

# *Comedy: Violence, Change, Survival*



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## **Comedy: Violence, Change, Survival**

**"The predominant theme in comedy: A study of Violence, Change and Survival."**

**Case study: Marx Brother & W.C. Fields**



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(Let The Comedy Begin)

## Introduction

"It's a funny old world. A man's lucky if he gets out of it alive." W.C. Fields  
*You're Telling Me!* (1934)

In this master thesis, I will investigate specific themes or motives that have predominant existence in the genre comedy. By theme, I mean recurring motive associated with a particular person, place, or idea, in Opera this is called Leitmotif, literally meaning leading motif. In this thesis, I am in search, of the theme violence, change, and survival, which are archetypal themes in the genre comedy. In particular in the films of W.C. Fields and Marx Brothers.

The three themes have been chosen through a lengthy investigation into comedy, instead of following my preconceived idea of what comedy is. I have let comedy speak to me, through watching enough films, to be able to arrive at some conclusions, the three themes, violence, change, survival, caught my attention. While there are other themes, subjects I could have chosen in the genre comedy, it is these three themes, I want to investigate, which I hope to show is predominant in the genre comedy.

"Probably the most violent comedic form is the kiddie cartoon. See them on a Saturday morning! Road Runner is worse than Bonnie and Clyde." (Lewis: 1971: 190)

The theme of violence, in slapstick comedy, is reasonably well-known phenomena, along with the violence in Cartoons, where it has been more visible to the audience and researchers. In this thesis, I look for implicit violence, that is through the case study of W.C. Fields, then graphic violence through general films by Jackie Chan, Bud Spencer, and Terence Hill. To the second theme, if we look closely, at the movies of Chaplin, the idea of survival is a major theme, the film *The Gold Rush* (1925), is all about surviving the winter, poor Chaplin in order not to starve to death, eats his shoe. The theme survival is central to comedy, it is a recurring theme in Marx Brothers and generally in the films of Albert Brooks, Jerry Lewis, Mae West. To the theme of change, which is less visible than the other two, when a hero is changed from the timid man into a lion, like in the film *Running Wild* (1927), this is change.

In his film analysis guide, "*Studying Contemporary American Film*", Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland write:

"Whatever type of text we are referring to – a novel, poem, or film – the theme refers to that text's substance, its principal idea, what it is about." (Elsaesser & Buckland: 2002: 117)

Using thematic analysis means searching for the principal idea, in the case of comedy, the theme of violence, change, and survival. As Elsaesser & Buckland points out, thematic analysis consists in two forms, in the general (violence in comedy) and the particular (violence in W.C. Fields). The cases chosen have either the explicit reference to the theme, like in *Toto*, who merely wants to survive or for their implicit idea, like Albert Brooks, who is unable to survive.

### Research Question

The research question:

The theme and themes that dominate (is present) in the genre Comedy.

How is comedy produced through the theme of survival, violence, and change, with the case studies of W.C.Fields and Marx Brothers?

To answer the research question, I will ask the following question:

1. What is comedy in Cinema?
2. How is comedy defined through the comedian/theoretician?
3. How is comedy produced in a comedy movie?

The primary objective of this thesis is to bring to the surface, the dominant theme in comedy. In the book "*Filmanalytiske Tradisjoner*" (2008), it says, the theoretician should always have the film as a whole in its focus (Roometveit & Lise with: 107). Some comedy films, have more than one theme in them, these other themes will not part of the study.



The two case studies are two films by Marx Brothers and three films by W.C. Fields. In the case of Marx Brothers, I have chosen, the movie, *The Cocoanuts* (1929) and *Animal Crackers* (1930), which have the predominant theme, surviving. In the case of W.C. Fields, violence in the films *Sally Of The Sawdust* (1925), *It's the old army game* (1926), and *Running Wild* (1927).

## Theory

To better understand the genre comedy, I have read the book "*The crazy mirror: Hollywood comedy and the American image*" (1969) by Raymond Durnat, on American film comedy. And "*The Silent Clowns*" (1990) by Walter Kerr, along with Gerald Masts "*The comic mind: comedy and the movies*" (1973). While I do not use their theory, they have helped me, in my investigation, the book "*Golden Age of Sound Comedy*" (1973) by Donald McCaffrey and "*A-Z of Silent Film Comedy*" (1998), by Glenn Mitchell.

The French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, wrote two books, on cinema, his theory of perception-image, is utilized to define the theme of change. Along with Alenka Zupancic theory of comedy, especially her comments on Slapstick comedy, and last but not least the German film critic, Siegfried Kracauer on Silent film comedy. There is more in a small sentence by Jerry Lewis, on violence in comedy, then a whole theoretical book by David Bordwell. The way Woody Allen, define comic character, is fundamental, to the understanding the theme, change.

## Method

In this master thesis, I will analyze thematic motives, in the genre comedy, with two case studies, that is W.C.Fields and Marx Brothers. Picking from a wide-ranging of comedians, I will try to describe the underlying motif in the genre comedy.

Once the comedian is chosen, I will look into his filmography, analyze his films one by one, pinpointing the underlying theme. In order underline the comedian's idea, I will look into everything the comedian has done, this means watching as many films as possible.



## The Invention of Comedy

*In this chapter, I will mention some of the fundamental development in comedy. That is articulating, some elements, which characterizes the genre comedy.*

"The comic is therefore accidental: it remains, so to speak, in superficial contact with the person." (Bergson: 1914:10)

For Henri Bergson the French philosopher, comic effect is produced through absentmindedness, what Bergson calls mechanical inelasticity, that is when a man continues in his everyday activity unconcerned to the people and objects around him. To a person who has no prior knowledge of the history of cinema, he or she will be amazed at seeing, the first fictional film, ever made by the Lumière Brothers.

The short film, *L'Arroseur Arrosé* made in 1885, with the duration of 45 seconds, the plot of the movie is simple, a man is watering his garden. A young man approaches unbeknownst to the gardener behind him, with his leg, presses on the water hose, which stops, the water flowing for a few seconds, the gardener looks inside the hose, not understanding, why the has water stopped. At that moment, the boy takes his leg off the hose, and water starts flowing again, spraying water on the gardener.

In other words, the first fictional film, made with the camera was a comedy, a gag (Visual Comedy) (Bordwell & Thompson: 2003).

The history of Cinema begins with comedy, it is not strange then that five years later Georges Méliès (the first film director), makes *Le Déshabillage impossible* (1900).

Another extraordinary film, which uses the trick camera, very advanced for its time, the short is about a man in a drunk state, taking off his cloth, trying to go to sleep.

But every time, he takes something off, a hat, another one replaces it as if in a bad dream, this continues indefinite, the poor man is not able to take any of his cloth off.

A single static shot, this little scenes is more complicated, less naive then the previous film mentioned, we have a pure desire, a man trying to get to sleep, we have an unknown force, cloth preventing him from doing so, this is repeated until he, becomes frustrated and angry. This scene is pure comedy, the impossibility of fulfilling a desire, and our identification with him (Abel: 2010).

While Lumière Brothers created the first fictional film, which was a comedy, Méliès is the first comedy director, in several of his film, comedy is an integral part of his fictional world. In one of his earliest short films, *Une Nuit Terrible* (1896), about a man almost like a Kafkaesque story is trying to sleep, but then is disturbed by a giant bug (Ezra: 2000).

After Méliès mastered the trick camera, in 1901, combining the knowledge, he gained over the years with fantasy elements he was so fond of, and he created the short film, *The Magician's Cavern* (1901) with duration of 2. 50 seconds. The film is about a magician, who turns a skeleton into a beautiful woman, then after some more tricks, turn it back into a skeleton, which starts to dance, then magician begins to dance with the skeleton looking at us in amusement. What is essential in the short film is the character of Melies (the magician), who is capable of doing extraordinary things comically. The short film, *Excelsior!* (1901), the tricks Méliès pulls is exceptional, the magician asks for a handkerchief since his assistant does not have one, he pulls it out of his assistant mouth, from the handkerchief then he pulls out an aquarium so on and so forth. That is his tricks, along with the fantasy elements, are all combined with comedy to create an enjoyable film (Ezra: 2000).

The most critical filmmaker after Méliès is Edwin S. Porter, who makes the short film, which seems like the forerunner to Keystone cops, *Kansas Saloon Smashers* in (1901). The film uses violence to create comedy, in a saloon, a bartender is serving alcohol to some men, then two women enter the salon, begin beating up the men, and start smashing the bar (Musser: 1991).

In another violent short, *A Chess Dispute* from (1903), although filmed in one static shot, the camera is well placed, about a friendly chess match, which turns into a violent fight between the two men, when one of them cheats. What makes this short impressive, is that the violence is not shown but suggested to the audience, we never see the actual fight, most of it happens off-screen (Fig. 1) (King: 2002).

"Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absent mindedness and wake him out of his dream." (Bergson: 1914: 134)



(Fig. 1) One of the men, is beating the other with a bottle off screen (Robert W. Paul: 1903).

Decades later, Pierre Richard will create his absent-minded character, who inflicts violence on people, the earliest short film to have an absent-minded character, is in the film, *An Interesting Story* (1904). The film is about an imbecile who is unaware of the world around him, while reading a book, inflicts violence on himself, he is even run over by a road roller. What makes this short impressive is the use of editing, camera position, and character to produce comedy, slowly the filmmakers are developing Slapstick Comedy (Pierre: 2009).

A simple definition of slapstick comedy is a comedy based on physical action, inflicting impossible violence on to the person or persons around him. *An Interesting Story* is a classic Slapstick film, the man is pumped back to life by using bicycle air pump after being run over by the road roller. Another example of early slapstick comedy, is in *First Prize for Cello* (1907), a man sits down and start to play the cello, he is so bad at playing the cello, that the whole neighborhood asks him to stop. He continues playing, oblivious to the people around him, in other to make him stop, the entire neighborhood starts to throwing things at him, at one point of the film a cupboard is thrown at him (Loiperdinger: 2012).

The American comedian Ben Turpin, who continued to make films until the 1940s (the year he died), made the first, Pie in the Face act in a film, *Mr. Flip* (1909). In the film Ben Turpin is harassing woman, wherever he goes, he finally gets pie in the face as punishment in the last minute of the film. Ben Turpin would continue to make movies with Chaplin, and be one of the leading actors for Mack Sennet Studio (Roots: 2014).

"Linder was essentially an indoor man, a trimly turned out *bon vivant*, insisting on restraint in his gagging, thoroughly disliking chases, refusing or failing to drain from initial extravagances the vast logical absurdity that was in them. Thrown into a physical situation, he seems to have found his comedy in evading it." (Kerr: 1975: 53)

As Walter Kerr describes Max Linder in the above quote, if we retroactively look at what the French comedian, Max Linder invented, and comparing it with other shorts of the time, it is incredible. His character is that of a wealthy bachelor (you never see him working), sometimes he is married. Most of the time, he is around stranger (a trait that belongs to every comedian), his comedy compared to others is slow, it does not immediately jump at you, but is much more complicated. In the films of Max Linders, there is no dialogue, except for a few expository intertitles, which describes the situation.

In *Max Speaks English* (1914), no titles is used, he meets an English lady who does not speak French, the film becomes comic, when Max has to communicate with her without using words, in a silent movie (Golden: 2000).

Among many things, Max Linder introduced to comedy was to portray the same man from film to film, a man with silk hat and mustache, who embarks on adventures. His single contribution to comedy is the character of max, the movies are about him, it is crucial that he is not a random character, but we have the feeling that we know him. His first known appearance is in *The Skater's Debut* (1907), he wants to skate, already in this film, you can see, the influence he had on Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), in the scene where Chaplin, is trying to roller skate. Compare Linders film with the *First Prize for Cello*, which was made the same year, and we can see a new form of comedy is developing.

The most astonishing achievement of Max Linder persona on the screen is that he is alive, he appears to be living in a real world. Therefore he has desires, weaknesses, happy and sad moments, his comedy emerges from just living, a bourgeois lifestyle (Horton: 2015).

In *Troubles of a Grass Widower* (1908), he is married, after quarreling with his wife, she leaves him, Linder had already established himself as old fashion man, who has never done a hard day of housework in his life. Then scene by scene, Linder inserts comic moments, alone in the house, Max trying to feed himself, washing dishes and does some housework. In *Max and His Mother-in-Law* (1911), a film around 25 minutes, which is enormous for its time, Max is with his new bride, wanting to be alone with her, his mother in law keeps interrupting them. In the film the couple ends up taking their mother in law, everywhere with them, even to their honeymoon, for Linder the mother in law, represents every mother in law (Golden: 2000).

The title of the film suggests a generic character, which represents the desire of mother in law in general, just like skiing which for Linder has no specificity. In *Max and His Dog* (1912), the dog could be any dog, and it has no specificity, what is specific is the character of Max. What is of importance is the character of Max with the dog, the dog in of itself is not essential. Looking at Linders film from the critical point of view, we can see that, his structure is limited, each movie has one theme, that is throughout the film one thing happens or is happening. In *Max Takes a Bath* (1908), he tries to take a bath in his new bathtub, that is what the whole film is about, everything is centered around this theme (Golden: 2000).

In one of his most important short, *A Mirthquake Of Twenty Years Ago* (year unknown), Max goes to the store to buy something for his girl, in the store a paper accidentally gets stuck to him. It is flypaper which first gets stuck in his shoes, he sits down the store owner helps him get rid of it, but another one got attached to his ass. Max gets rid of that one, goes over to the girl's house, another one got stuck to his arm, he tries to get rid it, but now his hands are like glue, everything gets stuck to them. The short film from 1912 has a very appropriate title *The Romance of Max*, the predominant theme in Max Linders films is his relationship with woman. In *A Mirthquake Of Twenty Years Ago*, it is the glue that makes trouble for Max, and he even is thrown out of his girlfriend's house because of it. His films, are about Max romantic troubles.

In *Max Lance La Mode* (1912), Linder is having trouble getting married, in *Max and His Dog* (1912), about a woman who can't decide between Max and another man. In Linder's screen persona, we can find elements that will be the trademark of comic character, his impossible relationship to woman or lack of relationship, and the fact that he gets along more with animals than human beings (think of the dog, who ends up being his companionship) (Golden: 2000).

"Any such gag was a small unit complete in itself, and any comedy was a package of gags which, in music hall fashion, were autonomous entities rather than parts of a story. As a rule, there was a story of a sort, but it had merely the function of stringing these monad-like units together." (Kracauer: 2012: 216)

Max Linder was the international star, but the Keystone Studios (Founded by Mack Sennett), was a studio that made one thing, comedy. In the short film, *Keystone Comedy*, produced in 1912, the year the studio was founded, we get a glimpse of this crazy factory. The short film, Shows behind the scenes of the film industry, makes fun of the filmmakers and near the end of the film, Chaplin appears in it. It is important to note that Mabel Normand, a woman was able to act, and direct in Mack Sennett studio, where she often appears with Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle (Mest: 1979).

In short movie, *The Bangville Police* (1913), the Keystone Cops (a bunch of incompetent cops), try to rescue a woman, who in fact contrary to what the cops think is not in any danger whatsoever, it is a reversal of a typical D.W. Griffith film, without the actual suspense, and mastery in editing (Roots: 2014).

