

Slapstick Modernism:

Charley Bowers and Industrial Modernity

William Solomon

Humor saves a few steps, it saves years.

Marianne Moore¹

I

In a posthumously published essay entitled “Machine Art,” drafted between 1927 and 1930, Ezra Pound makes a strong case for the aesthetic value of contemporary machinery. Initially directing his comments to those interested in the plastic arts (architecture especially), he praises the attractive formal elements of assorted mechanical objects, emphasizing in particular the admirable shape of their component parts. Supporting his claim with photographs, he declares that the basic idea he has drawn from his researches into the philosophy of art is that “we find a thing beautiful in proportion to its aptitude to a function. I suspect that the better a machine becomes AS A MACHINE, the better it will be to look at.”² From a visual standpoint, machines are most pleasing to the eye when they are purposefully constructed to perform specific tasks. Addressing musicians as well, the second chapter turns to the acoustic properties of machinery, and at this stage of the argument Pound also begins to deal with economics. Endorsing in general efforts to organize production, he proposes that work could be made more enjoyable were the sounds in a factory better composed. More harmonious and rhythmically sophisticated arrangements might eliminate the aural disagreeability of the labor process (72-75); and “there is no reason why the shop noise shouldn’t be used as stimulus and to give swing and ease to modern work (81). Lastly, due to their energetic commitment to invention and design, engineers are intellectually exemplary: “The engineering mind is about the most satisfactory mind of our time” (77). Artists thus have much to learn from those currently involved in rationalizing the industrial workplace, and Pound himself sees no reason to disguise his interest in either Ford’s “theories or his practice. *He has already experimented in tempo*” (81, original emphasis).

Pound’s appeal to standardized methods of mass production as a viable model for artistic creation offers us access to the basic principles informing the idea of a machine aesthetic, an idea that has long served as a way of commenting upon the nature of artistic modernism’s engagement with science and technology between the two world wars. To take a canonical account of the American writer’s reaction to these forces of modernity in the 1920s, Cecilia Tichi, in *Shifting Gears*, praises John Dos Passos, William Carlos Williams, and Ernest Hemingway for their imaginative embrace of values specific to the machine age. According to the literary historian, Dos Passos’s significance rests on his pioneering reliance on “structural and machine technology . . . as the model for the composition of the modern novel.” Correlatively, the virtue of Williams’s achievement in these years was to devise a kinetic “poetics of efficiency” (230), to invent a mode of writing that enacted formally the accelerated movements endemic to the rise of urban modernity. It was by way of his lyrical work, alongside the stylistic economies of Hemingway, that the engineering “values of precision and speed” (256) were incorporated into modernist literature.³ More recently, Joel Dinerstein has employed this interpretive paradigm in an expansive treatment of modernist practice during the period under discussion. “African American artists,” he asserts, “integrated the speed, drive, precision, and rhythmic flow of factory work and modern cities into a nationally (and internationally) unifying cultural form: big-band swing.”⁴ In conjunction with emergent dance styles, jazz musicians of the era turned to the “previously

unappreciated qualities" – "*power, drive, precision, repetition, reproducibility, smoothness*" (19, original emphasis) – of a machine aesthetic in order to help facilitate physical and psychic adjustments to the conditions of existence within urban-industrial modernity.

What such approaches to the field of interwar modernism foreclose, however, is an encounter with the forcefully comic energies in circulation at this time and that were frequently directed toward the disruption of dominant systems of economic production. An over-reliance on the paradigm of a machine aesthetic blocks access to what I will call here a slapstick modernism, in which a series of willfully undisciplined acts of cultural improvisation defied the priorities governing large-scale capitalist manufacture.⁵ I will draw my primary examples from the cinematic genre of silent screen comedy, focusing in particular on the remarkable achievement of a virtually unknown filmmaker: Charley Bowers. Of the eight and for the most part only recently recovered short films (many others remain lost⁶) that Bowers made in the 1920s, several feature bizarre inventions that the consistently entrepreneurial protagonist (always played by Bowers) has created with ready-to-hand materials. Fittingly known in France at the time as "Bricolo," Bowers' use of the medium to exhibit a set of absurd machines that operated in unruly and unreliable ways enabled him to cut a deviant path through industrial modernity. Inevitably proving financially disastrous, his humorously dysfunctional creations generate laughter at the expense of the ethos of productive rationalism, in the process opening up an alternative understanding of machinery as the locus of exuberantly unsettling bursts of joyful play.

