suburban Brisbane. Not forgetting the totally eccentric account of *Young Einstein*, who first discovers the theory of relativity and then rock and roll.

*Bliss* (Anthony Buckley, 1984) was made in Australia, based on a novel by an Australian, but could have come from anywhere. It focuses on life, death, and the twilight state in between. Harry has a heart attack, and for four minutes his soul leaves his body. When it returns, the world seems just slightly insane. His wife is “doing it” with his partner on a table at his favorite restaurant, his son is obsessed with Nazi uniforms and having sex with his sister, and Harry meets up with a hooker who introduces him to the values of the 1980s, freedom, love, the beauty of nature, and eating a special type of honey.

The humor is predominantly surreal, like the sardines that drop from between the legs of Harry’s philandering wife, the elephant that sits on his car, and other comic grotesqueries such as the cockroaches that crawl out of a wound in Harry’s chest. Australian producers and directors are becoming more adventurous about leaving the Australian myth and stereotype ockerisms behind and exploring new grounds for Australian cinema.

*Malcolm* is an Australian comedy completed early in 1986, and, like the pattern of its time, it is not reliant on Australianisms to make it work. However, it doesn’t go out of its way to deny its heritage.

*Malcolm* is a gentle, disarming comedy about a thirty-year-old man who is inept socially, but has a talent for making mechanical devices. When he takes his one-man tram onto the tracks, he leaves his job with the tramways and is forced to take in two boarders (a petty criminal and his girlfriend). The trio then gets involved in a series of eccentric crimes using Malcolm’s mechanical talent. This off-beat comedy is played in a totally naturalistic way, and the comedy flows out of the unpredictable actions, reactions, and situations that are created as a natural extension of each character’s obsessions. It’s the point at which their individual obsessions cross that creates the poignant humor in *Malcolm*. This is illustrated in the scene where Malcolm gives Frank a present. Malcolm is obsessed with wanting to make something for Frank; Frank is so obsessed with his world of gambling and criminal activity that he doesn’t notice what Malcolm is doing. Leaving his own world behind, Frank is finally attracted by Malcolm’s world, as Malcolm presents Frank with the car. In this incident, both obsessions are served: Malcolm’s need to give the gift
and Frank’s to receive the gift, which is instrumental to his world of crime. In this scene the moment of crossing is critical as far as comic timing is concerned for the audience to get the full impact of the moment.

*Malcolm* is such a combination of different styles that the pitch, color, and timing of each element must be carefully synchronized; otherwise the humor would be lost. Given the comments of critics both in the United States and in Australia, it would seem that *Malcolm* has achieved its purpose. Sheila Benson, the *Los Angeles Times* critic, wrote: “If you can’t remember the last time you laughed out loud at a movie, if the great Ealing comedies of character are still your standard of excellence then ‘Malcolm’ is your cuppa tea mate.” Neil Jillett of the Melbourne *Age* wrote: “There have been far more ambitious films than *Malcolm.* . . . none has been better.”

As well as the gentle, subtle humor, which works on many levels, there is a touch of slapstick, as in the scene where Frank gets hit on the head with a shovel and the scene in which Malcolm’s car splits in two. However, the element of slapstick is juxtaposed against absolute naturalism, and this makes the result more potent.

Each of the elements in this film has been planned to precision, both humor and the multileveled pathos, which is never sentimentalized. When analyzed, the psychological conditions of the characters at the beginning of the film (accentuated by the rich, dark tones of the environment) are a reflection of our society and the fringe people who find it impossible to penetrate the mainstream.

*Malcolm* works on many different levels, and it doesn’t disown its heritage. The naivete and innocence of *The Sentimental Bloke* can certainly be found in the character of Malcolm, whereas Frank is a version of the larrikin ocker we have seen in many Australian films.

The larrikin image is also closely connected to the box-office phenomenon of the screen world at the moment – *Crocodile Dundee.* Paul Hogan embodies all the stereotypes of our historical ockers without the vulgarity, crudity, and ugliness we witnessed in the 1970s. His character of Mick Dundee is a direct link with our cultural ethos and heroes of the bush. The difference is that Dundee has been cleaned up enough to be presentable to an American audience. (They even took out the hairs on his chest for the American poster.) For the most part, Hogan gives a standard impersonation of the laid-back bushman, wrestling with crocodiles, dry shaving with a hunting knife, and telling the time to the minute with a glance at
the sun. Paul Hogan is by far the “finest dead-pan ocker” our country possesses, and because of his generosity of spirit and heart the audience is easily drawn to Mick Dundee from the beginning. Basically Hogan has cleaned up the ocker image and placed “him” back in the bush. We see him in his natural simplicity and then see him in urban sophistication doing just as well with his bush mentality.

In this paper I have not tried to suggest that any particular style of humor is preferable to any other. Rather I have tried to offer some insight into what is distinctive about Australian film humor as illustrated in films over the eighty-plus years of filmmaking in my country. I have also sought to reveal some of the scenes of this humor and the influences that have helped to shape it.

Some themes and characters have persisted from the early days (the bush ethos and the typical Australian male). They have, from time to time, been taken up and reworked by a variety of filmmakers, with a variety of results, and at times new ones have been added. The result is that now, in the 1980s, we have a greater variety of comic styles being used than ever before: farce, satire, irony, and serio-comedy.

Australian narrative film has come a long way. Along with characters, styles and themes have been modified in response to the needs or preoccupations of the time. Whilst we are still by necessity making films with a view to overseas markets, a growing number of filmmakers are also managing to create a less self-conscious Australian product, with an integrity of its own: films that are technically sound, with fully rounded characters and strong story lines that grow naturally out of the Australian environment and are proudly Australian without being aggressively so.