Concerning content, the comedy is all is over the top, the characters one dimensional, if they introduce one character as a bad guy, then throughout the movie he is portrayed as a bad guy. As Kracauer pointed out, the story was to be able to put the gags together, and in of itself, has no importance. While the narrative is flat, what Mack Sennett did more than anything else was to introduce cops in comedy, from then on, there is always one or two cops in the films of Chaplin (in *A Thief Catcher* (1914), Chaplin even appears as one of the cops), Buster, and Harold Lloyd.



It was in Keystone Studios that all the comedy duo started, Chaplin with Arbuckle, Arbuckle with Lloyd and Keaton, and the fantastic supporting cast around them. Something Max Linder was greatly missing, we quickly forget who appeared with Linder, but we remember, the supporting cast around Chaplin. In the Sennett Studio, the comedian was able to make a film anywhere, they were completely free, to make it as he went along, in other words, improvisation was at the center of their filmmaking.

"Sennett comedies were shot off the cuff. Something was inevitably happening within 30 miles of the Sennett studios... Sennett packed his cameras, crew, and players off to the scene of the activity, shot some footage with his central players in the frame, and then returned to the studio to shoot the interlinking story. Such improvisatory filming not only provided the Sennett company with spectacular events that cost nothing, but gave Sennett production the feeling of spontaneity and freshness."  
(Mast: 1979: 48)

Therefore they have as Gerald Mast points out a spontaneity to them, you can see this in the extraordinary short with Gloria Swanson, *The Danger Girl* (1916). A film about love triangle, shot to perfection, the narrative perfectly intact, with character intermingling without it seeming weak. In *Gentlemen of Nerve* (1914), Mack Swain (Mr. Walrus) is stuck, how Chaplin in an improvisational way tries to get him out is pure comedy, then, of course, a cop appears out of nowhere (Mest: 1979).

In his book Mack Sennett "*King Of Comedy*", describes what was going on in the Sennett Studio, the cost of mechanical gags, the fact that they never bought stories or gags from anybody else.

"Matter of fact those comedies were fundamentally sound in plot structure and characterization. Each comedian had a definite character and a definite range. The stories and the gags were custom-tailored to fit Ben Turpin, Harry Langdon, Billy Bevan, Charlie Chaplin, Mabel Norman, or whichever funny person the story was for." (Sennett: 1990:128)

Sennett's approach to comedy was to develop the story first, then tear it apart, add funny moments or gags, until they were satisfied. In the book "*The Silent Clowns*" by Walter Kerr, he talks about the short film, *The Knockout* (1914): "This plot doesn't strike you as particularly funny." (1975: 61-62)

Kerr sees Sennett not so much as the king of comedy but as a carpenter, who builds the house where comedy can exist. Sennett gave the tools to his comedians to be able to create comedy, also not to mention, introducing parody into the movies. Sennett is the first filmmaker to poke fun at other films like Erich von Stroheim, *Foolish Wives* (1922) and Rudolph Valentino, *The Sheik* (1921), not to mention the films of D.W. Griffith.

Lookin at it the studio from another angle, then we can see that what they made was something like, what every comedian today do on Television. The Sennett studio was like Saturday Night Live, and comedians could come, try various styles and character, before finding their voice. In *A Busy Day* (1914), Chaplin plays a woman, in *Making a Living* (1914), he plays a swindler, in *Mabel at the Wheel* (1914), a gentleman, who turns out to be a villain. The stories go nowhere, the comedy is like one-liners (Chaplin gets hit by a brick), portraying weak characters, that have no depth nor life to them. Seeing the films Chaplin, made at the Mack Sennett Studio, he seems to be all over the place, playing all sort of character, at best finding himself in an ordinary short film without actual comedy.

The problem with early Chaplin is that he still finds himself in the world of Mack Sennett, his supporting characters is less well written, he still uses the flat, overplayed characters (the gambler), whom we supposed to hate immediately. In *The Tramp* (1915), the criminals, seem to be taken right out of Mack Sennett film, the plot of the movie is just ridiculous. The Tramp saves a girl from some criminals (who for no reason was standing in the woods), while a beautiful girl who also for no reason, is in the woods, holding some money. One reason Chaplin leaves Mack Sennett Studio in 1915, is that Sennett had something to say, he was involved in the making of the films. Therefore Chaplin was never free to do what he wanted (Roots: 2014).

## Surviving the World

*In this chapter, I introduce the concept, the theme survival, which I will show through various comedians, is an essential part of the genre comedy. The theme survival in comedy can vary all the way from, surviving the daily life in the case of Albert Brooks, to surviving the non-event in Jacques Tati.*

"Accidents were the very soul of slapstick. This too was intrinsically cinematic, for it conformed to the spirit of a medium predestined to capture the fortuitous aspects of physical life." (Kracauer: 2012: 215)

In the movie *Dr. Jack* (1922), possibly the first film by Harold Lloyd, that has a perfect narrative structure, Harold Lloyd plays a doctor (Dr. Jack). Who at the beginning of the film gets a call from a little girl crying: "Come quick Doctor Jack, Mary is dying!" He drives as fast as possible but gets stopped by cows, cop, the car breaking down, he then starts running, rides a bicycle which turns out to be broken, when he finally arrives. The little girl says Mary fell in the well, he looks into the well, it turns out that Mary was a doll, but all was not in vain, the situation becomes even funnier when he finds out that there is a sick boy. Then Lloyd checks him, it turns out, that he was only playing sick to avoid school, in this way, he twice plays with our expectation (Kerr: 1975).

Harold Lloyd character in the film is the perfect metaphor for comedy, someone who revives people, helps people to survive. In the movie, Lloyd saves a girl, who has become lifeless, given wrong medicine by a wrong doctor, Lloyd rescues her from a vampire-like state of living, where even the sun, is forbidden to her.

"Keaton was a wonderfully resourceful inventor of mechanistic gags; as he ran a foul of locomotives, steamships, prefabricated and over-electrified houses, he put himself through some of the hardest and cleverest punishment ever designed for laughs." (Agee: 2000: 408)

The American film critic James Agee "*Comedy's Greatest Era*", wrote one of best account of the experience of watching silent comedy. As Agee points out, Keaton put himself in some of the hardest situations to create comedy, in the films of Buster Keaton, the whole movie is about surviving, avoiding obstacles, facing death. In *The General* (1926), surviving Civil War, in the *Steamboat Bill, Jr* surviving the cyclone, in *The Navigator* (1924), the Ocean (Kerr: 1975).

Buster Keaton often survives by sheer luck, even when the danger is created by him, in *Hard Luck* (1921), he tries to commit suicide, he steps in front of what seems to be a car at night, it turns out, it was two motorcycle. In his unthinking mode, he finds himself, in immense danger, in *Day Dreams* (1922), very appropriate title for Keaton's character. While saying goodbye to his girl, he steps on the street, cars flying by him, almost killing him, he continues in his sorrowful manner the goodbye. When watching a Keaton film, the comedy is indistinguishable from pure anxiety (Roots: 2014).

"Film comedy died with the silent film. Perhaps the depression precipitated its death. But it did not die from the change of social conditions, however unfortunate; rather, it was killed by a change within the mediums itself – the addition of dialogue."  
(Kracauer: 2012: 216)

For Siegfried Kracauer comedy ended when sound was added to it, for him comedy ceased to be comedy, when dialogue distracted the audiences from the visual experience. This strange statement, becomes even more bizarre when we look at the date it was written (1951), a simple counter-argument would be the films of Laurel and Hardy, which runs entirely against statements like comedy died after the invention of sound. The films of Laurel and Hardy are testaments to the fact of living comedy. Laurel and Hardy continue the Mack Sennett tradition of having the narrative as secondary to the comedy, In *Liberty* (1929), they are convicts escaping prison. In the getaway car, they have been given, some cloth, in a hurry they make the mistake of wearing each other's pants, the whole film is about how to change pants, since one of them is too big, the other too small (Kerr: 1975).

They are in the city, every time, they try to change pants, something happens, which forces them to put them back on. In an ordinary film, the story or narrative would be about how they escaped, and what happened to them afterward, but here the comedy is where we do not expect it to be, in a simple mistake of wearing the wrong pants. The film is much more intelligent, than we might expect, while they have escaped prison, they still don't have the liberty to change, even their pants.

"In Laurel and Hardy there is the action-image, the perpetual duel with matter, the milieu, woman, other people and with each other; they were able to decompose the duel, by breaking all simultaneity in space and substituting for it a succession in time, a blow for one, then a blow for the other, so that the duel propagates itself to infinity." (Deleuze 2005: 203).

This form of non-narrative is called by Deleuze action-image, where one action, escaping prison leads to another situation, the constant problem of trying to change their pants, which can go on ad infinitum. In *The Finishing Touch* (1928), they supposed to finish a house for a client, everytime they start, something else happens. In the films of Buster Keaton, he builds the house, even if it gets destroyed in the end, with Laurel and Hardy, they never start, every time they start, something else happens. There is no plot in the strict sense of the term, in *Bacon Grabbers* (1929), they have been given the assignment to retrieve a radio, 3 minutes go by, they still have not gotten out of the office, where they got the assignment. And of course, the whole film is about how they did not get the radio when they did, they destroyed it (Barr: 1968).

The logic of Laurel and Hardy films, is like the Joke told by Sigmund Freud in "*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*"

"First, I never borrowed a kettle from B. At all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged." (Freud: 1960: 62)

To come back to Deleuze's concept, Hardy is the man of action, he is the one who sets things in motion, in *Unaccustomed As We Are* (1929), Hardy tells Laurel: "Set the table, that's simple, you don't have to use any brains for that." Laurel puts down dishes first on the floor first, then covers the table, Hardy does not see the dishes on the floor, he trips and falls on his face. Although Laurel is presented as the one with no brain, he is the one with enormous ability to escape the situation. In the film, *The Second Hundred Years* (1927), Laurel in prison, he asks another inmate "How long are you in for?", he answers, "Fourty years", Laurel then gives him a letter "Mail this for me, when you get out." (Kerr: 1975)

The British film critic, theoretician Raymond Durnat in his book on American comedy "The crazy mirror: Hollywood comedy and the American image," perfectly describes the relationship between Laurel and Hardy:

"Each lets the other do his worst before retaliating – perhaps in obedience to some strange relic from the code of the west...Stan suffers because he's timid and inoffensive, Ollie suffers because he's pompous and rude." (Durnat: 1969: 69)

In other words, we have to brute force in constant battle with one another, Hardy tells Laurel to go in and light the oven, Laurel goes in, turns on the oven, but does not have a match. Hardy then volunteers to light the oven, he does not know that it is already turned on then when he lights the match, it explodes. All the violence inflicted on Hardy is from Laurel, like cartoon characters, they continue on living.

In the films of Laurel and Hardy, we can find the earliest sound experimentation, in *They Go Boom* (1929), for some strange reason Laurel and Hardy are sleeping in the same bed (even in prison). Laurel is sick, his nose is clogged up while breathing, he makes strange sounds, which disturbs Hardy. In *Laughing Gravy* (1931), the film takes place in the winter, again Laurel and Hardy are sleeping in the same bed, Laurel has the hiccups which prevent Hardy from sleeping. In *Berth Marks* (1929), they are in the train station, where the conductor is calling out all aboard, through his mumbling speech, yells where all the trains are going, but neither we nor Hardy understands, what he said.

They ask him: "Doe's this train go to Pottsville?", the conductor answers back "Keep your ears open." Continues to say in the same mumbling speech, where the train is going, never having understood a thing, Hardy tells him "Thank you." Dialogue like this would be virtually impossible before, in *Tit for Tat* (1935), they say thing like "Hardy: Do you want us to get arrested before the customers arrive? Laurel: What time are they going to be here? Hardy: "What time are they going to be here, why customers come at any time." The new possibility of using voice, a comedy routine like in movie *Blotto* (1930), would be almost impossible since you constantly have to wait for the intertitles to appear (Roots: 2014).

Laurel and Hardy are among a long tradition of comedy characters, where the question of how they can survive is left open. How is Hardy, able to survive the traps put by Laurel? How are the two men able to live, when they cant finish any job handed down to them?

In a remarkable book by Steve Massa (*Slapstick Divas: The Women of Silent Comedy*: 2017), he talks about all the woman from the early days of slapstick comedy, from the lack of attention these women got, Mae West would make up for all that all by herself. Most of these women, played the romantic interest of the hero, while the comedy came from the man, in the films of Mae West, it is the complete opposite. Up until the 30s woman had been overshadowed by their male co-stars, the coming of sound comedy would change all that (Austerlitz: 2010).

What is a typical Mae West film about?

Strangely, her films reflect all that, the man has all the power and money, they rule the common space. The question then is Mae West smart enough to play their game and be able to live in that world? The plot, the narrative is the least interesting part of her films, the supporting characters are usually flat, one dimensional, with one track mind, the most interesting part is Mae West herself. The movie often raise, the questions like is woman, in this case, Mae West able to survive, the world run by men?

Oddly enough the woman around her, see her as a threat to the society, and values they represent, yet they lack the power to act on it, it is the men who are in all the high positions, while the woman, are reduced to nothing. In *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), West says to the innocent girl who is unable to survive in that violent world "Mens all alike, married or single, it's their game, I happened to be smart to play it their way." In a Mae West film, everybody has an angle, everybody trying to use, outsmart each other. Her comedy is extremely subtle.

In *I'm No Angel* (1933), she goes to a fortune teller, and he tells her: "Ah you have a wonderful future, I see a man in your life," in which Mae West responds "What only one"? There something comic in her relationship to men, especially to sexuality, in some sense Mae West, is fighting for a place in the world of men, while all the other woman have already given up their position to men (McCaffrey: 1973).

The films are about making it in the world, being smart enough to survive, for Mae West men are like wolves, if you are not careful, they will eat you. In some sense this is the central theme in comedy in general, what are the films of Charlie Chaplin about, other then the character of the Trepmp trying to survive the world, where he finds himself destitute?

There are comedy films which are about the comedian making in the world, and there is also the comedian who helps other people make it in the world. In the movies of Mae West and Charlie Chaplin, it is about them making it, in Abbott and Costello it is about them helping a young couple make it. Abbott and Costello is there to help them to make it in a violent world, so it is not so much Abbott and Costello making it, as much as Abbott and Costello helping the couple in love make it in the dangerous world. The typical narrative structure is Abbott and Costello is they enter a violent world unknowingly, the world of gangsters in *Hold That Ghost* (1941), robbers in *Hit The Ice* (1943), crime-detective in *Who Done It?* (1942) and horror in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). And try to survive it together (Maltin: 1970).



"In *The Patsy* (1964) in which the Jerry Lewis character, Stanley Belt, falls from a hotel window (continuing his fall in a series of still cut-out images over the opening credits) only to land on a diving board and bounce back up through the window." (King: 2002: 21)

For Geoff King, this scene is cartoonish, where the laws of physics are overridden, but it also shows that Jerry Lewis can survive anything, even falling from a window. In the comedy team, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, the world is less dangerous in this sense, but the theme surviving is nevertheless present. In *Sailor Beware* (1952), they take on the navy, in *At War with the Army* (1950), they take on the army, the two films are about entering a world, and try to survive it together. That is true for the two films, but also for their other films, whether it is surviving the hard reality of the army or the golf tournament in *The Caddy* (1953). Jerry Lewis early films with Dean Martin can be called something like a guide to surviving the world. In *The Caddy* and *Money from Home* (1953), Dean Martin is utterly broke, out of his luck, money, and job (Maltin: 1970).