In framing silent comedy under the aegis of modernism, I am following Miriam Hansen's proposal that we employ the conceptual category in a more encompassing manner so that it includes "a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity."⁷ The benefit of turning toward a so-called lower genre like silent comedy in discussions concerned with modernist aesthetics is that it is by way of such films that we can recapture a sense of the ways in which throughout the period explosive desires in excess of the criteria governing mass production sought release. Importantly, by emphasizing the nature of the address silent comedies made to their historical situation, I hope to accomplish something besides the simple elevation of selected filmmakers to the status of artists. Rather than argue the case, as has been done successfully in the past, that either Chaplin or Keaton managed to transcend their positions in the realm of commercial entertainment, my goal is to enhance our understanding of the significance of the cinematic phenomenon as a potentially progressive mode of resisting the use of scientific and technological innovation to serve the exclusive interests of hegemonic social forces.⁸

Before taking up Bowers' body of work directly, it will be necessary to complete two preliminary tasks. First, his cinematic enterprise must be located within a specific strain of satiric caricature in this country, one that amusingly exaggerates, in predominantly domestic settings, the outcome of inventive resourcefulness. Second, a brief detour through Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's theoretical work will put us in a position to elucidate the disorderly force of Bowers' idiosyncratic cinematic project.

We may begin with the celebrated drawings of a mining engineer turned cartoon humorist: Rube Goldberg. Of the many comic strip series he generated from the early twentieth century forward, the absurd inventions attributed to Professor Lucifer Gorgonzola Butts, which began appearing in syndicated daily newspapers in 1914, have proved especially memorable. Appropriating everyday items for purposes entirely other than what their manufacturers had envisioned, the comic *bricoleur's* ingenious contraptions invest ordinary objects with a doubleness.⁹ Thus the components of an apparatus for sharpening ice skates (the idea for which occurred to him while "overhauling a 1907 Ford") include a wire basket, see-saw, basketball and net, several tin cans, a boxing dummy, a pair of wheels, and a file. In addition, a human being (floorwalker) and an animal (a hungry goat) are incorporated into the ludicrous assemblage.¹⁰ Despite the insistence in the captions on the logic of cause and effect, chances are slim that the precariously built contrivance will operate successfully. Whereas modern appliances aim to save time and energy in a domestic milieu, such montage constructions serve in contrast to demonstrate "man's capacity for exerting maximum effort to accomplish minimum results."¹¹ Impractical and probably dysfunctional, such devious complex apparatuses both poke fun at and defiantly invert the priorities governing mass production: put together

in a decidedly irrational fashion, these mock-machines contain non-standardized parts that cannot therefore be easily interchanged. Moreover, in satirizing the commonplace assumption that technology be considered along rigidly instrumental lines, as a useful means to specific ends, Goldberg's crazy inventions pose an alternative to adjacent cultural attempts to develop a machine aesthetic or style predicated on the subordination of form "to the principles of economy, efficiency, and functionality" (Rutsky, 98).

That Goldberg's cartoons stimulated the creative imagination of several silent screen comedians has been noted by several commentators. A little known though impressive illustration of Goldberg's impact on the cinematic genre is *It's a Gift* – a 1923 film produced by Hal Roach and featuring Snub Pollard (Harry Frazer).¹² Snub's appearance in the film is preceded by an intertitle that introduces him as the lazy counterpart to a more socially prestigious and presumably indefatigable inventor. Whereas "Edison works twenty hours – sleeps four – Pollard's hours are longer – sleeps twenty-four."¹³ The first image of the character shows him in a room dozing beneath a perplexing web of strings, many of which are connected to things outside the frame. After a medium shot of his laughing face, the camera lingers on a crudely cobbled together device located at the foot of the bed. This turns out to be a makeshift alarm clock, which uses a feather tied to a piece of wire to wake the slumbering character (by tickling the bottom of his feet). He shuts the device off by reaching up and pulling a tasseled string hanging from the ceiling, which causes an open razor blade to cut the end of the feather. Yanking a different cord sets a block of wood shaped like a phonograph arm in motion. Swinging toward the phonograph, this device brings a match rather than a needle into contact with the spinning disc. The friction lights the match and the wooden arm then swings in the opposite direction toward the stove and ignites its burners. Other strings lower onto the stove a coffee pot as well as a piece of bread attached to a grill. Next, Snub instructs a chicken in a cage mounted on the wall to lay two eggs, which roll in succession down a chute into a bowl filled with soon-to-be boiling water. The manipulation of other homemade contraptions, including a hand-cranked scooper that deposits sugar in his coffee cup, enables him with little physical effort to enjoy breakfast in bed.