Nadia Tass is an Australian film director, actress, and singer.

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Humor in Korean Cinema

Ahn Byung Sup

George Bernard Shaw once said, “Humor is an element. It is neither a mixture nor an alloy. We laugh, then we notice it is there. Mud, cruelty, disasters are rich in humor. It is plentiful in fantasy; it springs from everywhere – with a complete lack of moral sense it places Charlie Chaplin and Saint Francis of Assisi on the same level.” Lin Yu-T’ang, a great humorist, said in a lecture on humor in East and West, “It is a special gift of civilization. . . . a special gift of the human intellect.” Humor is the breath of human life, a delightful inner resource that gives us relaxation from seriousness. But humor is as different in East and West as the civilizations of East and West are different from one another.

In Korean cinema, sentimentalism is more prevalent than humor. This is a tendency that has persisted since the beginning of Korean filmmaking. Audiences have favored sentimentalism over humor, and producers have met their demands. A brief excursion through the history of filmmaking in Korea will help us understand why this is so.

On October 27, 1919, The Righteous Fight with the Enemy and The Landscape of Kyongsong City were shown to the public at Tansongsa movie house. The Righteous Fight with the Enemy was in the form of a kino-drama, a mixture of motion picture and stage play. The Landscape of Kyongsong City was a documentary. This is considered the first film event in the history of Korean cinema. The first narrative film, An Oath Under the Moon, was made in 1923 by Yun Paek-nam, and this was the first appearance of film as an independent art form approximating present standards.

Korea was under Japanese control from 1910 to 1945. When Na Ungyu’s film, Arirang, first opened for public viewing in 1926 it was recog-
nized as an expression of opposition to Japanese domination. Audiences identified with the hero, Yong-jin, portrayed by Na Un-gyu, and the tragic heroine, Yong-hui. After a futile effort to save Yong-hui, his sister, from abduction by a lusting Japanese policeman, Yong-jin goes mad. A sense of helplessness and sentimentalism dominates, particularly in the last scene of the film, in which Yong-jin is taken away by Japanese police as he sings “Arirang,” a national folk song. The film was instantly successful for its artistic sensibility in portraying Korean youths subjected to Japanese control. But more importantly the film expressed precisely the emotions and the suppressed anger that every Korean experienced at that time. Na Un-gyu became a national hero for courageously expressing, through his portrayal of Yong-jin, the emotions latent among Koreans. The eloquence of his speech of resistance against the Japanese police was something the Korean public dreamed of. Audiences saw their own helplessness and the nation’s fate reflected in the futility of Yong-jin’s efforts to save his sister and in his resulting madness.

With Arirang, Na Un-gyu began a tradition of infusing films with a sense of resignation, futility toward man’s future, and sentimentalism. To this day, sentimentalism remains one of the predominant emotions in Korean Cinema.

Artistically, Arirang succeeded as well. Na used this plastic medium effectively to convey the emotions and psychological development of the characters through images and symbols. His use of a desert scene to portray the hero’s fantasy was superb and provided the public a unique film experience. It demonstrated the attractiveness and effectiveness of cinematographic expression. The expressiveness of Na’s cinematography and his narrative structure were major contributions to Korean cinema. The structural pattern he pioneered consisted of featuring a brother and sister and the abduction of the sister by a Korean informer for the Japanese. The portrayal of an agile maiden as a victim of a Japanese informer’s lust was symbolic of the Korean situation under Japanese colonial rule. The spirit of resistance against the Japanese official and the final destruction of the hero provided the theme and tragic structural pattern.

The theme of resistance was picked up by Yi Kyu-hwan in his film, A Boat Without a Boatman (1932). The hero, a boatman, attempts to save his daughter from a Korean informer for a Japanese official and makes his final gesture in a spirit of resistance against Japanese control and modern technology, symbolized by an iron bridge under construction. He meets
his own death by rushing into an oncoming train with a hammer in his hands.

With Na Un-gyu and Yi Kyu-hwan pointing the way, film became an effective means of expressing patriotism and a spirit of resistance against the Japanese. Those involved in the fight for independence borrowed the medium to express their own tradition.

After his first effort with *A Boat Without a Boatman*, Yi Kyu-hwan picked up the folk life of the fisherman in realistic style. He portrayed the genuine emotions of villages consisting mostly of fishermen living along river banks. His attempt to portray the folk life of Koreans isolated from modern civilization and at a distance from the immediate control of the Japanese government used realistic style to reinforce the theme and narrative structure already introduced by Na Un-gyu.

In his last film, *O Mong-nyŏ* (1937), however, Na turned away from his earlier stylistic approach to pursue the psychological structure of human impulse, especially of the sexual impulses of the men around a young lady, *O Mong-nyŏ*. He thus opened the way for the use of film to portray life and human nature.

Na Un-gyu was the embodiment of *auteur* filmmaking. He was the writer, actor, director, and often the editor of all nineteen of the films he made. His work can be classified into three categories. The first category consists of works displaying a consciousness of the political situation of the country. The second category includes films taking a psychological approach to the portrayal of human behavior. The third category includes films of social realism, which proved to be artistically inferior to his work using the other stylistic approaches.

The tragedy is that none of the early films made during the Japanese occupation, numbering almost 150, has survived. Only stills and documents on the films are available to young aspirants and contemporary filmmakers. Young filmmakers and students depend for their knowledge on those who witnessed the earlier productions.