The films first introduce Dean Martin and his problems, then Jerry Lewis enters the scene as an answer to Deans problems. Lewis character, on the contrary, does not seem to need anything (except maybe a girl), he can be doing any job, could be living in any condition, and he still would be fine. Unlike Laurel and Hardy, the relationship between the two men is less violent, less Slapstick in this sense, much more realistic, while Martins is part of the society, integrated into the world, Lewis no matter, where he is, do not fit. Starring with, *The Delicate Delinquent* (1957), Lewis is alone, his character much more visible, there is no longer Dean Martin to save. He is all alone, and he has to make it in the world all by himself with other people, his character is a man who comes from nowhere, has no family, no friend, while before he seemed to need nothing, now he seems to need a friend. Jerry Lewis plays a janitor, with the help of the policeman, enters the police academy, and thus can survive the violent world of juvenile gangs.

It is one thing to survive the world, and it is another to survive Jerry Lewis, the comedian plays both sides of the track, after *Delicate Delinquent*, it is the world who has to survive Jerry Lewis. In *The Sad Sack* (1957), the voiceover warns the audience about Lewis character: "The last guy you suspect of being, the kiss of death." The film takes place in the army, and it is the complete reversal of *At War with the Army*, instead of Lewis working hard to survive the army, now it is the army who is trying to survive Jerry Lewis. In *Don't Give Up the Ship* (1959), Lewis loses Destroyer escort (a warship), which creates trouble for the navy (Pomerance: 2002).

"The Most popular Italian cinema comedian is Toto, who was born in Naples in 1898. Even today you can't move in the city without seeing image of their most famous son. He began in variety and his physical style of comedy was a carryover from the Italian theatrical comedy tradition." (Hughes: 2011: 245)

The Italian comedian Toto, who is generally unknown to the non-Italian speaking public, is today forgotten, even though he made films with well known Italian directors like Vittorio De Sica and Pier Paolo Pasolini (Hughes: 2011). One reason for this negligence might be the fact that his films are not available for the general public, for the non-speaking Italian, his movies are impossible to find. When I do find them occasionally, they have no subtitles, and since the films he made was not silent comedies, they are difficult to understand. From the few movies I have seen of him, I will try to give a picture of his comedy, which can be described as Toto trying to survive poverty. In *The Band of Honest Men* (1956), he plays a poor caretaker of a building in Rome, when one of his tenants is dying (the old man tells Toto, am dying). Toto replies what are you talking about, you are healthier than I, "You got the pulse of a bull, I wish i had this pulse." By the time he finishes his sentences, the old man has already died, Toto feels his puls, looks at his watch and says: "The communication cut off" (Skov: 2011).

Everything is in detail, he steals some flowers for a woman, the woman tells him "Thank you, so beautiful," Toto replies "They look real" she asks then "Why, are they fake?", Toto answer "No, I mean, they are real." In *Cops and Robbers* (1951), he plays a common thief in Rome, while on the run from the cops, he takes the time to steal a chicken from a farm he was passing through (Lanzoni: 2008).

Not only is Toto poor, so is everybody around him, which means he has to fight for survival constantly, he has to feed not only himself but also his family, who usually are as hungry as he is. In the film directed by the great Italian neorealist Roberto Rossellini, *Where Is Freedom?* (1954), Toto plays a barber in prison when let out, he breaks into jail again, the real world was more violent than the jail life, which was no paradise (Skov: 2011).

In the jail, there is violence between the inmates, poverty, lack of food, the film shows the terrible conditions of Italian jail, Toto makes us feel this reality, even more, when he tells the judge: "I was surrounded by respectable people, goodness, friendship, selflessness. It was one for all and all for one."

When they let him out of jail, Toto meets a woman, who takes him to a dance hall, where a dance marathon is going on, she tells him, they have danced non-stop for 931 hours, with only sandwich in their stomach. The situation angers Toto, and his solution to the problem is genius, not that they should stop dancing, but that they eat big meals and shave, while they dance. The scene is so absurd, the situation so terrible that you begin to laugh, for Toto comedy is in the realism, how can the dancers otherwise eat?

In *Poverty and Nobility* (1954), a very intriguing film, the structure of the films is like a play within a play, the film starts with people in theatre watching a play, the camera then enters the world of the play. Toto plays his usual poor character, who is asked to play nobility, his jealous wife asks what about me, Toto tells her:

"If there were to play another character the marquis, would have proposed it to you. The Marquis aunt is very ill. Maybe, once home, he finds her dead! You want to play the dead?" (Fig. 2) (Bruke: 2017)



(Fig. 2) Toto is given some old cloth to sell for money (Roberto Rossellini:1954).

The only form of surviving is stealing, or when a miracle happens, therefore Toto is either a thief, a criminals or generally poor. On the level of narrative, Tot can survive through transcendence, that is the end of the film transcends the realism established at the beginning of the film. That is to say, in *The Band of Honest Men*, the poor caretaker Toto, becomes rich by learning how to make counterfeit money.

In *Cops and Robbers*, the policeman in his good heart helps the thief, who was only stealing to feed his family. In *Where Is Freedom?*, after finding the outside world more gruesome, than the prison, he goes back to jail happy.

In *Poverty and Nobility*, for brief moment Toto becomes nobility, he is then able to have all the nice cloth and food he wanted. It is important to point out, this is not where the comedy is, the comedy is the realistic struggle of survival, in *Poverty and Nobility*, when he finally gets some food (pasta), he starts to put it in his pocket (he is saving it for later). What is this realism? Toto in all of his films, is poor, the reality of Italy is shown to the viewer, the fact that even if you have work, you will have the same amount of money, as a man who has no work.

The problem of eating, paying rent, having cloth to wear for winter, the fact that you have to share a small house with other people. Toto's character is always poor, as he himself puts it: "One doesn't become a caretaker, one is born a caretaker."

In *Destination Piovare* (1955), he plays a station master, sent to a small town, where nothing has happened since the middle ages. The reality of the present is visible in the film, when they get the news, that Italy has become a fascist state (the film is set in 1922, when the Fascist took over). The film is like a documentary, it shows how children were taught to salute (gesture with arm held out forward) (Skov: 2011).

The struggle to survive is perfectly rendered when he has to ask himself, the question: "To Be Or Not To Be Fascist", or in the midst of the second world war, his wife asks him for some lam. In his desperation, he sees a cat, brings it home, and plans to eat it. Toto in these moments can make comedy at the level of Chaplin, the situation is so terrible, that it is comic. Chaplin is often reduced to a dog fighting for survival, think of the friendship Chaplin makes with the dog in *A Dog's Life* (1918) (Mast: 1979).

The difference between Chaplin and Toto is that everything in *A Dog's Life*, belongs to Chaplin, there is no reality of the outside coming into the film, no realistic characters to be found. Everything is invented for the movie by Chaplin, in Toto, all the characters are real, including Toto himself, the events and people have existed in one form or another, which is why they find themselves in his films. In the movies of Chaplin, everyone is a character, that is Chaplin invents all of them, even the street is not a real street, but a fictional one, created for the film. That was Marguerite Duras critic of Woody Allen, Woody did not invent New York, he changed nothing, New York stayed the same before and after Woody Allen, while in Chaplin:

"Chaplin's space, in *City Lights*, is completely filled by him... Everything is Chaplin's. The whole city, cities, streets... The place belongs entirely to him." (Duras: 1990:34)

Therefore Chaplin for Duras has no limit, no geographical boundaries, he could be doing anything, be anywhere since he invents everything. In other words, the world belongs to Chaplin, with Toto, he needs a great director like Pier Paolo Pasolini, to bring out this element of wandering into his films.

No wonder then, that opening title of Pasolini, *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (1966), begins with a song: "All the other actors from Femi Benussi to Vittorio Vittori, were found on the streets of the world." Like a Chaplin film, Toto and his son are on the road going nowhere, and a title appears: "Where is mankind going? Who knows!" (Bruke: 2017)

"Beyond every film, beyond his characters, Tati is a world in himself – something which cannot be said of all comic geniuses. Take, for example, Chaplin, a great figure for whom Tati held quite mixed feelings: there is not a chaplin world but chaplin's films. Same thing with Keaton: his characters have a special relationship with the world, but that world is ours too." (Chion: 1997: 16)

What the French film theoretician Michel Chion attributes to Tati, is indeed immense, he sees in his comedy a world of fish, houses that have eyes, the movement, and sound of the world. While I disagree with Chion, on the lack of world in Chaplin, there is something new in Jacques Tati, that neither Keaton or Chaplin had.

Almost all the characters around Chaplin, play the realistic role, while his supporting character play the dramatic part, the very source of comedy comes from Chaplin himself. With enough experience they found out, it was better to have one character to play the dramatic role, while the other the comedy, but the deadlock of where the comedy should come from was still a problem, a problem every comedian has to face. In modern films, they have gone the opposite direction, in every superhero films now there is a comic character, while the main hero plays the dramatic scenes. In other words unlike Chaplin, who is at the center of comedy, Tati's ability goes even further, the power to make unfunny people funny, you rarely see the other characters being comic in a Chaplin film.

In the very beginning of the film *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1953), we see a group of people, trying to catch a train, like the Laurel and Hardy film, the speaker announces the arrival of the train. Like the scene in *Berth Marks*, neither the group of people nor we understand a word of what the announcer is saying, so they confused, run from one side of the track to another, not knowing where the train is going to stop.

This movement of going from one track to another would be performed by Laurel and Hardy, in Tati, while the people did not intend to be comic, he can make unfunny people, the very sources of his comedy. Who is funnier in *Mon Oncle* (1958), Jacques Tati or his sister, who turns on the water fountain, every time she thinks somebody, has come to visit her? (Lanzoni: 2014)

To reflect on this scene a little bit longer, then it is essential that the group of people is on vacation, they don't know where they are going, the land and the place are foreign to them.

Jacques Tati character, Monsieur Hulot is a comic force, he knowingly or unknowingly forces the people around him to be funny, by merely opening the door to the hotel, where he is staying. Monsieur Hulot opens the door, and there is such wind outside that it disturbs everyone around him, making one guys mustaches to blow in the wind, the tea to float in the air, Monsieur Hulot is the very source of comedy, like the wind, he changes, disturbs the natural order. Monsieur Hulot has merely to take the first step, like a Domino effect, he only needs to tap the first domino, then the whole scene comes apart, in other words, Tati is a minimalist. Monsieur Hulot character needs to do as little as possible for an entire comic scene to break out, think how he destroys the restaurant by simple gesture in *Playtime* (1967).

If the power of Tati's comedy was in doubt, we need only to look at the funeral scene in Monsieur Hulot's Holiday, and his power is indeed immense, Tati is to be able to make a funeral scene funny.

Even at the level of plot, what is *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* or *Playtime*, about? In *Playtime*, we merely observe people working, and Monsieur Hulot misses a critical meeting, we have no clue, what this meeting was about. It would not be wrong to claim, that *Playtime* has no plot as such, it is about people wandering around, looking. In *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, the narrative takes place in the summer, when people are on vacation, that is to say, a week or two.

In *Trafic* (1971), within the time frame of the auto show in Amsterdam, in *Playtime*, the time of the flight, near an airport, which means stranger who came from somewhere and they go nowhere (Chion: 1997).

It is crucial that the people around Hulot, do not find him funny, they see in him only the destruction he causes, a strange man who makes trouble. In *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, the only person who is aware of his comic character is the young girl who is attracted to him, she is the only one, who notices Hulot extraordinary character, while everybody else is unamused by him. What the ordinary people miss is his destruction is the very source of comedy, the people in the hotel, have just given up on life, they play cards, continue with their lifeless daily routines. Even the young man who supposed to be alive, engages in politics most boring manner, while Monsieur Hulot is like fireworks. Near the end of the film, when he accidentally sets off the fireworks in the middle of the night, waking everybody up at the hotel, bringing life to the dead. It is a mystery how Tati's character Hulot, can survive, his background and origin is entirely unknown, he is a silent comic in the world of sound.

Although it is hard to image the romances of Tati, in *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, he has the romantic relationship with the young girl, with whom the relationship ends when the vacation end, in *Playtime* with the American woman. It is interesting to see the animated film, *The Illusionist* (2010), based on an unproduced script by Jacques Tati, where the relation between the girl and Tati, is very similar to all Tati's films.

There is no violence, in that sense, the only form of surviving is creating an event in a world of a non-event. That is when nothing happens, that is why, in Tatis films, the story takes place when something happens, or is supposed to happen. For Tati, the modern world has lost its magic, the only form of wonder is technology, which continually breaks down.

To survive the ordinary, Hulot creates with the people around him something extraordinary, that is why in the end, we feel like we have come close to people, we have experienced something together, think of the ending of *Playtime* and *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*.



"David Howard: Well, I didn't really quit, but I got fired. But it was the same thing. Linda, you were right. No more "responsible David". I'm free! I was responsibly blind, honey. I was a dead man." *Lost in America* (1985)

In his first film, *Real Life* (1979), Albert Brooks tells a story of a documentary filmmaker (Brooks himself), making a documentary film about the daily life of ordinary American family, which was a new concept back in the 70s (Austerlitz: 2010).

Albert Brooks in this film slowly documents a life that has exhausted itself, where nothing new is happening, a world of stillness. The film shows the family at the brink of divorce, the father is an animal doctor, who is just terrible at his job.

Brooks describes this modern life as: "Day after day it was the same lifeless", while he is critical to the family he is involved with, he seems not all concerned with his own life. Brooks character is a man all alone, and he has no friend (he does not seek one either), nor any relationship of any kind, he is as lifeless as the family, he is involved with. By the end of the film, he burns down the house where the family was living, and in sad truth, the only thing that happened was Brooks burning down the house. Albert Brooks in his comedy is very close to Toto, and both comedians are very close to real life, his second film *Modern Romance* (1981), is composed of conversation between people since nothing new is happening to anybody or the world, there is only the lifelessness of the world left. The question of how Tati's character Hulot is able to survive in the world is mysterious, but contrary to Brooks, Hulot is able to create life, where ever he is.

In *Modern Romance*, Brooks is isolated from everything, society, people, the outside world, he is living an empty life with no commitment of any kind. He is not even committed to the film, he is editing (he is an editor), the comedy emerges out of these unbearable moments of lifelessness. In the movies of Albert Brooks, you follow the story, and you forget that you are watching a comedy, then all of a sudden, he is in the editing room, trying to create sounds of space for a science fiction film, comedy emergence (Austerlitz: 2010).

The film opens with Brooks breaking up with his girlfriend, he then takes some drugs, asks a girl out, picks her up. They sit silently in the car driving, presumably to the restaurant, listening to Michael Jackson, after a minute, to the girl surprise, they arrive back at her apartment, and he tells her it was too early for a date since he just broke up with his girlfriend. Brooks goes back to his old girlfriend, asks her to marry him, she says yes, in the end, credit it says:

"Robert and Mary were married three weeks later in Las Vegas" and "They were divorced the following month" the title continues to say "They are currently dating with plans to remarry".

Nothing new happened, he went back to his old girlfriend, nothing new happened in his life, nothing new was created, unlike all the other comedians we have talked about so far, Brooks is the first comedian, who is unable to survive the modern world. In his third film, *Lost in America* (1985), a significant film, since it is the only film by Brooks, that attempts at a solution to the lifelessness of the world. (Austerlitz: 2010) In the film, Brooks and his wife tired from their everyday job, resign from their position, sell their house, buy a trailer and begin traveling the country. But like all of Brooks films, misery is never far off.