A letter arrives, launched through the window by the mailman from the street who has hooked the envelope to a rubber band previously looped around a tree branch. After reading the missive, Snub decides it is time to rise. A short pull on another cord moves the bedspread to the window, where the spread hangs like a curtain. Having pulled his pants up with yet another cord, he removes from the wall what appears to be an armored shield that proves to be the lining of a folded jacket, which he turns right side out and puts on. The material thus serves as a coat of arms in two senses. Before leaving, he flips the bed up, revealing on the underside a mantle and fireplace with flames licking upward; a broom and brush attached to the phonograph then allow for some last minute dusting of hat and shoes. Outside the house, he approaches an oddly shaped object with the word garbage written across it; he promptly slides a rectangular piece of metal into a slot, which blocks out the middle letter, the "b," and spells out instead garage. The can is indeed also a parking place, for when he pushes a button a bullet-shaped vehicle emerges. Snub climbs in holding a giant horseshoe magnet, and when an automobile passes by he uses the magnet's powers of attraction to get his own, engineless means of transportation going.

The question, then, is how to conceptualize such eccentric performances, and it is with this concern in mind that I find Deleuze and Guattari's category of desiring-machines valuable. Their views on this matter are usefully elaborated in a piece composed as an appendix to the second edition of the French version of *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.¹⁴ Titled "Balance-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines," the essay has the additional virtue of citing Goldberg's cartoons and two Keaton films – *The Scarecrow* (1920) and *The Navigator* (1924) – as approximations of the topic under investigation.¹⁵ (The opening portion of the earlier film features two men at home surrounded by various mechanical contraptions that aid them in their housekeeping tasks, as well as in meal preparation and clean up. The myriad devices, all of which can be used in at least two different ways, combine to make the domestic existence of the two bachelors quite easy, albeit to a ridiculous degree.¹⁶) The decidedly absurd qualities of the kind of machines conceived of by "the artistic and

literary imagination" are a result of either "the indeterminate character of the motor or energy source," "the physical impossibility of the organization of the working parts," or "the logical impossibility of the mechanism of transmission."¹⁷ Roughly compatible with the spirit of Dadaism, and productive at their best of a "schizo-laughter" (137), desiring machines are to be defined primarily on the basis of their "capacity for an unlimited number of connections, in every sense and in all directions" (126), and thus by the "break-flow" power they possess.¹⁸ Constructed in aleatory fashion out of scraps, residual materials plucked from elsewhere and arranged to form something different, desiring machines mobilize libidinal energy to couple "continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented" (5).

Perhaps the most crucial point for my purposes, however, is the way Deleuze and Guattari characterize the relationship of desiring machines to what they call social technical machines as one of immanence, with the former lodged inside the latter. Initially, the difference between the two appears to be "a question of size, or one of adaptation," the former "being small machines, or large machines suited to small groups" (1995, 138). But ultimately the distinction comes down to "the regime" that "decides on the size and ends" (140). In other words, desiring machines are the same things as social and technical machines. They presuppose each other, yet they function differently in different historical circumstances: "social technical machines are only conglomerates of desiring-machines under molar conditions that are historically determined; desiring-machines are social and technical machines restored to their determinant molecular conditions" (138). Whereas conscious political, economic, and social interests govern the operation of predominantly large-scale social and technical machines, desiring machines release the force of unconscious sexuality, building "little machines" that are "revolutionary by nature" to the degree that they are "capable – when inserted into the social structure – of exploding things, of disrupting the social fabric" (1995, 76). In what follows, I attempt to demonstrate the pertinence of applying this perspective to the strikingly odd apparatuses exhibited in Bowers' cinematic oeuvre.