After the dark age of 1940–1945, during which filmmaking ceased, Korean cinema seemed ready for a period of restoration. However, before any significant revival could occur, the Korean War of 1950–1953 intervened, and filmmaking again came to a halt. It was only after 1954 that Korean film production could resume.

During the 1960s, Korean cinema blossomed aesthetically as well as technically. To strengthen the roots of filmmakers and their industry, the
government of Syngman Rhee provided tax exemptions. This encouraged the film industry and the theaters toward better creative efforts and stimulated the importation of better foreign films.

The Stray Bullet (1961) of Yu Hyŏn-mok and the works of Kim Ki-yŏng, Kim Su-yong, and Yi Man-hŭi deal with the struggles of life in a postwar situation marked by lost dreams and the pain of the political division of North and South. Realistically portraying the social and political condition of the lost generation of the 1960s, Yu Hyŏn-mok introduced the technique of counterpoint to draw out the inner conflicts of the characters by juxtaposing images and sound. He also sought to highlight psychological interactions by manipulating depth of field.

The lyrical film Mother and the Boarder (1961) and The Tyrant Yong-san (1962) by Sin Sang-ok and Teenage Rebel (1958) and The Maid (1960) by Kim Ki-yŏng are representative of the films made in attempts to achieve a better understanding of human impulse and psychology. These films owe much of their achievement in the psychological approach to Na Un-gyu and his O Mong-nyŏ. With The Market Place (1965) and Late Autumn (1966) of Yi Man-hŭi and The Seaside Village (1966) of Kim Su-yong, the lyricism of Korean cinema reached its peak. The scenography of landscape, every spray of the sea’s waves, every grain of soil, incorporated with human psychology, was superbly handled to bring out the best poetry of film.

Where the films of the 1960s were stepping stones in the aesthetic development of Korean cinema, the films of the 1970s were marked by their commercial aspects. Korean film became not only an art form but also an industry for public entertainment. Rapid economic growth and industrialization created a totally different social climate, one characterized by commercialism and consumerism. Within this economic turmoil, the film established its own commercialism. Entertaining mass audiences became the priority of the film industry, and the “aesthetics of economy” was a catchphrase among young filmmakers. Unless one could guarantee commercial success, aspiring young artists found few opportunities to get into the film industry. The March of Fools (1975) of Ha Kil-chong, The Home of the Stars (1974) of Yi Chang-ho, and The Golden Age of Yŏng-ja (1975) typify the commercialism of the 1970s.

By the 1980s, Korean cinema was ready for a different sensibility. The film industry was ready for new talents. Strong nationalism and a sense of identity dominated cultural activities, and there were strong efforts in
every field to preserve the old and discover cultural roots. The films of the 1980s reflect such efforts. Representative of them are the works of Im Kwŏn-t’aeck and Yi Tu-yong, two of the most prolific filmmakers of the period.

*House of Death* (1980) by Yi Tu-yong depicts human desire in terms of shamanism and the rite of the dead. His film, *The Spinning Wheel*, shown at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1983, deals with cruelty to women and women’s resistance to their maltreatment in a male-dominated society. The meaning of true love in contrast with lust is the subject of *Eunuch* (1986).


While Im Kwŏn-t’aeck and Yi Tu-yong try to portray the traditional life of the Korean people and their cultural roots, Yi Chang-ho and Pae Ch’ang-ho concentrate more on contemporary life. *Declaration of Fools* (1983), depicting the life and dreams of youths, is typical of Yi Chang-ho’s films.

Pae Ch’ang-ho, started out as an assistant to Yi Chang-ho. He made his directorial debut with *The Slum People of Kkobang Tongne* (1982), exploring the theme of love amidst life in the ghetto. His success continued with the subsequent films, *Tropical Flowers* (1982), *Whale Hunting* (1984), *Deep Blue Night* (1985), and *Hwang Chin-i* (1986). In these films he showed his concern about apathy in modern society. With his artistic maturity also came stylistic consistency. As a result, he has achieved the status of a major *auteur* of Korean cinema with great influence on young filmmakers.

In comparison with Western films, Korean cinema generally lacks great formal consistency in its narrative structure, and aesthetically it has yet to mature. Korean cinema still suffers from sentimentalism and melodramatic emotionalism. It has far to go to reach a satisfactory aesthetic level and finally to settle into an art form. But at this point four major filmmakers are active, and there are a few prospective talents ready to make their debuts. It doesn’t look too grim for a better future for Korean film.
As we have seen, Korean cinema is serious in its themes. Sentimental factors are more strongly present than humorous elements. Koreans often say that one characteristic of their culture is han. Han – sometimes translated as grudge, spite, or enmity – is perhaps best described as a frame of mind characterized by a sorrowful lament, gradually increasing, which comes from undue treatment or suffering from heavy persecution. A Korean colloquial expression says that when a woman has han, it frosts the ground even in Mayor June. A similar characteristic, called urami, is also found among the Japanese people, according to Professor Yi Ö-yông. The basic spirit of Chushingura seems to be an emotion based on urami. When it is smoldering in one’s heart, he is driven to revenge. On the other hand, Korean han is passive. It does not lead to revenge. It is a feeling deeply rooted in the heart and reveals itself in resignation, reproaching heaven, and lamenting one’s destiny. This characteristic has been expressed often in Korean works of art. When han reaches an extreme degree, it may appear as sentimentalism. The sentimentalism in Korean cinema and popular song is an extreme expression of han.