First, they go to Las Vegas, in a hotel, they ask for the honeymoon sweet, but the manager says it's not available. Signaling that he wants money, since David (Albert Brooks), doesn't know, how much to bribe him, he asks him, how much do you want, he answers hundred dollars. They bribe him, and get a room much worse than they expected, while in Las Vegas, the couple ends up, losing all their money to the casino, doing lowest job available to survive. Then near the end of the film, the couple finally admit their attempt at different life failed, go back to the way their life was. So again nothing changed, nothing new was possible, and now even the dream of a different life is gone.

Brooks characters are unable to survive the world, in his films, there is no escape from modern lifelessness, it is not strange then, that his next movie *Defending Your Life* (1991), he is dead, the film takes place in heaven. Albert Brooks character before dying is a dull advertising executive, who has given up on the dream of escape, which is why he dies in car accident (he was dead long before the film started). What Brooks characters lack, is some of the inventiveness of Tatis Hulot, he lacks a life with fireworks and the survival instinct of Marx Brothers.

In the film *The Muse* (1999), we no longer find ourselves in a fictional world, Brooks is a screenwriter, who is unable to create (there is no more life in him).

The character is based on Brooks, Steven Phillips (Brooks), who has written a script, the problem is that it is lifeless. A breath of fresh air enters his life when he meets Sarah (Sharon Stone), who changes his life. In some sense what Sharon Stone does in the film, is what Brooks is supposed to be doing, to bring life to the lifeless. In the movie, the roles are reversed, now it is Brooks who is lifeless, who needs another character, to breathe some life into him, which succeeded, he is then able to write another script (Austerlitz: 2010).



## Change / Becoming Somebody Else

*In this chapter, I will talk about the second theme in the thesis, the idea of Change, I will illustrate, through various examples, the underlying preoccupation of many comedians, that of transcending one's limit.*

"From the Charlie Chaplin series: viewed from behind, Charlie, deserted by his wife, seems to be shaking with sobs, but as soon as he turns round, we see that he is in fact shaking himself a cocktail...The slight difference in the action which brings out an infinite distance between two situations – seems to be omnipresent in burlesque in general." (Deleuze 2005: 173-174)

The film, *The Immigrant* (1917), starts in a boat sailing to America, Chaplin shows first some people on the boat, seasick. Cut to, Chaplin from behind, bending over, we think that he is throwing up, also seasick like everyone else. But when he turns around, we see that he, in fact, was fishing. This slight change of perception, Deleuze calls perception –image, when in the first instant you get one idea, then a small shift of camera position gives you another idea. There is no more randomness to the comedy, it is composed of two parts, one image superimposed over another, the two independent parts perfectly juxtaposed together (Mast: 1979).

For Deleuze, Harold Lloyd, in particular, develops perception- image, in *A Sailor-Made Man* (1921), the first image we see, is a close up, of Lloyd hand holding a brush painting. Then the camera retrieves, the second perception shows a man sitting next to him, it was his hand that was painting, Harold Lloyd was standing there next to him, looking at the painting (Fig. 3) (Kerr: 1975).

While this movement creates a comic effect, it also makes the audience realize in the first few seconds of the film, that Lloyd character is a talentless brat, he even ruins the painting. Then when he falls in love with a girl and wants to marry a girl, Lloyds character ask the father for her hand, her father says to him: "Show me that you can do something besides loaf and loiter."



(Fig. 3) It looks like Harold Lloyd is painting, but the hand belongs to another man (Fred C. Newmeyer:1921).

That is what the film will be about, and he has to catch up with our first perception, that he was doing something – painting. To go back to Deleuze's passage, Deleuze overlooks, that the film, also shows the viewer two types of character, the first one he was painting, in the second he is useless. In the opening scene of *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), a woman is on her knees, cries, begs Roberto Benigni: (Celli: 2002)

"Please, Do anything...Dont leave me. Ask me anything and I'll do it. I adore you, I love you. Don't leave me. Use me, slave me. But dont leave me. You taught me everything, about love, about sex, want to make love to me?" Benigni then asks her "What did he say".

This scene perfectly renders the classical perception-image. First we think that Benigni is leaving the girl, then, on the contrary, we immediately understand, that Benigni is far from doing and being all this.

In *Johnny Stecchino*, Dante played by Roberto is a bus driver for students with Down syndrome, the film is a classical becoming somebody else with a little twist, Dante like Woody Allen plays a weak man, who is afraid of woman. Benigni is then transformed by somebody else, Mary played by Nicoletta Braschi, who gives him the name Johnny (an American gangster with money). The reason for the transformation is Benigni before being Johnny is treated poorly by everyone. Then Mary, changes his cloth, identity, makes him into a gangster, which forces people around him to give him respect and consideration. This change is not for the girl like in the films of Bob Hope, and Woody Allen since she knows who he is, but for the world who see him.

In classical perception-image described by Deleuze, the miss perception happens only in one scene, usually in the beginning of the film, in the movies of Benigni, the whole movie is about, miss-perception. I call it miss-perception for one reason that Benigni is unaware of how others see him since it is purely external perception. In the film, everybody thinks he is a gangster, while he naively, thinks people dislike him for having stolen a banana. In the film, *il mostro* (1994), a serial killer goes around town, killing and raping woman, Benigni who plays a mannequin handler for a department store, is by some mistake miss-perceived as the monster, Benigni, is, of course, unaware of all of this (Celli: 2002).

There is a scene in the film, which perfectly illustrates this, a piece of his clothing is stuck to one of the mannequins, while trying to get it out, from behind, it looks like he is trying to have sex with it. He then screams, which sound like him, enjoying sex, from another angle, we see that a fly has landed on his back, he was scared of the fly. In other words, there is no transformation, in his character, he is just miss-perceived as somebody else, the transformation is external. For a brief moment, in *Johnny Stecchino*, the people think, he is a gangster, Benigni becomes somebody else, through his new cloth and how others see him. The internal change happens when he falls in love, which does not mean that he gets the girl in the end, but only the act of falling in love changes him. In *il mostro*, Jessica (Nicoletta Braschi), becomes his roommate, which creates a romantic relationship between the two.

That is when he is miss-perceived as the monster, only then Jessica (who plays an undercover cop), becomes his roommate (she also plays two characters). The only form of transformation in *Benigni* is love, which is not visible to other people, the change is only noticeable to him.

In the interview with Woody Allen, Stig Bjorkman asked Woody on his development of comedy:

"Well, it seemed to me like a very standard film persona for a comedian. Someone who is physical coward, who lusts after woman, who is good-hearted but ineffectual and clumsy and nervous. All standard things that you've seen in different various disguises. In Charlie Chaplin or W.C. Fields or Groucho Marx there's the same things but in different forms." (Stig Bjorkman 1993: 26)

A very well description of the first stages of becoming, somebody who is a coward then through the transformation that is through the second perception becomes a hero. Nobody plays the physical coward better than Bob Hope, but Hope never remains the coward toward the end. Alenka Zupančič in her philosophical book on comedy gives a better understanding of what I call the becoming somebody else.

"The prizing of comedy as a porte-parole of human finitude (and of everything that is supposed to be related to it: acceptance of our weaknesses, limitations, and imperfections; reconciliation with the absence of the transcendent and acknowledgment of the equation "a human is only human" life is only life") is conceptually highly problematic." (Zupančič 2008: 49)

What Alenka is saying here is that comedy exists, when the inhuman melts into the human, that is when the finite (that is to say the weakness of the character) turns into infinite (he becomes strong). Bob Hope like Woody Allen is very much aware of this fact. Therefore his cowardliness is beautifully presented in *Caught in the Draft* (1941). The film begins with Hope in the trenches, on the front line before attacking the enemy, Hope says: "Remember now it is one way street, forward you understand."



Then, when the attack starts, he (Bob) is supposed to lead the men to glory, he points the gun at the enemy, pulls the trigger, the gun goes off. Hope immediately stops, surprised at the gun, puts down the gun, and shouts: "It's loaded, its got bullets." (Neibaur: 2004)

The camera pulls back, and then we begin to understand that, it was only a movie set (our perception changed). Hope was just acting for the camera, and the scene is even funnier now, we understand that even in a fake war, he is a coward.

All the while there is a real war going on, outside the movie set (World War 2), and Hope is going to be drafted, so he does everything in his power to avoid going to actual war, he even tries to marry a girl, to skip war.

The film is very intelligent, Hopes character even says "Am not a coward, am just allergic to bullets", the transformation of character takes place, when he meets a girl. Whom Hope first tried to marry to avoid war, but it turns out, the only way she accepts him is if he is in the war. In the film, he will end up going to war, heroically, changing how everybody looks at him, winning the respect of his father in law, and marrying the girl. In all of the films of Bob Hope, at the beginning of the film, he is a coward, then through transformation, becomes a hero. That is Hope can transcend his limitation, he can do the impossible. That is also related to the Deleuzian idea of perception-image, the change of perception, changes what we think of the character. Now this change might sometimes fail, that is in the case of Woody Allen, the second perception almost never arrives.

"Hope and I are both monologists, and as characters we both think we're great with woman, and we play as both vain and cowardly... You're laughing not at the jokes but at a guy who's vain and cowardly and full of false bravado. You're laughing at the character all the time." (Lax: 2009: 63-64)

Unlike Hope, Woody Allen stays within, the first perception, therefore in his film, there is a failure at becoming somebody else, the external transformation fails, the second view lasts only for a while, then returns to its normal state. In *Take the Money and Run* (1969), Woody's first film, he supposed to be a criminal, he steals a gun and tries to shoot the cops, the gun turns out to be lighter. The whole film is about the failure of becoming a criminal when Woody meets a woman, he lies to her, tells her that he plays cello at the New York Philharmonic:

"After fifteen minutes I wanted to marry her, and after half an hour I completely gave up the idea of stealing her purse." (Girgus: 2002)

Woody Allen always plays two characters, he plays the neurotic (probably very close to how he is in real life), and the fictional character of the story. His instinct is always to become somebody else, since he is most often incapable of performing any action handed down to him. Woody Allen changes the well known Shakespearean genre of Comedy Of Error into Comedy Of Failure. Failure is a major theme in Woody Allen's early films, the failure at having a relationship with a woman, or doing any job, in *Take the Money and Run*, the failure at robbing a bank or even killing a woman who is blackmailing him.

Ultimately all the failure amounts to, the failure at becoming somebody else, that is transcending one's limits, in *Bananas* (1971), the only film, where he marginally succeed at becoming somebody else, the film is about the Cuban revolution. After his girlfriend breaks up with him, he quits his ridiculous job, ends up in the Banana Republic, where he accidentally becomes a rebel, which makes the girl fall back in love with him. Not to worry, failure is never far off, while he succeeded in getting his girlfriend back, the revolution completely fails (Schwartz: 2000).

In *Play It Again Sam* (1972), (Woody Allen), has schizophrenia who talks to Humphrey Bogart character Rick, from *Casablanca* (1942), who teaches him how to be cool and how to handle situations and woman. His ex-wife Nancy tells him:

"You're a dreamer. You're awkward. You're clumsy. They can see how desperate you are. You know this. You said it yourself. Oh, face it, Allan. You may be very sweet, but you're not sexy."

The is what the film will be about, how to turn this clumsy, awkward character into a cool, sexy man, and the movie answer is by becoming Bogart, who is already like Woody Allen. In *Play It Again, Sam*, Woody Allen becomes somebody only by being himself, the Woody tells the audience:

"Bogart: That was great. You've, uh, you've really developed yourself a little style.  
Allan: Yeah, I do have a certain amount of style, don't I?"

Bogart: Well, I guess you won't be needing me any more. There's nothing I can tell you now that you don't already know.

Allan: I guess that's so. I guess the secret's not being you, it's being me. True, you're—you're not too tall and kind of ugly, but - what the hell, I'm short enough and ugly enough to succeed on my own.”

The comic moment of the film is when Woody Allen pretends to be somebody else, that is when he acts like Bogart. As the final dialogue suggests, there is no transformation, he accepts himself and begins to see that Bogart is already like Woody Allen. In *The Front* (1976), the plot is about some blacklisted writers, who confide in Woody Allen's character to sell their scripts for them, by him pretending to be the writer. In the film, there is no internal reason for him to change, there is an external one, Woody is a single man who is down on his luck, owing a lot of money to a lot of people. Making the wrong bets, one guy at the beginning of the film tells him: "The well is running dry, sink or swim.”

Then he becomes a writer, earns enough money to pay back his debt, but once he pretends to be somebody else, he is unable to stop (Schwartz: 2000).

Woody Allens is very much aware of the cowardly characters in cinema, Woody is aware of the timid character in W.C. Fields, and how much of a coward Bob Hope is. In Bob Hope, while he succeeds at becoming somebody else when he makes the next film, he returns to his normal state, that is the coward. Bob Hope, while he transforms within the film *Caught in the Draft*, becomes coward again in *My Favorite Blonde* (1942). In Woody Allen, since there is a constant failure at changing, there is a continuation from film to film, Woody keeps the comedy, while in Hope when he is transformed, it is no longer comic. That is the comedy is created by being or playing the two characters when they pretend or act like somebody else (Neibaur: 2004).



## Comic Violence

*In this chapter, I will discuss comedians, that have implicitly or explicitly violence, as a form of comedy.*

"Where comedy is concerned, for example, the burlesque style of Mack Sennett didn't survive at all beyond the mid-1920s. From that period only Chaplin managed to persevere up until *Limelight* (1952), yet at the cost of a series of radical evolutions to his style. But American film comedy hasn't shined too brightly now for more than ten years." (Cardullo: 2014: 8)

For the great French film critic, Andre Bazin, both Comedy and the genre Western had reached their limit after the 40s, the genres had repeated itself all too often and was worn out, tired. For Bazin, a great artist is then a person who comes along, tries to surpass the tradition, that is he brings new life to the worn out genre.

These artists can take the genre in another direction, think of *High Noon* (1952) and *The Outlaw* (1943). This Bazin called Meta-Western, Meta-Western is a genre, aware of its tradition and changes it for the better (Cardullo: 2014).

Andre Bazin also does not mention, the rejuvenation of the genre western by the Italians, the strange fact a sub-genre was created in Italy by the name of Spaghetti Western (western Italian style). Some of the most well know westerns, by the public today, is made by the Italians.

"Each of them tries in its own way to surpass the traditional western, whether through irony, like *The Outlaw*, through psychology, like *The Westerner*, or by means of brilliant formal variations, like *My Darling Clementine*." (Cardullo: 2014: 9)

Along with the genre western, comedy also tried to surpass its limit, by searching for new forms of violence, there is a long tradition of this, Bob Hope's *The Paleface* (1948), is a Western-Comedy, the saloon bar in the film is called "The Dirty Shame Saloon" (Neibaur: 2004).

The film is perfectly aware of its tradition and tries to change it to produce comedy. Another example is Mel Brooks *Blazing Saddles* (1974), when the black workers (slaves), are asked to sing a song, they do the impossible and sing Frank Sinatra: "I Get A Kick Out Of You", which is historically inaccurate, therefore produces a strange comic effect. Virtually all of the films by the director Mel Brooks are meta-comedy, very similar to the way Abbott and Costello use other genres, to produce comedy. Starting with horror-comedy *Young Frankenstein* (1974), *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995), Science-fiction-comedy *Spaceballs* (1987), and a reflective meta-comedy *the Silent Movie* (1976) (Horton: 2012).