II

The Desiring-Machines of Charley Bowers

Farm machinery has been for the most part ugly . . . in the scientist's sense, it is a lot of little machines hitched together.

Ezra Pound, "Machine Art"

Bowers' career in the motion pictures began in 1912 when he participated in the adaptation of newspaper comic strips for the screen. His most extensive experience was as a cartoon animator of roughly two hundred and fifty "Mutt and Jeff" films. By the mid-20s he was in a position to make his own slapstick movies, and in so doing he brought with him the skills he had developed and knowledge he had acquired in his previous jobs; for the most striking aspects of his body of work are the often unexpected moments when apparently dead objects spring to life.¹⁹ Few before him had blended animation techniques with photographic images of actuality, and the result of this unusual mixture of disparate formal methods was astonishing special effects that eradicated any pretense to realist representation. Such depictions of impossible events in turn opened up within the medium a fictive space available for flights of extreme fancy. *Egged On* (1926) is a case in point in that Bowers' subversive imagination runs rampant; yet the film is of additional thematic interest in that the "low tech" invention at its center mocks the entrepreneurial ambitions of those seeking to enter the world of venture capitalism or high finance.

In the film, Bowers plays a young man (Charley) who hopes to get rich by developing a way to manufacture unbreakable eggs. Realizing he must have some money to construct a prototype of his

idea for a “perfect machine,” he tries to convince several bankers to fund his endeavor, eventually getting a member of the International Egg-Shippers Association to agree to back the project. Excited by the prospect of future wealth, Charley sets up a workshop in the hayloft of a country barn owned by his girlfriend’s father. We then see several shots in which various objects in use around the farm have evidently lost key components: a horse drawn cart is lacking its back wheel; a mailman’s bicycle no longer has its pedals, gears, and chain; the hinges of a door are gone; and the basement is flooded because the kegs stored in it no longer have taps. The lost items have, we soon learn, all been removed by Charley who has incorporated them into his machine. After three weeks of hard work, he proudly declares he has finished. As the family gathers around the wacky apparatus, things don’t look promising given the contraption’s protruding planks, wires and rods, not to mention its awkwardly attached assortment of pumps, pulleys, cans, tubes and belts.

Charley confidently starts the show by holding up an egg, like a performer on stage, and drops it down a chute. For the marvelous process to get underway, however, Charley must become a part of the machine. He therefore seats himself on the device and begins pedaling, his legs supplying the power required to put things in motion. The egg then moves through the machine, and after being dusted, squirted, and dried, it drops to the floor. Miraculously, its shell has become a rubbery, protective substance that proves to be virtually indestructible: the egg can be hurled to the ground, stretched, and even squeezed flat by a washing machine wringer without cracking open. Charley then cuts it open to convince his skeptics that the undamaged egg remains suitable for cooking.

Having arranged to have the president of the egg-shippers association visit the farm and see the invention, Charley steals a batch of eggs from a neighboring farmer for the upcoming demonstration, driving off with them hidden under the hood of a Model A Ford. The narrative action abruptly halts at this point so that Bowers can perform an act of cinematic wizardry, a technologically mediated magic trick. A close-up presents the eggs contained in a dish rack resting on the automobile’s engine block. Suddenly, one of them, though untouched, begins to roll around. As something begins to poke its way out, we see a pair of exceptionally strange looking arms flailing about; the shell then falls away, and after a series of puzzling contortions, what takes shape in front of our eyes is, surprisingly, not a baby bird but a miniature automobile. The heat of the engine has apparently enabled the vehicle to incubate the egg and in so doing give birth to a tiny version of itself – the Model A as Mother Hen. While the newly born, albeit inorganic entity drives off, the process repeats itself until all the eggs have hatched and a swarm of little cars is zooming wildly across the floor of the barn. Shocked by an event presumably unprecedented in the history of machine biology, Charley promptly faints. The scene soon comes to an end with the befuddled protagonist watching from the floor as the maternal automobile gathers her brood and, collapsing her wheels, lowers herself to the ground for a nursing session / refueling break. What is worth underscoring here is that the gag, in making fun of industrial manufacture by dissolving the distinction between fowls and factories, chicks and cars, simultaneously offers, however fleetingly, an admittedly ludicrous impression of the world as a peculiar place in which reproductive systems can cross or intermingle, a world in which machines produce flows that other machines break into and draw energy from.²⁰