But, the Korean people are not all tears and sentimentalism. This we can find amply demonstrated in arts and literature. Yangban-jôn, a novel written by Pak Chi-wôn (1731–1805), and the Korean mask plays of the Yi dynasty period (1392–1910) are quite comical and humorous, though it may be more accurate to call them satirical rather than humorous. We can find colorful humor in satirical stories about yangban, an upper-class people, and mocking, sinful, corrupt Buddhist monks. The Korean mask plays are also very humorous. The masks themselves are humorous in their shapes, and the characters in the mask plays are comically performed. Old Korean folk songs are bright and merry in their keys.

Despite these traditions, Koreans gradually have come to like tearful and sentimental works. About such sentimentalism, one Korean scholar has said: “Originally the Korean people liked the spirit of comedy and enjoyed a good sense of humor. But they have fallen into sentimental emotion through experiencing pessimism, frustration, and resignation caused by Japanese occupation.” New plays in which sentimentalism is expressed in exaggerated gestures and sad popular songs were introduced from Japan into Korea during the colonial period. When these met the sorrow and pessimism of a losing nation, the result was a descent into sentimentalism.

Whether this explanation is reasonable or not, the theory has considerable value. Nevertheless, there must be other ways to think of sentiment-
talism in Korean cinema. The mainstream of Korean cinema is realism, but we frequently find sentimental factors even in the realism.

A typical example of the sentimentalism in Korean films is found in *Miwodo Tasihanbun* (1971), which large audiences enjoyed even as it kept them shedding tears. In the story, a married man comes to work at a local office. While working there, he meets a virgin girl and lives in the same house with her. Soon the girl has a child by him. Later, his wife finds out and takes the child into her own house to be reared under her care. But the child is ill-treated by her older children. The child’s mother often comes to the house to watch her child without being seen. Heartbroken at seeing her child being ill-treated by the older children, she weeps painfully. Such sorrowful and painful scenes are the peak of the art of sentimentalism.

A few years ago, Satō Tadao, one of the most influential Japanese film critics, visited Korea. He appreciated Korean cinema, and in a newspaper article he pointed out that sentimentalism is characteristic of Oriental films, including those made in Korea, Japan, China, India, and Hong Kong. According to Satō, sentimentalism in cinema is not the worst thing. We hardly find sentimentalism in cinema in the West. However, the sentimental elements found in the Oriental cinema may be worthy when properly controlled and directed into emotional beauty and warmheartedness. I agree with Satō.

In spite of the sentimentalism, we can find expressions of humor in Korean cinema. Such are discovered in the works of O Yong-jin, an outstanding playwright and screenwriter who typifies the characteristics of Korean comedy. His screenplay, *The Wedding Day* (1956), was made into a film by Yi Pyŏng-il. Later he turned the screenplay into a stage play with the title *Maengjiinsa Taek Kyŏngsa*. Among Korean comedies, his works are excellent and distinguished masterpieces.

In *The Wedding Day*, Maengjiinsa, the father of a family, intends to let his daughter Kapuni marry Mion, the son of a higher-class Kim family. But Kim’s family spreads a rumor that Mion is a cripple. Maeng, being embarrassed by the rumor, tries to switch the bride with Yibuni, his maid. Yibuni takes the place of his daughter just before the wedding ceremony. But when Mion, the bridegroom, arrives at Maeng’s house for the wedding, he is not a cripple but a healthy, handsome young man. The rumor was intended to find true love. This comedy satirizes the wedding customs of the Yi dynasty era and ridicules the selfishness of Maeng. The film won the best comedy award in the Asian Film Festival in 1957.
O Yong-joon has other works of serious political drama and screenplays, but his comedies demonstrate Korean humor in abundance. His works never fail to show a taste of satire and true-to-life humor, though it is not the same kind of humor that people in the West enjoy.

Yi Hwang-p’yo, another film director of the 1960s, also has a sense of humor. His film, Under the Roof of Seoul (1961), deals with the life of Seoulites with warm humanity and abundant humor.

Declaration of Fools by Yi Chang-ho is a kind of black comedy. The film is carried without dialogue, using instead a kind of improvised gesturing. It is a story of low-class young men and a young woman. But a tragic feeling is at the bottom of the story. The characters are having different daydreams of one another. When they awake, they face their realities.

Pae Ch’ang-ho’s Whale Hunting is another pleasant work of comedy. Two young men try to take a young girl out of a ghetto of prostitutes and back to her home. Their adventure is shown in a comedic form with witty and humorous sequences.

Yi Tu-yong’s The Mulberry Leaves is about a husband and his wife during the Japanese occupation. The wife makes love with almost all the men in the village except her servant in order to lead a life while her husband is away from home, wandering around the country as an anti-Japanese resistance leader. The woman shows various kinds of humor while going along with men. But in reality she is captured by sadness and sorrow in her heart.

Um Chong-sun’s Pyon Kang-sô (1986) is a sex comedy. The hero is a strong and energetic male. The heroine has a tragic fate. Whenever she gets married, her husband dies. Their encounter is very comical. When they first meet and make love, the place where they lie forms into a big puddle. A rock falls from the top of the mountain. When Pyón Kang-sô passes water, it is like a river. Offensiveness is a characteristic element in the humor in Korean cinema. As George Bernard Shaw pointed out, humor has a taste of cruelty and disaster. And so it does in Korean cinema.

The structure of humor in Korean cinema is double in nature. For instance, in the case of The Wedding Day, switching Kapuni with Yipuni results in a tragedy for Maengjinsa. Also in The Mulberry Leaves, Declaration of Fools, and Pyón Kang-sô, the protagonists appear to be successful while the antagonists fall into tragedy. This too is based upon the idea of han. When han plunges to its depths, it bursts into sentimentalism.
When han is brighter and controlled it becomes humor. Here we find a unique characteristic of the humor in Korean cinema. It has something to do with pathos as it depicts an absurd aspect of the truth of life and the human condition.