While the genre western surpasses its tradition, by merging with other genres, comedy was in search of new forms of violence and they found the perfect marriage, in the comedy team Bud Spencer and Terence Hill. The team of Bud Spencer and Terence Hill, made more than 20 films together, starting with Western, then crossing over to other genres, like action and adventure. Becoming the Laurel and Hardy of the Westerns genre, their films are of particular interest, first for their violence, second for their hybridization of comedy and western (Hughes: 2011).

They enter other genres, from action to gangster, the two men stick out like a sore thumb, they don't belong to that universe, in fact, they don't belong to any universe. They are not cowards, far from it, they are the ones who save the day, take action against injustice, they do not win by accident but by their effort, and strength.

The only continuation they have from genre to genre is comedy which is produced by violence (Fridlund: 2006).

In their first film together, *God Forgives... I Don't!* (1967), the film is supposed to a serious western but comedy is already there. In the film, *God Forgives... I Don't!*, while Spencer is asleep, Terence takes his horse, leaving Spencer in the desert alone, making him walk for twenty miles on foot. Hill is kind enough to leave the horse with a man who lives in the wilderness so that when Bud has walked for twenty miles, he can get his horse back. The film shows Bud Spencer wander in the desert alone, angry and we start to laugh.

The relationship is quickly established in the film, Bud Spencer is the strong one, Terence Hill is the smart one, they are an unlikely couple. They work together because they need each other, not because they are friends, the moment Hill thinks he can do the job alone, he leaves Bud in the desert (Fridlund: 2006).

Bud & Terence belong to the long tradition of comedy teams, their origin is never shown or known, they come from nowhere, like Chaplin, they have no fixed place. They find themselves at different places with different people, they are after money, because they are always poor. In the film *Trinity Is Still My Name* (1971), it begins with Bud, stealing money, horse, and ammunition, from four convicts all the while eating their food. The opening title starts with a song: "Again we must travel on to nowhere" after the titles sequence ends, Terence comes and robs, the same group of four men, if this wasn't bad enough, they get robbed again by Terence and Hill's parents.

There is something new in Bud & Terence, in all other comedy teams, they move as one, that is they think as one, Abbott and Costello have the same intentions. In the classical comedy teams, one of them decides everything, while the other follows instructions, its Oliver Hardy who tells Stan Laurel what to do. In Bud & Terence, they are on equal grounds, which makes their relationship much more interesting to watch, throughout the film, they clash, neither of them decides, therefore very often they end up fighting each other. In their second film, part of a trilogy, *Ace High* (1968), Bud & Terence try to survive, the harsh reality of the west, they just want enough money to live. The film's structure is similar to the desire of the man, who tried to take off his cloth in George Melies, Bud & Terence everytime they come close to the money, it gets away from them. At the beginning of the film, Bud starts a fight, nobody gets killed, nobody is hurt, like a pie fight, then the camera tilts up showing the words "Law and Order" (Fridlund: 2006).

Their violence belongs to the long tradition of Slapstick comedy, defined by Alenka Zupančič:

"Regardless of all accidents and catastrophes that befall comic characters, they always arise from the chaos perfectly intact, and relentlessly go on pursuing their goals, chasing their dreams, or simply being themselves." (Zupancic: 2008: 29)

In Slapstick comedy, when people are shot, they don't die, in *Out West* (1918), Arbuckle is shot multiple times, no matter, he continues living as if nothing happened (Kerr: 1975). In *Bud & Terence*, when there is a fight, nobody gets hurt, when the bad guys in the end of the film, die, it is not funny, the comic moments are the moments when the violence are not deadly. Something else Bud has in common with Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, their fondness of food, which is a major part of his character, not to mention his anger, when somebody says "Evening Sheriff", Bud responds "Shut Up".

Bud & Terence along with Keaton and Lloyd is in some sense indestructible, like Laurel and Hardy, they can survive anything that befalls them. The difference is that in Laurel and Hardy the violence is produced by Laurel, in *Bud & Terence*, the violence is part of their world. But unlike Woody Allen, and Roberto Benigni they can take care of themselves, they are strong and smart enough to survive, transformation in that sense isn't necessary.

In the book on filmmaking "*The Total Film-Maker*" (1971), Jerry Lewis talks about comedy coming out of violence. Therefore we can ask, why is *Bud & Terence* in a western, rather than in a comedy film?

"In another strange twist of our human existence, comedy comes out of violence, which is a brother to tragedy." (Lewis: 171:190)

What comedy takes from the genre western is simply this, the violence in that world, in Slapstick comedy the violence came from within, after the decline of Slapstick comedy, comedy as a genre had to search for new forms of violence. In *Ace High*, Paco the bandit, who acts in the name of revolution, kill all the peasants, then the peasant revolt, killing even more people. In the world of western, there is violence against women, black men, ordinary people, lawlessness, not to mention the violence in everyday life. In *They Call Me Trinity* (1970), Bud is a strange sheriff (more like a criminal than a sheriff), who gets a new convict by Hill, Spencer picks the convict up like a leaf, throws him into his cell. In this brief moment, although insignificant to the plot, he just puts the criminal in jail, in the way, he does it is pure comedy.



"The collapse of Harpo's building is violent; the guy walking into the excavation pit is violence. To the average audience, violence on the screen is a belly ripped with a seven-inch knife or a burst of machine-gun fire. They don't seem to notice the violence in comedy or stop to analyze the tremendous amount of it." (Lewis: 171:190)

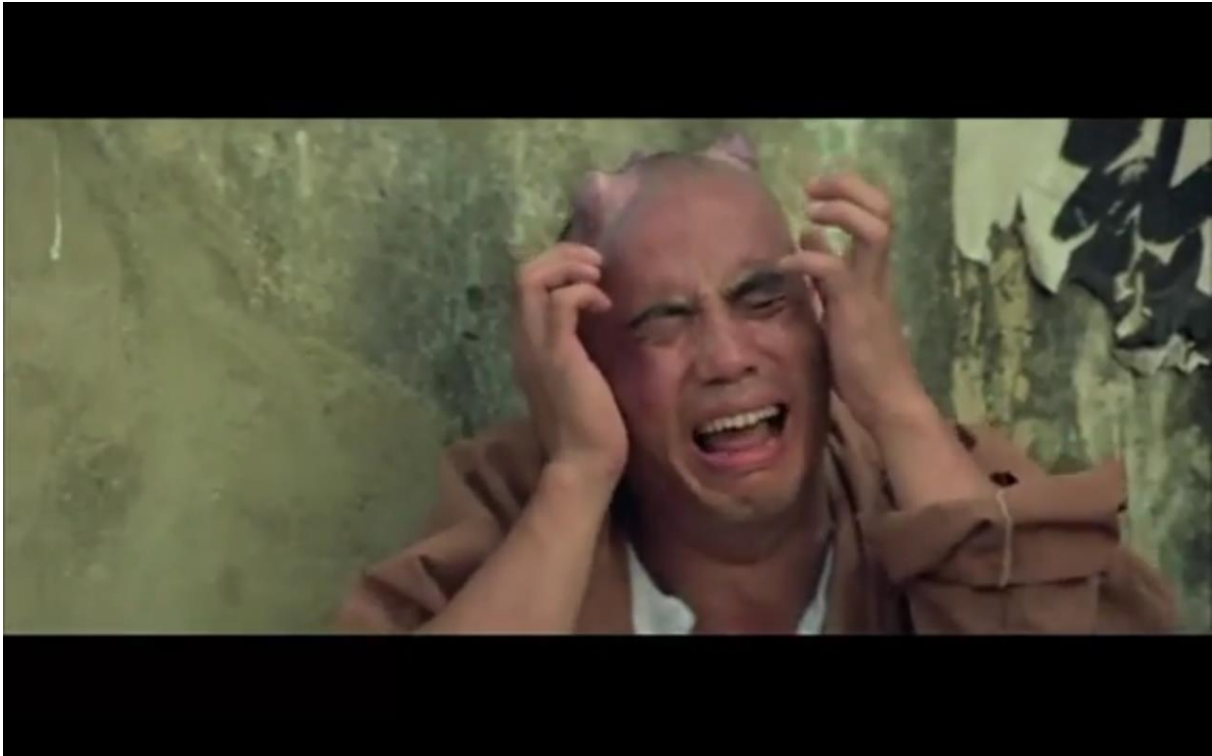
Jerry Lewis points to the tremendous amount of implicit violence in comedy, a violence which we ignore or don't pay enough attention to. There is no question of the explicit violence in Martial art films. Martial art as a genre was thriving in the 60s, then in late 70s, they were already out of material, having their peak with Bruce Lee. Jackie Chan was entering the genre, witnessing this, and from his lack of box office success, begins approaching Martial art in a new way by adding comedy.

In the films of Jackie Chan, the world of Martial art is more like a myth than anything real, especially in his early films, unlike Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan's fighting style is in the form of an animal figure. In Chan's first film, *Snake & Crane Arts of Shaolin* (1978), the snake is not only in the title, but also plays a significant part in the narrative, the movement of the hand (that is the fight) resemble the movement of the animal (Gentry: 1997).

Jackie Chan lives in a world of fairy tales, like the Brothers Grimm story "The Brave Little Tailor", who killed seven flies with one blow, the old beggar in *Snake in the eagle's shadow* (1978), kill flies with just his hands. The old man who teaches Jackie kung-fu is the archetypal comic figure, he comes from nowhere and can live anywhere. The old man in the film has no particular relation, or place, a wanderer, he has one weakness, which is that he cannot function without alcohol. (Gentry: 1997) What the old man teaches Jackie Chan, is pure comedy, that is only when you have mastered the art of fighting, you can become a comedian. That is to say to turn a rice bowl into a weapon, a fight into a dance. In *Drunken Master* (1978), the old man saves Jackie from a man who calls himself the gorilla, and the gorilla uses brute force, that is pure violence without comedy. The old man fights back just by using a towel, which he transforms into a comic weapon ten times more powerful than the gorilla (Gentry: 1997).

So how is comedy used, what is the relation between comedy and violence?

The old man does not use a knife, or a machine gun, it is the everyday object, like chopstick he uses like a weapon, which means his violence is not deadly, therefore comic. The old man's violence is cartoonish, nobody gets hurt, when Jackie fights a bald man, the old man give him, an iron hammer, Jackie hits the bald man on the head several times, but like a cartoon character, he continues to fight (Fig. 4).



(Fig. 4) The bald man, after being beaten several time on the head with a hammer (Yuen Woo-Ping:1978).

"Like any evolutionary process, the transformation took time and involved a good deal of trial and error. Flashing out characters from a world of violent slapstick has perils. For example, if a character seems to be "really" hurt by the action, either physically or emotionally, the distance necessary for the knockabout comedy vanishes." (Kamin: 2008: 76)

That is if the violence really hurts the characters, the comedy disappears. There is also a violence in what the old man teaches Jackie, his method of training is bone breaking, there is more violence in what the old man does to Jackie then his opponent do to him.

In a regular kung-fu film, there is at least 10 to 15 fighting scenes, without improvisation, they become empty and boring. When the old man, in the *Snake in the eagle's shadow*, is attacked by some men in the restaurant, rather than using a sword, he uses in a masterly fashion his rice bowl and chopstick. In the film, *Drunken Master* (1978), Jackie fights a woman, who beats him, he runs away, right after this scene, he confronts another man who uses a sword, Jackie in self-defense pick up, what appears to be an aubergine, the scene becomes immediately comic. The old man teaches Jackie, the Eight Drunken Master fighting style, in *Drunken Master*, among the eight is the god of Drunken Miss Ho "Drunken woman flaunting her body". This feminine fighting style, is so at odds with other fighting styles, that it appears comic. At the end of the film, Jackie in a drunken state is losing the battle, he turns into Miss Ho, this strange comic feminine fighting style, perplexes his opponent so much, that he wins the fight. That is Jackie wins the battle by becoming a comedian, while his opponent uses pure violence, Jackie uses comedy as a weapon.

"Violence exists in the fabric of the Kitano world, in the every day and the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary and spectacular that other forms of cinema often concentrate on." (Redmond: 2012: 37)

Another worn out genre, the Yakuza genre (Japanese Gangsters), is similar to kung-fu genre. In that they both had their peak, in the late 60s. When the Japanese actor-director Takeshi Kitano, makes his first Yakuza film in the late 80s, the genre was long gone, and all that was left now was nothing more than some cliches (Redmond: 2012).

Sean Redmond book on the Takeshi Kitano, "*The Cinema of Takeshi Kitano*", among his Yakuza films, is *Sonatine* (1993), the *Outrage* (2010), trilogy, where violence is as Redmond describes it:

"Violence as a form of stasis, as a thing in everything, sits as a brooding presence or present, even without these acts of mayhem and bloodshed taking place."  
(Redmond: 2012: 37)

In his Yakuza films (his first film called *Violent Cop* (1989), there is raw violence to his character, and the world he finds himself in. While they might seem at odds with each other, it is only logical that, Kitano would make comedies, along with his Yakuza films, and at times mixing the two. In the film *Ryuzo and the Seven Henchmen* (2015), is about retired yakuza gangster, who still want to be and think they are gangsters, comedy is perfectly rendered along with the Yakuza genre (Takeshi Kitano: 2018).

In his first comedy film, *Getting Any?* (1995), about a man who wants to have sex (which turn out to be impossible), this film is unlike any other comedy films of the 90s (Redmond: 2012).

In his second comedy, *Kikujiro* (1999), Kitano is helping a sad child, to find his mother. In the film, while Kitano does every trick in the book, for a ride, in the end, he teaches the kid how to place a needle in the middle of the road, which far from getting what they wanted, puncture the car's tires and crashes the car.

Kitano character is nothing short of a criminal who resort to pure violence, when he does not get what he wants, he asks a truck driver, for a lift, when the truck driver refuses, Kitano breaks his windows. Then when the man confronts him, he starts to beat the living shit out of him. Kitano plays a retired Yakuza, who although supposed to have given up on the life of crime, throughout the film is as violent as ever, saying to some punks in the street: "Hand over more money or I'll kill you guys!"

Then right after this scene, Kitano is sitting in a bar, drinking alcohol with straw, like a child. This film is not made for children, far from it, the kid is in an adult world, too violent for any children, the world of Kitano.

He supposed to take the boy to his mother, instead, they go to the racetrack, where he loses all his money, then in his carelessness, he loses the boy. In the middle of the night a pedophile, who promises the child, that he will take him to his mother, instead he takes him to a secluded public bathroom, forcing him to take off his cloth. The genius of Kitano violent comedy is when he finds the boy half-naked, with pedophile trying to take the kid underwear off, he saves the kid, gives the pedophile a beating. Then Kitano takes his clothes, stands precisely in the same position as the kid and forces the pedophile to take Kitano's underwear off.

"The premise of all comedy is a man in trouble, the little guy against the big guy... In this respect, the sources of comedy are a simple matter of who's doing what to whom. They include of course, what the comedian does to himself." (Lewis: 1971-198)

The comedy is what Kitano does to the pedophile, in some sense to everybody throughout the film. Pierre Richard is an obscure figure compared to other comedians, hardly mentioned except for a few footnotes. His films were popular at one point, but today he is completely forgotten, on Wikipedia, it is written that Pierre Richard is regarded as one of the most talented comedians of the last 50 years. Even if this statement is exaggerated, it is strange that then nobody talks about him (Pierre Richard: 2018).