At any rate, still in need of an egg for the test, Charley spies a packing crate in which a hen is resting, albeit surrounded by sticks of dynamite. An intertitle informs us that the bird has the strange habit of pecking the explosive material, but she has nonetheless laid an egg. Having grabbed it, Charley runs it through his machine, and the recently arrived businessmen are suitably impressed by the resilience of the egg’s outer covering. Unfortunately, Charley places the egg on an anvil and instructs one of the observers to try and break the shell. The resulting blast obliterates the barn, knocking those present into a state of unconsciousness. The film’s final shot shows the entire cast sprawled in the wreckage, smoke curling slowly upwards. Bowers thus proves himself to be an exemplary artist from Deleuze and Guattari’s perspective, for if he has in the end put “before us shattered, burned, broken-down objects” (1983, 32), he has in the process converted a device designed to serve the interests of capitalist industry into a dysfunctional desiring machine, one that in effect undermines “the function of technical machines” (31).²¹ Moreover, since the defeat of acquisitive

impulses is a recurrent motif in his slapstick films, we might say that Bowers' repeated transformations of the wish to become wealthy into an object of collective amusement signals his unconscious investments in the cinema as a potentially revolutionary laughing machine.

Of the numerous Goldberg-inspired apparatuses that appear in slapstick movies between the two world wars, many involve the preparation, serving, or consumption of food.²² The best known of these is no doubt the decidedly impractical eating machine that torments the hapless factory worker in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Also notable in this regard are the devices in *The Kid* (1921) that the Tramp constructs at home to aid him in childcare: a coffee pot with a rubber nipple attached to its spout enables the rescued infant to drink his milk while rocking in a makeshift swing suspended from the ceiling; and a bottomless wicker chair is ready to be used as a potty. In addition to the aforementioned dining sequence in *The Scarecrow*, in *The Navigator* (1924), Rollo Treadway (Buster Keaton) must customize the galley of a giant ocean liner to suit his and his girlfriend's needs, which they do by modifying the functions of the large kitchenware on hand. Finally, in *The Chef* (1919), Harold Lloyd plays a lazy restaurant worker who has retooled his workplace, installing a system of pulleys operated by levers and pedals, so that he can start meals cooking without leaving his seat. In addition, assorted pieces of gardening equipment, such as a hoe, serve as prosthetic limbs, thus enabling him to perform basic tasks without getting to his feet.²³ It is the gags in this last film that Bowers' two-reeler *He Done His Best* (1926) takes to a more complex level of machinic sophistication.

Again playing a young man in love, Charley desires this time the daughter of a restaurant owner: "Father Tuffman." Informed by his would-be lover that she cannot agree to marry him unless her father consents, Charley goes to meet her father at his place of business. Due to a misunderstanding, he ends up hired as the new dishwasher. When the staff goes out on strike, Charley tries to handle the requisite tasks by himself. Struggling to satisfy the numerous patrons, to distribute enormous quantities of food as quickly as he can, he stumbles while carrying an overheating coffeemaker. The appliance hits the floor and detonates like a bomb. When the smoke clears, all that is left is a charred and gutted building.

To palliate his enraged boss (and prospective father-in-law), Charley promises not only to rebuild but to improve the place as well. In a week's time, he has cleverly automated the entire operation, eliminating the need for a human workforce and by the same token presumably staving off any future labor disputes. Leading the still disgruntled owner into the kitchen area, Charley shows him the "flabbergasting" machine he has invented. It has a steering wheel, a flashing light, assorted dials and levers, some pistons and coils, as well as an oversized control panel with really big buttons. Having started the device, Charley energetically spins a handle causing a duct leading into the adjoining room – the dining area – to move over an unset table and drop perfectly into place out of the inverted funnel at its end a tablecloth, silverware, glasses, and even a vase filled with flowers. These are followed by a menu and a telephone, both dangling on chains. Charley, who has donned a pair of headphones, listens to the incoming order for oyster soup and then exhibits another of the increasingly impressive jobs his remarkable machine is able to do.