In my opinion the most successful humorists in cinema are Charles Chaplin and Jacques Tati of France. Chaplin’s humor is imbued with pathos and melancholiness stemming from the poverty in his childhood. The humor of Tati (Mon Oncle, M. Hulot’s Holiday) is not concerned with pathos, however. It is a brighter and more controlled cinematic expression through actors. In Korean cinema we can hardly find the kind of humor depicted by Tati. Humor must be found in cinematic expression. We expect to see humor expressed in the rhythm and montage of film.

We must constantly remember the Korean people’s experience of civil war, the mental scars of which are still ubiquitous, as can be seen in Kilsottum. Since the Korean War, the problem of separated families has been serious. This is one of the reasons why there is little humor in Korean cinema. However, we must try to develop more of a sense of humor to counterbalance the serious situations Koreans face and to save Korean cinema from sentimentalism.

I think humor is a product of the imagination. Unfortunately, in our present highly industrialized material civilization, facing the threat of nuclear bombs, conflicting ideologies, confrontations between super-powers, and terrorism, we are in danger of losing emotional beauty and imagination. As “Humor is a gift of civilization and a gift of human intellect,” mankind must be freed from the seriousness of contemporary situations through humor. Humor is necessary. Humor in East and West must be exchanged and performed on both stage and screen. Through exchange of humor in various countries we can restore abundant imagination. Through comparative demonstration and study of humor among different cultures, the imagination of mankind will be enriched and life will be more joyful.

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In Conclusion . . .

SUSAN SONTAG

I shall not try to sum up, but I do have a few comments. The papers delivered here have been rich and suggestive. Several people have pointed out, with unhumorous severity, that we are being rather solemn about humor. I think the participants have nothing to get defensive about on this score. True, Arthur Dudden’s paper, which I read but did not hear delivered, made me laugh out loud several times – it had some terrific jokes. But for the most part, yes, we weren’t funny. And I’m not going to be funny either. I do think that’s all right. For the subject of humor, like every exceptionally interesting subject, is basically a serious one.

It’s also a very large one. Actually, humor is a kind of umbrella term sheltering many different notions, some complementary, some quite contradictory. A term that is used to describe both physical slapstick and verbal wit (such as punning), that embraces romantic comedy as well as burlesque, is obviously a capacious term. And as an umbrella term, it is not worth trying to define. A definition would have to be either reductive or extremely abstract. My first point, then, is that what we have been reflecting about here is not a single concept, a spread of instances with an inner unity. It is, rather, a tone or register in which narrative or dramatic action is conducted, a spread of instances whose unity comes from its relation to something other than, actually opposed to itself.

Thus (as I see it), in much of the discussion that has taken place here, humor was being equated with something that was light, as opposed, presumably, to something that was dark. It was equated with what was entertaining, as distinguished from what was serious, solemn, and possibly not entertaining. It was sometimes equated with what was more accessible to a large audience, as distinct from something that, because of its solemnity
or seriousness, was available only to a more restricted audience. For humor, like almost every potent idea, is a relational concept. The many terms that we group under the heading of humor, or use as provisional equivalents or substitutes for the notion of humor — such as satire, irony, fun, burlesque, comedy, among others — always presuppose a polar term. Like “left,” which presupposes “right,” and “up,” which presupposes “down,” the humorous never functions as a notion by itself. A contrast is always being presumed.

It is obvious with “left” and “up” (and “woman” and “alive” and “heterosexual” and many other constructs) that they need their opposites; they, as it were, call their opposites into being. It’s almost as obvious, when you think about it, with “humorous” or “comic.” In all discourse about humor there is always an oppositional term, implied if not actually explicit. The classic example is comedy — which suggests, which requires, tragedy. One of the most ancient representations of humor is the comic mask, a mask with an upturned smile, which is set alongside a mask with an exactly symmetrical downturned position of the mouth, representing the opposite attitude or sentiment, which is called the tragic. Most discussions of humor obscure the fact that humor is a relational term, in all contexts. The main reason that so many discussions of humor run aground is, I think, because it is not understood that an opposing term is always lurking nearby, controlling our perception of what is humorous.

Another point. It seems to me that the discussion of humor tends, almost inevitably, to be polemical or didactic. Wimal said just now, introducing me, that I might be talking about humor and culture. Indeed, that subject could hardly be far from anything I might say here, as it has not been far from the papers presented here. This becomes clear when we think about our symposium as a cultural event. Most of those who participated in this symposium were using the subject of humor to make statements about their countries, about problems that interest them — evoking their country’s traditions of humor, specifically those reflected in films, as a set of conventions available to filmmakers for acts of dissent or of skepticism, and as a focus for explicit cultural criticism afforded those who comment on films. A review of the traditions of humor that divided up more or less along national grounds, as did this symposium, was an opportunity not easily forgone to make some statements about a country’s culture, its history, its dilemmas; to use the tradition of humor, such as it
was instanced or characterized, to expound a more critical or complex view of the country and the culture.

In the twentieth century the most important and most influential theories of humor have all depicted humor as a mode of being intelligent – not just “smart” – and as a critical or subversive faculty of the mind. I am thinking of the theories of the French philosopher Henri Bergson in the early part of the century, of Freud in his book on wit and in other writings, and of the great Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, who in the 1920s and 1930s advanced a theory of the comic narrative in his books on Rabelais and Dostoyevsky. Bakhtin’s notion of humor as an explosion of archaic and joyous and insolent and disruptive feelings (what he called “the carnivalesque”) and of polysemic meanings is quite compatible with some of the analyses presented in this symposium of national traditions of humor.