In fact, there is so little written about him, that all the information, I have of him, is through Wikipedia, and his website ([pierre-richard.fr](http://pierre-richard.fr)). It might be said that everything the French comedian actor-director Pierre Richard, did before making his films with Gérard Depardieu (they made their first film together in 1981), was experimenting with character, like Stan Laurel before, meeting Oliver Hardy. Unlike Kitano and Jackie Chan, Pierre Richard violence comes from Pierre Richard, created by him involuntarily. In his first film, *Le Distrait* (1970), the title means daydreamer or the absent-minded person, is about an advertising agent (Pierre). Who is not able to accomplish anything, whether it is to catch a cab, or take an elevator, he just does not function properly (Pierre Richard: 2018).

This character trait is continued in another film, *Le jouet* (1976), where every human weakness seems to exist in him, even handshakes do not function properly when Pierre Richard is involved. He is like a magnet attracting every defect around him (Pierre Richard: 2018). There is nothing consistent, even when he tries to make an argument, it is impossible to follow:

"We could consider publicity like the treatment of a disease. Like a doctor who treats a sick person. The treatment consists of heroic electroshock. Let me explain."

When a girl tells him: "Quick, we don't have that much time", she means that we don't have much time for sex, he misunderstands and tells her: "But its only 4 o'clock".

In *Je suis Timide mais je me Soigne* (1978), he plays a character who is shy, afraid of woman, his life is ruined, by fear of woman. At the beginning of the film, he rings a girls apartment (electric doorbell), when she answers "yes", he tells her "I love you" then runs away (Pierre Richard: 2018).

There is violence in his absent-mindedness, he destroys his boss office while looking for the light switch. Richard walks into a house, takes off his clothes, shoes, makes himself comfortable, starts reading the newspaper, answers the telephone, tells the man on the phone "You got the wrong number" while continuing to drink, then only to find out, he entered the wrong house. I call this violence, involuntary violence since he has no control over the violence he brings about. In his second film, *Les malheurs d'Alfred* (1972), when he wants to sit on a chair, it breaks, when he takes a shower, the water turns out to be boiling, even when he shaves, he ends up cutting himself (Pierre Richard: 2018).

This involuntary violence is continued with, *La Chèvre* (1981), his first film with Gérard Depardieu, the plot of the movie is crazy when an absent-minded girl disappears, Pierre along with Depardieu, who plays a detective is hired to find the girl (Fig. 5) (Pierre Richard: 2018).

Pierre Richard character (François Perrin), is employed just because he is as absent-minded as she is, he is unlucky and accident-prone as the girl. For the interview, to see if he is the right man, they give Richard the chance to sit on any chair he likes, he, of course, chooses the one that is broken. While looking at a beautiful woman, he falls into a ditch, when lighting a cigarette, he sets Depardieu's ties on fire. The relationship between the two men is like Laurel and Hardy, you can see Hardy continually surprised, amazed at Laurel's mischiefs, Depardieu looks in amazement at Richards violent acts. There is the involuntary violence inflicted by Richard, but there is also the violence of the world.



(Fig. 5) While arguing with Depardieu, Richard sinks further and further into a quicksand, even the ground is not safe (Francis Veber:1981).

That is they enter a violent world, where they must survive, in their first film, they enter the world of prostitution, where they find the absent-minded girl abducted to. In their next film together, *Les Compères* (1983), the plot of the movie, is similar to the first film, a young man, has run away from home, become part of a Biker gang. Depardieu and Richard are called to save the boy from the world of violence and mafia, in their final film together, *Les Fugitifs* (1986), they enter the violent world of criminals and bank robbers. There is the internal violence of Pierre Richard, and the external violence of the world, in this sense their films are like Abbott and Costello (Pierre Richard: 2018).

There is a Small theme recurring from film to film, in the first film, Pierre has a bloody nose, he gets a handkerchief from Depardieu, after cleaning his nose, he throws handkerchief out of the window, from a moving car to Depardieu regret.

In the second film, Pierre cries for no obvious, very much like Laurel who cries on demand, he gets a kleenex from Depardieu, in the last movie, he cries again, ask Depardieu for a handkerchief, Depardieu, responds: "I haven't got one."

"*Happy Gilmore* tells the story of a violent sociopath. Since it's about golf, that makes it a comedy." (Ebert: 1996)

The great American film critic Roger Ebert, was very critical of the Adam Sandler's film *Happy Gilmore*, in 1996. Adam Sandler is the latest comedian to have violence as a form of comedy. Somebody like Jack Nicholson inspires his type of violence, in his film *Billy Madison* (1995), at one point of the film, Jack Nicholson is mentioned, which means that he is aware of this. There is something of Nicholson in Sandler character, although Sandler lacks Jack's madness, his inspiration for being angry might be from Nicholson, we will come back to this later (Crawford: 2000).

Adam Sandler's characters are usually losers, doing odd jobs, jobs he either dislikes or does for money, then through his transformation, he gets a better job and girlfriend. If we compare him to Jerry Lewis, although Lewis is very strange, he is born with a talent, Adam Sandler requires help in developing his talent.

In *Going Overboard* (1989), he is a waiter, trying to become a comedian, he is then given a chance in performing his stand up on a boat, with the help of his friend and another comedian. In *Happy Gilmore*, Sandler is a failed hockey player, with the help of a professional golfer, and his violence becomes a successful golfer. In *The Wedding Singer* (1998), he is a failed musician, who sings at weddings for money, then with the help from the singer Billy Idol, who promises him to tell his record company executives, about his songs, there is hope for his musical career. In *The Waterboy*, he is just an ordinary waterboy, the only film, where Sandler is happy with his job, then through his violence, he is transformed into a football player. In the movie, *Big Daddy* (1999), he works at the toll booth (another strange job), his girlfriend leaves him, his life changes, when he has to take care of a child, which inspires him to, becomes a lawyer, which then also gets him, the girl. There is a consistent theme of the need to succeed in one's profession, being able to survive with help, which then creates the possibility of a relationship (Crawford: 2000).



Throughout *Happy Gilmore*, Sandler like Bud Spencer, goes around, punching and kicking people, although Jack Nicholson doesn't need anything to get angry, Sandler needs help. In *Happy Gilmore*, the opening titles show what we think to be happy memories, Sandler with his father watching a hockey game. But all this happy memory is disrupted when a Hockey puck kills his father, pointing to the violence inherent in the game of Ice hockey. When the IRS comes to take Sandler's grandmother house away from her (she did not pay taxes), Sandler becomes angry and throws the man out a glass door.

If all of this wasn't enough, Sandler's character in the film fights with his boss almost killing him with a nail gun, then has another fight with his hockey manager, not to mention killing his golf trainer, he even fights a crocodile (a very Bud Spencer thing to do). In *The Wedding Singer*, when his fiancée, abandons him at the altar (she never shows up), he immediately gets angry, and violent. In this sense, Sandler is like the comic (Magazine) character Bruce Banner, who is an ordinary man, but when provoked transforms into the Hulk (if there ever were an angry character then it would be the Hulk). Like The Hulk, his anger gives him great ability to act, in *The Waterboy* (1998), it is through his anger that he becomes a great football player (American Rugby). When somebody in his team, calls him needle dick, he uses his anger to good use. In the film, it quickly becomes comic, when to win, he has to visualize the other team members insulting him, so that he can become angry so that he win the game. There are two forms of violence in the film, physical violence, and verbal violence, for instance after his girlfriend breaks up with him, Sandler's grandmother asks him, how is your sweet girlfriend doing? Sandler answers: "Ah she was hit by a car, she is dead."

By the time he makes, *Punch-drunk Love* (2002), with the director Paul Thomas Anderson his character is fully developed, the director Paul Thomas Anderson is fully aware of his anger, strange jobs he tends to do. Therefore in the film, Sandler sells toilet plungers and other novelty items.

The film, *Punch-drunk Love* is much more relentless, than all the other films combined, five minutes has not gone by, when he witnesses a car crash. Sandler's seven sisters calling him one by one, one of them, even drops by his office, asking him if he will come to the party when he does show up, the first thing they do, is calling him "gay boy." In the review of the film, Roger Ebert wrote:

"This is a pattern. He presents to the world a face of cheerful blandness and then erupts in terrifying displays of frustrated violence. He seems always on guard, unsure, obscurely threatened. It's as if Sandler is Hannibal Lecter in a Jerry Lewis body." (Ebert: 2002)

In the film, Sandler's character tells his new found love "Dont tell my sisters anything," Roger Ebert saw this in him "It drives him crazy, when people nose into his business." But Ebert does not elaborate, it is not people nosing into his business, that makes him crazy, it is that his sister knows all of his secrets. There is only one good sister, who tries to help him, but invades his private life even more, by asking him if he cries and why he needs a shrink. The film has no mercy for Sandler's character, even when he thinks, he is being private (phone sex), only later to find out, they also invade your life, calling him at his office, asking for money. When he refuses, they invade his life even more, which results in a violent encounter between too. All the violence in the film can be accounted for in this manner, why he destroys the glass door at his sister's birthday party, the smashing of the bathroom in the restaurant and the fight with the four blond brothers.

"The hostility veiled as humor in the typical Sandler comedy is revealed in "*Punch-Drunk Love*" as—hostility." (Ebert: 2002)

It is not so much hostility but violence as a form of comedy, when the couple makes love, never has there been a more violent way of expressing love, in the history of cinema, yet at the same time being so comic:

"Barry: I'm lookin' at your face and I just wanna smash it. I just wanna f\*\*\*in' smash it with a sledgehammer and squeeze it. You're so pretty.

Lena: I want to chew your face, and I want to scoop out your eyes and I want to eat them and chew them and suck on them.

Barry: OK. This is funny. This is nice."

Sandler's encounter with Lena changes him (Emily Watson), far from making him less angry, it makes him even more angry. "I have so much strength inside of me. You have no idea. I have a love in my life. It makes me stronger than anything you can imagine." With his new strength, he gets back the money from the sex company, beating the shit out of the four blond brothers, who was after him and even gets a break (private life) from his sisters.

*Anger Management* (2003), is the first film, where his anger is no longer transformative, but realistic, and the man who supposed to help Sandler with his anger issues, is that same man, who is the very source of anger, Jack Nicholson. In the film, Sandler is sent to anger management, Jack Nicholson volunteers to supervise him, slowly turning into an ordinary man, the girl now will only be with him, if he changes his character, and deals with his anger issues. In another sad film, *Reign Over Me* (2007), which has a similar structure to *Anger Management*, after losing his family, there is a reason to be angry, but his new anger brings him in front of the judge, who has to decide to send him to the hospital or not. Again violence is dealt with realistically, losing all its metaphysical dimension, compare this film, with *Punch-drunk Love*, the difference becomes clear, in *Punch-drunk Love*, far from curing him of his anger issues, it gives it back to him ten times stronger (Adam Sandler: 2018).



## Case Study – Marx Brothers

### Marx Brothers Background

Almost all the comedians from the 1920s, started their career in Vaudeville (vaudeville performance was made up of a series of unrelated acts grouped), the five Marx Brothers in this sense is no different, Vaudeville was once the battling ground for the upcoming comedians. From a Jewish family, it seems, their first talent was being able to play on multiple musical instruments, with Harpo playing the Harp, Chico playing the piano, and Groucho doing the singing. They started out as five brothers, Chico being the Italian immigrant, Harpo who never spoke, and Groucho who was quick in thought and mind. Gummo is the only one of the brothers who never made a film and Zeppo was the normal one of the bunch, playing the romantic lead and being the sensible one.

By the time they made their first feature in 1929, they had already fully developed their character, performing for almost 20 years in Vaudeville and Broadway Shows. Unlike Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, who struggled to find their style in cinema, the Marx Brothers, entered cinema fully formed. They made their first film in 1921, a short film *Humor Risk*, the film is unfortunately lost, their first feature film, *The Cocoanuts* (1929), and the third film, *Animal Crackers* (1930), were based on their, hit Broadway Show (Charney: 2007).

### Introduction to the Case-Study

After describing the origin of comedy, then the theme of surviving in the world, which is an elemental part of comedy, we will see how the two ideas exist in the films of Marx Brothers. The long tradition of becoming another subject, which is derived from the comedy plays of Shakespeare, where woman often disguised themselves as men, and vice versa. There is a reference to change in Marx Brothers, handled in a very refined manner. I will analyze only two of their films, but as I hope to show, all the films of Marx Brothers are about the same thing, surviving.

## The Cocoanuts

Year: 1929

Directed by: Robert Florey & Joseph Santley

Produced by: Monta Bell & Walter Wanger

Written by: George S. Kaufman (play) & Morrie Ryskind

Edited by: Barney Rogan

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Distributed by: Paramount Pictures

Running time: 93 minutes

### Synopsis

The film is set in the Hotel de Cocoanut, Mr. Hammer (Groucho) is running the bankrupt Florida hotel. He'll do anything to make money, even make love to the wealthy Mrs. Potter (Margaret Dumont). Mrs. Potters daughter (Mary Eaton), is in love with a struggling young architect Bob Adams (Oscar Shaw), while the villain is played by Harvey Yates (Cyril Ring), who is after Mrs potter's daughter Polly. Chico and Harpo arrive at the hotel with empty luggage, which they plan to fill with hotel goods, The film, end with a happy note, when Groucho saves his hotel, while Chico and Harpo help Adams marry Polly.

### Film analysis

"Groucho was the comically inappropriate public figure... with the silver tongue, stringing together nonsequiturs into lunatic scraps of nonsensical poetry... Chico was the tin-eared immigrant on the make, his English as woeful as his confidence schemes were brilliant. And Harpo was a malevolent Pierrot, impish and undaunted." (Austerlitz: 2010: 52)

Saul Austerlitz book *"Another Fine Mess: A History of American Film Comedy"*, in a short but accurate way describes the comic character of the Marx Brothers.

The first images we see in the film *The Cocoanuts* (1929), is of Florida, where people are having fun at the beach, rich people enjoying themselves, then cut to Hotel de Cocoanut, the bell boys and girls asking Groucho for money:

"We want to see you, Mr. Hammer", Groucho answers "What's the matter, somebody pay their bill? Groucho continues with "If you stick with me, and work hard, we forget about money." "Three years ago I came to Florida, without a nickel in my pocket. And now I've got a nickel in my pocket."

While all this is going on, he gets a telegram:

"We arrive this afternoon on the four thirty, kindly reserve two floors and three ceilings, if we like your property, we immediately will buy it." Groucho optimistically tells the bellboys: "See that, things has started our way already."

The hotel is in crisis for the simple reason, not having enough customers, the telegram turns out to be from Chico, who intends to rob the hotel, but Groucho's prediction in some sense is correct, things do turn out for the better.

Groucho's, unlike Chico & Harpo usually has a job, often in high positions, in *The Cocoanuts*, he is the hotel manager, while Chico and Harpo, are like two wanderers (with no position or place). Chico & Harpo are similar to Toto, that is they play the character of the thief, the swindlers, while Groucho is part of the society, Chico and Harpo are outsiders. The two brothers seem to be against all property and objects others possess when Harpo sees a bellboy with nice clothes, he tries to destroy it, when Chico sees a bellboy, he tries to rob him, while Groucho will try to divert his desire, by not paying him. The hotel is in crisis, Bob Adams is in trouble, Harvey and his conniving partner Penelope (Kay Francis), are planning to frame Bob, so that Harvey can marry Polly. The love couple Polly and Bob, are waiting for Bob, to design a building, to have enough money to be able to get married.