Also present in many of the papers was a more specifically contemporary understanding of humor as the occasion for a critical discourse about culture. For humor can be seen as an act of critical intelligence; the discourse about humor is now itself a lively part of a critical discussion of contemporary culture. The specifically modern slant, and this was the argument of most of the papers, is that humor in films, being an outgrowth of profound, deeply rooted popular themes, themes which spring from traditions of folk culture that long antedate the relatively new art of cinema – even though film is indisputably a product of modern mass culture, an art in and of the era of mechanical reproduction (the copy, the duplicate, the “print”). The discourse about humor assumes the value of preserving nativist traditions in a given culture under the onslaught of commercial or homogenizing influences. The assumption is that the tradition of humor is closer to an indigenous tradition of consciousness and could be preserved even in a world in which the circumstances of filmmaking are increasingly industrialized and increasingly international (which amounts, mostly, to coming under American influence). So comic films are seen as the repository of certain distinctive national or native traditions, a counterforce to the homogenizing pressures of the cinema of international conglomerates. That was, in part, the message of the astute paper on Australian cinema.

A review of the comic traditions in cinema, as in other arts generally includes a validation of the anarchic strands in a culture. It presents a plea for at least a limited amount of disturbance and noncomformity. And
sometimes it may be the occasion for expounding a more specific, political critique. It can be useful for this purpose to describe the controversy surrounding a particular film, contrasting the way in which a film was viewed when it first came out and the way it is regarded at a later time. Ma Ning’s extremely stimulating analysis of the Chinese film *Satisfied or Not*, made in 1962, was an example of a discourse about the comic being used fruitfully to make a certain political point, to instance a political complexity in his native country of which we might have been unaware. At the same time we were also being invited simply to savor an indigenous (therefore endangered?) tradition of the comic.

Once again, I want to stress that I’m entirely in sympathy with these ways of *using* the topic of humor as the occasion for a critical discourse about culture, about politics.

The papers, all of them, assumed that there were national traditions of the comic and, in some cases, addressed the task of describing the specifics of the national sense of humor. Ian Buruma’s elegant paper took up the old question of the Japanese sense of humor and asked why it is thought that the Japanese have less of a sense of humor or that certain forms of humor are unavailable to them. I thought he provided a brilliant account of why a particular form of humorous narrative that involves irony is less common in Japanese films, and in Japanese culture generally. Ahn Byung Sup talked about the lack of comic films produced in Korea, suggesting that Korea, with its painful history, could not yet afford the relaxation from the serious that comic films might supply. That presumes that comic is... light. Other speakers employed rather different senses of the comic.

I do not doubt that there are national traditions of humor. What seems more important to note here is that there are traditions of discourse about humor that emphasize the national, and that precisely this discourse has recently become an important tool of the critical discourse about culture.

Most of what can be said about the universally funny or comic – a reality that was ruled out or obscured by the construction of topics in this symposium – would revolve, I think, around the figure of the fool. The fool is a figure that seems to occur in some form or other in all cultures. This figure, the innocent person to whom regressive behavior is easily available, is very important in film comedy – think of Keaton and Langdon. The other figure that seems to be universal is the trickster, the
sly fellow who humbles the pretentious, the powerful, and the obtuse. And, finally, there is a recurrent *dual* figure, which seems to be an extension or amalgam of the fool and of the trickster (I am talking about what seem like nearly universal traditions of the comic), reconstituted as a comic pair, the odd couple – archetypally, a tall skinny man and a short fat man. This pair, given immortally embodiment in Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, recurs again and again. The super ego and the id, you might say. The holy and/or innocent fool with his head in the clouds and the lively coarse guy who is mostly thinking about the next meal but also trying vainly to bring his guileless impractical buddy down to earth. (The Sancho Panza type could be considered a trickster figure who isn’t very smart.) As well as the pairing of two contrasting comic archetypes, they are also two halves of a character that can be embodied in the same personage. The genius of Chaplin in his greatest films is, I think, that he is both Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Perhaps it is this density of archetypes that explains why Chaplin was more successful than any other comic actor in crossing cultural boundaries.

I offer these rather schematic observations with some diffidence. It may seem insufficiently history-minded to try to identify some transcultural traditions, figures of the comic common to all or nearly all peoples. Clearly the preferred focus now – as illustrated by the present symposium – has been on the ways in which humor can be linked to national traditions, national aspirations, and the critical consciousness of people who talk about culture.

One last point. To think about humor and about the way that humor is culture-bound, one must not only ask what people find funny. One should turn the question around and ask, what do people find not funny. Recall Mr. Buruma’s example of the Japanese who didn’t understand the irony involved in a certain teasing question because his culture does not equip him to make easily the distinction, well established in our culture, between a social role (with its attendant stereotypes) and the unincorporated, as it were, individual. . . . Standards of what is and is not funny are among a culture’s central assumptions.

The first time I was forcefully made aware of this was many years ago, and what was at issue was a film. At a college near New York City where I taught for a year, I met a visiting scholar from India. We fell into a conversation about his impressions of what is all too crudely called “Western civi-
lization;" and at one point he avowed that the proof for him of the innate barbarism of the West was . . . *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. What is considered in this part of the world as one of the masterpieces of film comedy he thought a monstrously wicked film. The audience’s laughter during the film, he said, had horrified him. Treating murder as a joke, he thought, could not help but make people more insensitive about or inured to the idea of taking human life.