It is important to point out, that Groucho himself is never in trouble, it is always the business that he is running is (Fig. 5 & 6).



(Fig. 5) Groucho trying to sell land to Mrs. Potter. (Fig. 6) while Harpo is stealing money (Robert Florey & Joseph Santley: 1929).

On the one hand, we have the crisis of the hotel, Chico & Harpo out of work, on the other hand, the lovers plan unfulfilled, and their future threatened. The detail of the plot is unimportant, what is important is how they survive the crisis, the only person who seems to be doing fine in all of this is Mrs. Potter, who is very rich.

First, the brothers save Bob from the criminals, who were framing him, then Bob's architectural plans are accepted which means, he can marry Polly, and that Groucho can get new customers to the hotel, in the end everything is resolved. It is with the help of Chico & Harpo, that they can survive.

Every Marx Brothers film has the same theme, that of surviving. Whether it is from gangsters, corrupt people, or saving a business from going bankrupt like the hospital in *A Day at the Races* (1937). The store in *The Big Store* (1941), the play in *Room Service* (1938), and the country Freedonia in *Duck Soup* (1933) (Charney: 2007).

If we compare the Marx Brothers to Laurel and Hardy, then there is no Hardy to drive the story, in *Monkey Business* (1931), the narrative is driven by the gangsters who are trying to murder one other, while the brothers, disrupt what is going on.

To the second theme, change, when Groucho receives the telegram, he thinks that two businessmen are coming to the hotel, it turned out, that it was Chico & Harpo. After arriving at the hotel, a detective recognizes Chico for what he is, he tells Chico "I think, I know your face", Chico responds "I give up, who's is it?"



## Animal Crackers

Year: 1930

Directed by: Victor Heerman

Produced by: Unknown

Written by: George S. Kaufman & Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby

Edited by: Unknown

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Distributed by: Paramount Pictures

Running time: 96 Minutes

### Synopsis

While in *The Cocoanuts*, the story revolves around the hotel, in *Animal Crackers*, it revolves around the wealthy Rittenhouse (Margaret Dumont) house, who is welcoming the explorer Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding (Groucho) home. Dumont's daughter Arabella (Lillian Roth), this time is in love with a struggling painter John Parker, played by Hal Thompson. Instead of jewelry being stolen like in *The Cocoanuts*, a valuable painting is taken, the bad guys are played by Mrs. Whitehead (Margaret Irving) and Grace Carpenter (Kathryn Reece). By the end of the film, the painting is found, the struggling painter gets commissioned by revered art collector Roscoe W. Chandler (Louis Sorin), with the help of the Marx Brothers of course.

### Film analysis

"The Marx Brothers used their musical numbers as relief situations. I also suspect they ran out of material. Mainly, it was for relief. Their material was fast-paced, particularly when Harpo was on. They moved so quickly that time had to be given for digestion." (Lewis: 1971:189)

For Jerry Lewis, a comedy film needs relief from the comedy, in this sense, Lewis early films with Dean Martin has something in common with Marx Brothers. Who had several musical numbers in their movies, in *Animal Crackers* (1930), the most memorable songs is, "Hello, I Must Be Going."

If we look closely at the comedy of Marx Brothers, through the eyes of Tati, and Albert Brooks, we retroactively see the theme of surviving in the lifelessness of the world. In the Marx Brothers, people are dull (that is mostly the bourgeoisie). There is a struggle against dullness, in *Animal Crackers*, everything is dull before Groucho enters, the setting, the people, their conversation, and behavior. Then Groucho character Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding (a renowned explorer), comes, there is dancing, singing, strange, nonsensical jokes. Not to mention, when Harpo enters shortly after, who starts shooting at everybody, he even gets shot, but like a cartoon continues with his activities of chasing girls. The only antidote against dullness is improvisation, in *Animal Crackers*, Louis Sorin (who plays Roscoe W. Chandler), makes a mistake calling Groucho by some another name. Groucho does not stop for one minute, continues with his insults:

"Am Spaulding, you are Chandler. Let have no more of that either. Bad enough being Spaulding... Can I look at the program for one minute, I might be news weakly for all he knows."

Another instance of improvisation is when Groucho is talking to the young painter:

"Say if we could find the fallow, who painted this picture, we could have a pretty good clue", Groucho ask him: "What did you say", fully knowing, what he just said. He repeats: "I say if we could find the fallow, who painted this picture, we could have a pretty good clue," Groucho then responds: "You just said that what a dull conversationist you turned out to be."

In *Horse Feathers* (1932), after Groucho barely listening to the previous dean of the school, tells his students " Well, I thought my razor is dull until I heard his speech."

In *A Day at the Races* (1937), a typical Marx Brothers film, there is the bad guy, there is the lover, who has not made it in the world (Chico is there to help him), and the rich Margaret Dumont (usually Groucho's love interest). In the film, Groucho makes a joke about Dumont: "Im sure Marie Antoinette would like to say a few boring words."

The three brothers are against, more than anything in the world is dullness, they rather have the whole world end, than be a dull person.

In Marx Brothers, there is the consistent theme of helping the couple survive, from corrupt people. The couple is either too naive, or too weak help themselves, and they need help from the outside, this is then when Chico & Harpo, enter the scene.

In *Go West* (1940), it is Chico & Harpo, who take back the land from the gunslingers, with the help of Groucho who is only after the money. Their comedy in this sense is close to Laurel and Hardy, they continuously disrupt what's going on, ruining the plans of the enemy. In *Go West*, the bad guys are after a land, owned by a poor family, the Brothers not only help them get back their land but also continuously change, alter the outcome. In *Animal Crackers*, Chico & Harpo, help the painter, John, by some funny circumstances, to succeed in his profession, by replacing a well known painting with his copy. The woman, who plays the romantic interest usually is in love with the poor man, a man who is struggling, while the man with the money often is played by the bad guy. There are always two men in the films, Margaret Dumont who plays the mother in *Animal Crackers* and *The Cocoanuts*, is opposed to the marriage to the poor man. In *A Night at the Opera*, and *The Cocoanuts*, the bad guy is the man who has already made it in the world, while the good guy, is the one who is struggling (Charney: 2007).

*Animal Crackers* is a typical Marx Brothers film, a man is struggling in his profession (painting), he lacks the means to marry the girl (he lacks money). Groucho in a high position, he is supposed to be an explorer, in the film, it is unclear if, he, in fact, has explored anything, he is an explorer like, he runs the hotel.

In this film, the bad guys, are not so bad after all (in most of the other films, they are just bad), here they merely wanted to pull a prank on Dumont, by pretending to steal the painting. While, the rich Dumont, seeks male companionship, worrying about her daughter, Chico & Harpo can survive anything, they don't worry about anything, more important, they are the ones, who change the very fate of the other characters.

While Groucho always survives, he is in need of money, we see him courting Dumont, he wants to marry her for her money. After the introduction and singing, Chico enters (Fig. 7 & 8).



(Fig. 7) Chico is asking Dumont, where the food is. (Fig. 8) Groucho greets him, thinks he knows him (Victor Heerman:1930).

The following conversation takes place, between Groucho and Chico:

"Spaulding: Say, I used to know a fellow that looked exactly like you by the name of Emanuel Ravelli. Are you his brother?

Ravelli: I am Emanuel Ravelli. Spaulding: You're Emanuel Ravelli?

Ravelli: I am Emanuel Ravelli. Spaulding: Well, no wonder you look like him. But I still insist there's a resemblance.

Ravelli: Ha, ha, ha, ha...hey, he thinks I look alike. Spaulding: Well, if you do it's a tough break for both of you."

Who did Groucho meet? Chico, is supposed to be Italian, yet there is nothing Italian about him, what is this Italian? Bob Hope is already somebody before his metamorphosis, the transformation of character implies, an already existing character. In Marx Brothers, the change has already taken place, the fact that Chico is an Italian (Jewish man who real name was Leonard Marx).

This is perfectly rendered when Chico recognizes Chandler, who used to be a fish peddler by the named Abe Kabibble:

"Ravelli: How did you get to be Roscoe W. Chandler? Chandler: Say, how did you get to be an Italian? Ravelli: Never mind. Whose confession is this?"

In the films of Woody, there is the struggle of transformation, in Marx Brothers, the change, has already happened, before the movie begins. The fact we have Groucho, Harpo, Chico, is already the transformation, from something, we never witnessed.

## Case Study – W.C. Fields

### W.C. Fields Background

William Claude Dukefield is his birth name, W.C. Fields his stage name, to name few things, W.C. Fields has in common with Marx Brothers, he also started in Vaudeville. The Broadway play *Poppy*, was an essential play for him, first staged in 1923, Fields plays the small-time con man, along with his top hat, cutaway coat, and cane.

He began as a silent juggler, then making his first films in 1915, unlike Marx Brothers, we have visual evidence of character development from his silent film to talkies.

Fields like the Marx Brothers were in the habit of making his stage shows into movies, then later remaking his silent films into sound.

In this sense, he was a master of reusing, transforming, changing gags he either did on stage or film. The film *It's the old army game* (1926), would be remade into *It's a gift* (1934), *Sally of the Sawdust* transformed into *Poppy* (1936), *So's Your Old Man* (1926), into *You're Telling Me!* (1926), and *Running Wild* (1927) into *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935). There are differences between the two version, by adding sound, Fields enhanced, changed the material for the better.

Fields made ten feature films in the 1920s, three of them are lost (Wertheim: 2014).

### Introduction to the Case-Study

For Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields, surviving the world is quintessential, in Marx Brothers, the role of the con-man is played by Chico & Harpo, in W.C. Fields, he is the con-man unless he is married, he then does legitimate business as far as he knows. The similarity continues, Groucho is in constant financial trouble, he would do anything to get his hands on money, even woo the old woman Dumont, so would Fields. The difference is in Fields there is much more violence in the film, he uses violence as a comic form, we can see this much more clearly in his silent movies, which his sound films, are the continuation of.

## Short Films

W.C. Fields was 35 when he made his first short film (in 1915), the stage would prevent him from making another movie until 1924, by the time he made his first talkie, he was already in his middle ages. That is an essential part of his character, he was never a young man, on the screen, he never played, or was the young man, Fields was already too old when he made his first film. His first film, *Pool Sharks* (1915), Fields is fighting with another man, for the affection of a young woman, when the heroine, sits on a chair, Fields looks for an empty chair to sit on when he cant find one. Fields with his cane in a comic manner makes a seemingly innocent child slip of his chair, then takes his place. Not to worry, the child hits back at him immediately, the violence between Fields and children have started (Gehring: 2007).

In *The Dentist* (1932), he is sitting on a chair, asks his daughter "Where is my glasses?", She responds "They are on your head" then continues with "Where is the newspaper", she responds back, "You are sitting on it." The film constantly emphasis his oldness, by reminding the viewers, that Fields has gone senile. In his dental office, he asks his assistant "Where is the soap?" She responds: "It is in your hand" (Neibaur: 2017).

Unlike Groucho Marx, Fields talks extremely slow, his clothes belong to the 18th-century Victorian area, his accents also suggest his oldness, not to mention his slow reaction. He even forgets what kind of character he is, in many of his films, Fields wears a hat, in *The Dentist*, he asks his daughter:

"Where is my cap," she responds "You never wear any."

Violence is never far off, in *The Golf Specialist* (1930), Fields plays his typical con-man, the first thing we see, is him receiving a mail, from a violent man. The letter states if he does to pay up the money. Fields owe him, this man will beat him up for all the money worth, not long after he reads the letter, Fields tries to steal 50 dollars from a little girl. Fields then goes golfing, for 15 minutes, he tries to hit the ball, while saying "Keep your eye on the ball" to a wife of another violent man (the house detective). The whole sequence is taken right out of his feature film, *So's Your Old Man* (1926), with the dialogue added: "Keep your eye on the ball". The pace is much slower here, the fact of adding sound to the gag has enhanced the sequence (Neibaur: 2017).

In *The Pharmacist* (1933), Fields is a druggist, a criminal enters the store while shooting at the cops, by the time they stop shooting at each other, the whole store is destroyed. In *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (1933), it is winter, when he opens the door and says: "It ain't a fit night out for man or beast!"

A snowball is thrown right into his face, this is repeated several times in the film, then his son returns from the city, Fields asks him, did you bring any money back with you, he answers no. At this point Fields and his wife, beat him up and throw him out.

While the violence is much more articulated in the films of Jackie Chan and Takeshi Kitano, in W.C. Fields violence is very subtle, his comedy is violence through old age, or to put it in another way, Fields surviving the violent world (Neibaur: 2017).

### **My Little Chickadee**

This film has been mentioned just for the fact that it is the only film, where Fields collaborates with Mae West. It was made in 1940, their only collaboration, the movie starts like a typical Mae West, she is punished by the townspeople (the woman of the town), when one of them, sees her kissing a bandit. While Fields plays his typical con-man, it is the only film, where Fields is interested in a woman, not for her money but her character and intelligence. The feeling is not mutual, Fields might be interested in West, but she is interested in money. In the film, she marries Fields, thinking him to be rich, when she finds out, he is poor, of he goes. It is a violent world when they enter a new town, and they find out that the crooks run the city, the logic of the films follows, the well known saying by Bertolt Brecht:

"What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a bank?"

What is a small-time con-man like Fields compared to crooks that run the city?

The town is so corrupt they kill every sheriff, the man who runs the city (Joseph Calleia), Jeff Badger appoints Fields as sheriff, knowing that Fields is a con-man, and that he will be killed in the process.

We find ourselves in the world of men when one of the thieves tells Mae West, she should be with him, he can give her protection, she responds:

"Mmm, funny, every man I meet wants to protect me. I can't figure out what from."

What Mae West and Fields have in common is merely this, there are two types of violence confronting both, their lack money, means that they have to play the game, established by society and other crooks. When they play the game, running into violence is inevitable, for Fields violence from him conning people, out of their money, for West by being a woman outside the law of society (Neibaur: 2017).



## Sally of the Sawdust

Year: 1925

Directed by: D.W. Griffith

Produced by: D.W. Griffith

Written by: Poppy by Dorothy Donnelly

Edited by: Russell G. Shields

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Distributed by: United Artists

Running time: 104 minutes

### Synopsis

The film is based on the Broadway musical *Poppy*, which was made later again in 1936, with the original title. W.C. Fields (Professor Eustace McGargle), is a con-man, who adopts a girl, Sally (Carol Dempster), raises her to be a con artist like himself. When Sally falls in love with a wealthy boy, Peyton Lennox (Alfred Lunt), Judge Henry L. Foster (Erville Alderson), tries to prevent the romance by sending Sally and Fields to jail. While sentencing Sally, for some of the crimes she committed, Fields reveals Sally to be in fact, the judge's granddaughter, the judge's then embraces her, and her grandmother welcomes her to the family. By the end of the film, she is reconciled with her family, agrees to marry the young man, while Fields for once gives up being con-man.

### Film analysis

"It is true that comedy presented acts of violence and extreme situations only to disavow their seriousness a moment later, yet as long as they persisted, they communicated nothing but themselves. They were as they were, and the shots rendering them had no function other than to make us watch spectacles." (Kracauer: 2012: 216)

It is hard to discern the comedy of W.C. Fields, Fields in almost every film has a daughter, this was never the case in the films of Chaplin, Keaton or Lloyd. They never played the character of the father on the screen, in almost every W.C. Fields film, he has children whether it is his own or adopted.