I said that I didn’t think people laughed because they were callous (even if they were callous, which I didn’t dispute). They laughed, I said, because this story of a handsome impoverished young Englishman, ninth in line to a dukedom, who murders the eight distant relatives who are closer to the title than he, really is funny. It’s not that we are indifferent to death, or the taking of life, I argued. It is that murder in this film narrative has become notional, a figure. In order for the story to be funny, it is necessary for the gruesome to be masked. The spectator doesn’t see any of the eight people die, and the ways in which they are dispatched are comically ingenious and a witty commentary on the eccentric character of each. For instance, one victim is an old colonel given to inane boasting about his exploits long ago in the Crimean War. The blowhard is blown up . . . by a bomb sent to him in a can of caviar, which arrives while he is having a meal at his London club. Interrupting the telling of one of his tedious war stories to open the can, he exclaims pompously, “Ah, caviar. One thing those Russkies really do well” – and then, Boom! Then, cut. The spectator knows he is dead, but is spared the visuals: the mutilated body (bodies, rather, for others would have been killed with him) in the wreckage of the club’s dining room. Thus we have the fantasy of death – a naughty fantasy – without being obliged to confront the reality of death.

The single most brilliant idea of the film, which insures that we will not take the death of the eight murderees seriously, is that they are all played, in a legendary feat of screen-acting virtuosity, by the same actor, Alec Guinness. The fact that each time someone dies, and the young murderer (he is played by Dennis Price) then moves on to tackle the problem of devising a new undetectable murder, the next victim (whom the spectator sees for the first time) turns out to be the same person, because played by the same actor – here is a wonderful application of the idea of family resemblance. More important, it means that each death is followed by a resurrection – as in the violence of animated cartoons from which the battered little animal is seen, in the next shot, as entirely recovered. Sub-
liminally, what the spectator experiences is that no one really dies. (Until, perhaps, the last victim.) Even when the murderer is, through an excess of his own cleverness, about to be apprehended, he is not shown being caught, disgraced. The last shot of the murderer that we see shows us someone who is still the self-confident charmer. No painful feelings of any kind are allowed to intrude. They would break the spell.

All the victims are one person, Alec Guinness in various kinds of eccentric drag. (In one instance, literally so, for one of the eight heirs is a woman.) The reality of the film is not death but skill: the skill of the character in the story in devising funny methods of assassination, the skill of the actor in impersonating a variety of eccentrics. Why is this not heartless, as my Indian colleague thought? Because, I argued, the film is not cynical at all. It is, indeed, extremely good-natured. *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is, viewed from the perspective of today's manners and moviemaking, a very old-fashioned film. Like the less brilliant *Arsenic and Old Lace*, it is about murder disrupting conventions of gentility — and assumes that decorum and manners are still a force. But the joke, I would argue (and did argue to my Indian colleague), is about gentility, not about murder.

Although it might seem easy to judge this Indian visitor to an American college as overly solemn or lacking a sense of humor, I can't say that I didn't, or don't, understand what he was talking about. For it is not just a question of not being able to appreciate what another culture finds funny....

Lately I've had several conversations about an American film that I despised and almost everyone I know likes enormously, a film that takes place in a world in which decorum has been loosened beyond repair, whose subject is humiliation and disgrace, and which forces us to look at the upsetting and the indecent. Some claim to like it because they find it sexy, but everyone claims to like it because they find it so funny. Since I found it not only not at all funny but cruel and an incitement to hardheartedness, this has been occasion for me in the last few weeks to reflect about my own sense of humor, which may indeed be quite limited and even, in some respects, not very American. I wonder what my colleague from India of many years ago would say about *Blue Velvet*. Lately, I've been feeling quite a bit like him.
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**Note**

1. This article is a version, edited by Ms. Sontag, of a partial verbatim transcript of her informal remarks delivered at the conclusion of the Film Symposium held in conjunction with the 1986 Hawaii International Film Festival.

On the concluding page of *Bertolucci’s Dream Loom*, T. Jefferson Kline quotes Bernardo Bertolucci as having said, “I could never separate politics from psychoanalysis...” Bertolucci’s work offers ample substantiation for this statement. Kline, on the other hand, despite his occasional use of the word, appears oblivious to the mechanisms of politics either in the texts of Bertolucci’s films or in the world at large. This is not to write off Kline’s book as valueless. Far from it. But, as the title signals, Kline’s interpretation of Bertolucci’s unusually diverse oeuvre is limited by the single master narrative he has chosen to employ to the exclusion of all others.

In his prefatory remarks, Kline is quite open regarding this and admits, “There is, of course, a danger in imposing any methodology, coherence, or unity on a body of work” (p. 3). Though he may recognize this danger, Kline does nothing to guard against it. This narrowness of focus is both the book’s strength and weakness. Seldom in film criticism has psychoanalysis been so lucidly explained and convincingly (with a few glaring exceptions) applied. Unlike the authors of many auteurist studies, Kline has a theoretical mission to which he hews closely, too closely, throughout the volume’s modest length. This lends *Bertolucci’s Dream Loom* a seriousness of purpose, a “coherence,” that is hard to find in auteurist criticism, but it also channels and distorts Kline’s otherwise sensitive readings of the films.

Essentially, Kline’s thesis is based on the not unfamiliar similarities between the experience of the film viewer and that of the dreamer. (He does not find it necessary to mention the many dissimilarities.) Aided by the writings of Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Nick Browne, among others, Kline uses this dated film-as-dream analogy to anchor some surprisingly compelling, if limited, interpretations of *Before the Revolution* (1964), *Partner* (1968), *The Spider’s Stratagem* (1970), *The Conformist* (1970), and even *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). Kline’s grasp of psychoanalysis proves a valuable tool in the analysis of character and narrative structure in each of these films, though whether his methodology would be as readily applicable to films written and directed by a filmmaker who, unlike Bertolucci, was not personally versed in Freud remains an open question. Kline, however, seems
to consider an affirmative answer to this question an unproblematic certainty.

If Kline seems oddly content with the schematic readings allowed by his minimally reconstructed Freudianism, the faith he places in this methodology seems justifiable, given his stated intent, up to the point he attempts to make the overtly political 1900 fit into his almost wholly depoliticized discourse. The existence of political content is allowed by Kline when he discusses The Conformist since it can be removed from the social structure per se and treated solely on the level of the fascist personality. But the content of 1900 is unassimilable by Kline's psychoanalysis and so is dismissed as inconsequential. Instead, Kline drastically reworks the film to suit his project. While he, apparently in a moment of weakness, concedes that the subject of the film is "revolution," he chooses the alternate, willfully inappropriate definition of the word, "Orbital motion about a point" (p. 142), over the political definition the film demands. Thus, for Kline, "1900 stands for cinema itself in its insistence on the shift of focus away from the history of events narrated to a 'destiny' always already 'written' in relationships, much like our own ongoing desire to reexperience the primal scene in the voyeuristic place of the darkened movie theater" (p. 143). This is nothing more nor less than evasion, and is at best only partially excused by Kline's slippery early warning that "I do not claim that the coherence I shall describe in Bertolucci's work is exclusive of other coherences" (p. 3). He may not make that claim, but he nevertheless acts to exclude meanings that he, for whatever reason, finds inconvenient.

However, once Kline moves beyond this outlandish discussion of 1900, his mode of analysis once again demonstrates its worth in a precise and illuminating chapter on the plainly psychoanalytical Luna. This film proves the ideal vehicle to illustrate the interconnections between film, dream, and maternity that Kline persuasively asserts runs through all of Bertolucci's films and, he argues, perhaps less persuasively, lies at the root of the viewing experience itself.

Aside from the chapter on 1900, Bertolucci's Dream Loom offers a unified, stimulating set of film critiques that should add considerably to any reading of the director's work.

There is one final reservation, however. Kline's grasp of film history (specifically Neo-Realism's relation to the French New Wave) and of classical film theory (Eisenstein and Bazin) is clearly tenuous. He apparently was not sufficiently interested or did not have the time to study thoroughly and reflect on the works themselves and instead depends upon the most simplistic received wisdom concerning them. This does not detract from his overall thesis, but it may prove an irritant to some readers.

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India is by far the largest film-producing country in the world. It produces
annually more than nine hundred films. Indian films are avidly seen not only in South Asia and Southeast Asia, but also in the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean, and even in Russia. We can best understand the true nature and significance of Indian cinema by dividing it into two main categories: the popular cinema and artistic cinema. Indian films have gained such wide popularity both inside and outside the country primarily due to the popular cinema, which is characterized by melodramatic stories, sugary music, song-and-dance sequences, and exotic locations. On the other hand, the artistic cinema is largely supported by a minority of discerning cinemagoers both inside and outside India. Aruna Vasudev's book, The Indian Cinema, seeks to explore the progress of this artistic cinema in the hands of the younger Indian film directors.

Satyajit Ray is generally credited with inaugurating the artistic cinema. The Song of India (Pather Panchali) won for Indian cinema international critical recognition that it so badly needed. His other two films in the trilogy, The Unvanquished (Aparajito) and The World of Apu (Apu Sansar), established firmly the artistic genius of Ray. A number of other directors like Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, Kumar Shahani, Girish Karnad, Goutam Ghose, Mani Kaul, Ketan Mehta, Nirad Mohapatra, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, and Saeed Mirza contributed significantly to the growth of this artistic cinema.

Aruna Vasudev in this book attempts to examine the work of these numerous directors associated with the New Cinema in terms of theme, form, style, and vision as well as in relation to the social and cultural forces that shape this cinema.

The book consists of ten chapters. The first three chapters are devoted to a historical analysis—the social, cultural, and artistic factors that contributed to the emergence of the New Indian Cinema. The fourth chapter presents us with some interesting information regarding the role of the government in fostering this New Indian Cinema. As Dr. Vasudev says, “In countries where a new movement opposed to the popular cinema surfaced, it developed out of a compulsion felt by the filmmakers themselves to plumb the depths of their medium as a basic material with the richest potential for creative expression, as an art, or as an instrument of social change. In India it was the government that initiated the change, making it possible for a whole new generation to produce films which are often critical of the government’s functioning” (p. 32).

The next two chapters are devoted to a discussion of the substance and style of New Indian Cinema and the social codes that pertain to it. From the very beginning the state of Bengal was closely associated with the rise of the artistic cinema, and hence it is hardly surprising that Aruna Vasudev, in her seventh chapter, chooses to survey the cinematic landscape of Bengal. The last two decades have witnessed a great burgeoning of serious and artistically distinguished cinema in the south; the eighth chapter is devoted to a discussion of the southern scene. The ninth chapter deals with aspects of form and function in relation to the work of younger and artistically committed di-
rectors, and the final chapter contains some useful information pertaining to some of the talented actors and actresses who have contributed so hugely to the success of the New Indian Cinema.

Dr. Aruna Vasudev's book, thus, is a useful work that should prove to be valuable to all those seriously interested in modern Indian cinema. I would like to have seen greater attention being paid to the formulation of a theoretical framework within which the material she deals with could have been more coherently and productively investigated.

All in all, *The New Indian Cinema*, constitutes a valuable addition to the exegetical literature on Indian films.

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