While Chaplin sees innocence and beauty in children (think of the film *The Kid* 1921), Fields sees in them the devils, they are, capable of great violence, just for their amusement, hence his hatred of all children, including his own. In *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man* (1939), it seems nobody can cheat Fields except, children.

A little girl tricks him into giving her money, when she claims that one of his elephants killed her dog, which later he finds out was a lie. Fields extraordinary ability as a juggler is visible in a small scene in *Sally of the Sawdust* and in *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934), it is not so much juggling act, as much as a comedy routine, involving three balls.

In the film, we also see Fields for the first time play, "Old army game", referring to the street game (Shell game), where you hide a small pea under a shell, then you put your money, where you think, the pea is. It is the world of dog eat dog, when Fields wins some money by playing the shell game, the mob figures out that he cheated, then comes back for their money, and a violent scene breaks out. That is the first film, in a long line of films, where Fields is on the adventure with his daughter, confronting a violent world. The only positive relationship in his life is that of his daughter, while all other people are either trying to con him or are too domineering like his wife, the only person Fields has affection for is his daughter (McCaffrey: 1973).

*Tillie and Gus* (1933), belong to the tradition set by Marx Brothers, that of helping the young couple make it, after an evil attorney Phineas Pratt (Clarence Wilson), steal all their money, and plans to take the ferry away from them, their only form of income. Fields and Tillie (Alison Skipworth), come and help the couple survive, by a race between the new ferry owned by Pratt, and the old dilapidated ship. In this film, Fields is helping the couple (he no relation to the young woman), like Groucho, for one reason only, money.

## It's the Old Army Game

Year: 1926

Directed by: A. Edward Sutherland

Produced by: Adolph Zukor, Jesse L. Lasky, William LeBaron

Written by: J. P. McEvoy (story) William LeBaron (story) Thomas J. Geraghty (scenario) J. Clarkson Miller

Edited by: Thomas J. Geraghty

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Distributed by: Paramount Pictures

Running time: 117 minutes

### Synopsis

W. C. Fields as Elmer Prettywillieplays, a druggist, who is in love with Mildred Marshall (Louise Brooks), William Gaxton (George Parker) plays a good con-man, who is also in love with Louise. Mildred Marshall convinces Fields to go into business with William, selling worthless land, which Fields thinks is legitimate. Even when Fields tries to do legitimate business, he is conning people, it ends on a happy note when it turns out that the land has some value after all.

### Film analysis

"W.C. Fields was a master at violence. In a bank scene he almost choked a kid to death. "If your neck was clean, I'd wring it." (Lewis:1971: 190)

Far from being a violent film, *Sally Of The Sawdust* is not violent enough of a film, the film ends in a satisfying way for everybody. In *You Cant Cheat an Honest Man* (1939), the only collaboration with Edgar Bergen (well know ventriloquist), most of the violence happens by the hand of the puppet. In *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941), he gets punched by a man for merely greeting his girlfriend (McCaffrey: 1973).

The world is just hostile, everything from children, people, animals, even objects seem to be against him, in *The Old fashioned way* (1934), while he does everything he can to secure himself a bed to sleep, cigars to smoke, food to eat.

Throughout the film, his toes are the subject of the violence (this is also true for his other films, his leg usually is the subject of abuse). Just think of the violence in getting hit by the constant snowball in *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (1933), add to it, his old age. In the *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935), while being robbed (they were stealing his beer), he has to put on his socks first, which he does very slowly.

The violence outside, and his slow reaction to it, that is in his old age, Fields has lost, all ability to move his legs properly, to quickly react against danger. In the films of Jackie Chan, the character of the drunken old man, the kung-fu master who through his drinking, can master all the violence that is directed at him. In Fields, it is the complete opposite, his drinking, makes him even worse, even slower than usual, his love of alcohol, creates even more violent situations than preventing it. In the film, *Man on the Flying Trapeze*, when they take the burglars to the police station, Fields is the one sent to jail, for making illegal beer.

*It's the Old Army Game*, is a film among a long line of films, where Fields, gambles money on shady deals, which by the end turns out to be profitable. In *The Bank Dick* (1940), he suggests to his brother in law, to steal 500 dollars from the bank and invest them into Beefsteak Mining Company. His brother in law, takes the money, gives it to the swindler, by the end of the film, it turns out, that the company was worth money after all, which then helps his daughter get married. Another film, which has a similar structure, is the film *It's a gift* (1934), Fields buys tumbledown shack which he hopes to grow oranges on, everybody tells him, he will not be able to produce oranges, that the land is worthless. Fields continue with his delusion, and then a miracle happens, when some wealthy men approach Fields and want to buy back the land back from him. They tell him, they are going to make grandstand for a race track there, he then sells the property for a vast amount of money and secures himself enough money for the rest of his life (Kerr: 1975).

It is a romantic idea, a Hollywood ending, the poor daughter marries the rich man in *So's Your Old Man*, the adopted child, finally finds her family in *Sally In The Sawdust*. Fields can only survive through a miracle, or by the magic of cinema, the land which in fact was worthless turn out to be profitable. In this sense, his form of surviving is similar to Toto, both comedian present, a highly realistic vision of the world, then through fiction, they escape the cruel world to a less hostile life.

The first thing we see in *It's the Old Army Game*, is Fields sleeping, then slowly, slowly, he gets up, while this scene might not seem funny, his slowness as we have seen is part of his character. In the film, the nagging wife, is replaced with nagging sister, who is regularly ordering him around, add to it, his work at the store, by the end of the day, Fields is completely exhausted. While trying to sleep, his evil nephew is making a lot of noise, to stop him from crying, Fields puts some cloth in his mouth, to dampen down the noise. His nephew does not like this, and he retaliates with hitting Fields on the head with a wooden hammer. Fields in his anger pick up the child (Fig.5) and intend to throw him, on the ground from the balcony. Then just in time, he is stopped by his sister (Fig.6), who witnesses the event. The whole scene is enormously violent, an action like this is unthinkable, in the world of Chaplin, who even respect animals. Some of the most violent scenes in *Tillie and Gus* is when Fields is given the responsibility of taking care of a little kid, which he does poorly, to the point of almost drowning the child.



(Fig.5) Fields picks up the child, intending to throw him on the ground, (Fig.6) just in time stopped by his sister (A. Edward Sutherland:1926).

## Running Wild

Year: 1927

Directed by: Gregory La Cava

Produced by: Adolph Zukor, Jesse L. Lasky, Gregory La Cava, William Le Baron, Carl Laemmle, Jr.

Written by: Gregory La Cava & Roy Briant

Edited by: Ralph Block

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Distributed by: Paramount Pictures

Running time: 65 minutes

### Synopsis

Elmer Finch (W.C.Fields), is married to his second wife Mrs. Finch (Marie Shotwell), who has a son from previous marriage and a dog. Fields character is a timid man, who has been working for twenty years as an accountant, nobody gives him any respect, neither his wife, son, dog or his boss. Fields also has a grown-up daughter from previous marriage, Elizabeth (Mary Brian), who encourages her father to stand up for himself, which comes to fruition when Fields accidentally is hypnotized by the great Arvo into a lion.

### Film analysis

"It occurred when my nephew Kermit came to live with us twenty years ago. During the first month, we tried to put the little fellow in the bathtub twice. Once he stuck his baby foot down my throat and, on another occasion, in my eye. Ultimately Mrs. F. and myself seized him unawares and emptied him into the washing machine."

(Fields: 2016: 95)

Every film by W.C. Fields is about his relationship to his daughter, his daughter, is in crisis, either the man she loves lack the means to marry her, or too wealthy, which means, she has trouble getting the approval from his family. The whole film *So's Your Old Man* (1926), is about Fields daughter in love with a young rich man, Fields who belongs to the lower class, sabotages her marriage by just being himself. Then he invests into an unbreakable glass, which at first seem unprofitable, but in the end, turn him into a wealthy man. And by some accident, Fields meets the princess Lescaboura, who also transforms him from lower class to upper class, which means that his daughter can marry the man she loves. When his daughter, lacks the means to marry, Fields is enormously inventive, in getting her married to the man she loves, in *The Bank Dick*, his proposition to steal the money, was just so that his daughter, can get married. Fields in this sense, is a positive father figure, which is another thing he has in common with Marx Brothers, both throughout their films, help financially or otherwise, the couple get together.

*Running Wild* is quintessential W.C. Fields, it is the most important film, of all his movies, I think it would be wrong to claim, that Fields character is a coward, he does not stand up for himself. The film begins with a clock ringing, waking him up from sleep, slowly Fields gets up from the bed, goes to the radio, tunes to a morning exercise program by a powerful, muscular man, who gives him exercise instruction through the radio. In the first few seconds, the film establishes the contrast between Fields, who is a timid, weak man and the radio trainer, who is a strong and powerful man. His weakness is even more emphasized when his wife, hears him exercising in his room, opens the door and stops him from continuing the nonsense (in her eyes), which he does immediately. If all of this wasn't bad enough, then the dog starts attacking him, the title appears: "Even the dog knows a boob when he sees one."

While the daughter is in love with his boss son (Fig. 9), she asks Fields to buy her a new dress (Fig. 10), in order to go out with the young man.



(Fig. 9) The young couple in love. (Fig. 10) Fields daughter, asking for a new dress (Gregory La Cava:1927).

To underline his lack of masculinity, even more, Fields goes to his wife, asks whether he can get some money for the new dress, which she denies without any hesitation. A fight breaks out between his daughter and wife, Fields does not stand up to his wife, jeopardizing his relation to his daughter and his daughter's relationship to the man – No Dress, No Man.

Then he goes to his boss and asks for a raise, his boss also flat-out rejects him, far from giving him a raise, he appoints him an even worse job, collecting bills. His first assignment as bill collector is to obtain money from a man, who is extremely violent, beating all bill collectors. The word Lion, is dropped for the viewers to read throughout the film, there is the lion's convention, the lion's ball, when the contractor Mr. Johnson, thinks that Fields is a brother Lion (a lion club), only then he gets the critical contract, which makes Fields rich. Before Fields enters the theatre, where he is to be transformed into a lion, the word lion is used again:

"At the Elite Theatre, the Lions and their wives were being entertained by plain and fancy vaudeville."

Fields while running away from a violent shop owner, enter the theatre, accidentally becoming one of the volunteers, where the hypnotist Arvo is performing (Fig. 11 and 12). He is then transformed into a lion, by the great Arvo, who was demonstrating the power of hypnotization, then Fields starts to think he is a lion, starts beating everyone up and runs away.





(Fig. 11) Fields being hypnotized by Arvo.

(Fig. 12) Fields becoming a lion.

In other words, Arvo turns he from a timid, easily afraid, weak man into a strong violent man (a lion), who beats anybody up, standing in his way. The theme of the film is the classical becoming another subject, the difference is it happens through hypnotization, which lasts like the Cinderella effect for a short while, then Arvo turns him back to his usual self. From this point onwards, Arvo unleashed all the years of repressed violence within Fields, Fields first beats up his opponent, then continues with punching Arvo, knocking him unconscious, then continues with beating two other men up who were trying to tame him, while finally beating up the man who was chasing him.

With great speed, Fields runs directly to the man who owned him the money, beats up him until he gives in, then runs to his boss, stands up to him, gives him some orders to be implemented immediately. After finishing his business with his boss, he goes straight to his wife, driving a stolen car dangerous, which previously he couldn't even cross the road alone, now he can do anything.

On his way, he buys a new dress for his daughter, tells his wife to fuck off, frightens the dog away and beats up his step-son. When all of this is done, then Arvo transforms him back to the old Fields. In a classical Fields ending, his wife begins to appreciate him, his daughter is reunited with her lover and father, Fields is even given enough money from his boss to be able to live. It is the only film, where Fields is directly violent like Adam Sandler, the violence has transformative power, transforming him from a small man into a man who can handle life and others.



## Conclusion

I had a certain preconceived idea about comedy, and I thought that violence ended with Slapstick cinema, and continued with Cartoons. The fact is that a whole book can be written on the violence in Laurel and Hardy, their violence is contagious in *Berth Marks*, Like Tati, they make the people on train violent toward each other. There are also some themes, that are not included in this study, like the role of technology in comedy, the theme of fantasy which is predominant in the films of Chaplin and Keaton. No to mention there are still many different forms of comedy and comedians that is not included in this thesis, like Steve Martin and Monty Python. Through this long journey, I have a better understanding of the genre comedy, what it is I am watching and what makes some scenes funny. I wanted to see more than anything else how comedy continued, as André Bazin says, comedy like the genre western was in crisis. Yet comedy films were still being made, long after the decline of Slapstick comedy, what types of comedy where they, how was comedy produced? When theoretician like Siegfried Kracauer and the critic James Agee, have given up on comedy, where could we find the same inventive Slapstick comedy, in today's screens?

And the answer is in many places, even during the time of James Agee and Siegfried Kracauer. I think comedy can survive since it is one of the major themes in the genre itself, comedy is in search of new forms of violence. Comedy films continued the long tradition of absent-minded characters while inventing new concepts along the way, the violence produced by absent-mindedness. It was Mack Sennett showed the importance of having improvisation in comedy, the ability to escape the lifeless image and world. Comedies approach to the theme of violence, change, survival, is similar to the titles in the films of Max Linder, that is something generic (romance), and the specific, the romance of Max. Through multiple examples, I showed, that there is violence in comedy, that is violence, which produces comedy, a violence that is not deadly. It would not be wrong to claim, wherever there is non-violence violence, that is wherever there is a violence that is not destructive, but transformative, there is a comedy, which W.C. Fields is a testament to.

To the theme of surviving, sometimes the comedians do not need anything to survive, in the case of Tati, for him, it is much more about creating an event among people, who have stopped living. Others like Albert Brooks, who is unable to survive, for the lack of the event, which he fails to create, while in Marx Brothers, Chico & Harpo can not only survive anything but help others in their struggle to survive. A whole book can be written on the comedy of survival in Chaplin, and people surviving the madness of Jerry Lewis.

These themes go across, genres, filmmakers, comedians, it is a fundamental part of comedy. Therefore any comedian making films, will come across these themes, the question is how is the approach different. While the idea of changing, exist in various forms in other genres, Deleuze concept perception-image, exist only in comedy, that is when two perspectives are shown to the viewer, one contradicting the other. In classical comedy, this miss-perception was made use of only in one scene, usually in the very beginning of the film, when the audience didn't know what kind of character, the comedian was playing.

In the films of Roberto Benigni, the whole film is about miss-perceived by others (*The Monster* (1994), and *Johnny Stecchino* (1991)). Bob Hope is the master of changing, becoming another person, in almost every film, he is succeeding in becoming another person, while in Woody Allen, there is a constant failure at changing, when he does manage like in *The Front* (1976), he is sent to jail for it. The transformation has already taken place in Marx Brothers, while the only film in W.C. Fields where the transformation happens is in *Running Wild* (1927), where he is transformed from a timid man, into a lion, which means from an ordinary man into a violent man. I feel like I have just scratched the surface, there is so much more to investigate, to look into, there was just no time. And far from being exhausted, this long journey has opened my eyes, too many things and themes that I did not know existed.

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*Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend.  
Inside of a dog it's too dark to read:  
Groucho Marx*

*Marry an outdoors woman. Then if you throw her out  
into the yard on a cold night, she can still survive:  
W. C. Fields*