The restaurateur watches with amazement as a soup bowl arrives on a conveyor belt and halts in front of a panel, out of which a white gloved mechanical hand emerges. After delicately putting down a tiny ramp leading up to the lip of the motionless bowl, the hand brings out an oyster shell and places it on the side of the belt. In an extreme close-up, the oyster faces the camera, slithers out of its shell, and inches its way up the ramp and into the bowl where it swims a quick lap in the soup. Having flavored the dish, the oyster returns to its shell whereupon the hand deposits it in a miniature oven that has appeared in the interim. The soup is then transported via a rubber hose to the table of the waiting diners who commence their meal. A pair of claws bussess the dishes when they are finished, and next, back in the kitchen, we see a seemingly live chicken dash through a door of the device. Almost instantaneously, the chicken is ejected from an adjacent compartment fully roasted lying on a plate. A mechanical arm yanks some carrots out of a planter, mashes some potatoes with a sledge hammer, and then the film's most remarkable gag gets underway. After a single pea is planted in a pot, a mature

vine grows before our eyes with the help of a little water and an electric light bulb. Having parodied scientific uses of time-lapse photography, Bowers, in a final comic twist, undoes the distinction between the field and the factory, between agricultural processes and industrial manufacture, by depicting the metamorphosis of the pod hanging from the plant into a labeled can of the vegetable. However, in the end, Charley is the one who gets canned. Saddened when he discovers that the girl he loves is to be married to someone else, the weeping protagonist rests his head on the instrument panel of his machine, causing raw food and livestock to spill out into the dining room.

His evident despair notwithstanding, Charley's failure to marry the ostensible object of his (Oedipal) desire and ruined prospects for economic success are inevitable given that his primary erotic or libidinal investments are in the process of making machines. Conjugal aspirations, the hope of being integrated into the family and achieving financial security, are nothing more than narrative pretexts that allow him to get to work on, or toy with, the machinery he truly loves and that furnishes him with the greatest satisfactions. Admittedly, in the next film I will discuss, *The Wild Roomer* (1926), the protagonist's inventive labors are spurred by the death of his grandfather, whose will states that Charley may inherit his deceased relative's fortune on condition that the boy convincingly prove within forty-eight hours that the machine he has been planning is genuinely functional. If it is not, the bequest goes to his evil uncle. Confident of success, Charley boldly predicts to his fiancée that his "invention will revolutionize the world." Here again, however, the financial motive is secondary, for the boy had already been spending the bulk of his time on this endeavor, well before the possibility of wealth was broached.

Notably, on the basis of this absurd assemblage, whose component parts include among other things some faucets, an automobile grill, a car battery and headlight, as well as a mannequin, the relationship of Charley's machinic procedures and contemporaneous efforts to mechanize the household comes sharply into focus.²⁴ In 1925, the American School of Home Economics published Christine Frederic's *Efficient Housekeeping or Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home*. Marketed as a correspondence course, and prefaced by Frank Gilbreth, the textbook proposes to apply the principles utilized to reorganize the modern workplace to the "business of home-making."²⁵ Declaring housekeeping to be "the biggest and most essential industry of all," Frederick's goal is to further the project of putting "housework on a standardized professional basis" (17). The chapters of her study are therefore lessons in how to plan and implement a "labor-saving kitchen," what practical methods are best for cleaning and doing the laundry, and what tools are indispensable in the home.²⁶ That the satiric thrust of Charley's contraption is aimed at precisely such ambitions is unmistakable, for a thick wire connects the machine to a chaise longue with a propped-up circuit board, and the labels over the numerous switches imply that the machine has been designed to enable an individual to do assorted mundane tasks (polish the stove, mop, sweep, etc.) by remote control. Carrying rationalist imperatives to their comic breaking point, the film proposes to reduce the domestic laborer's participation in home economics to a simple flipping of switches.

After having tested his eccentric creation, Charley calls his uncle and invites him over; yet the latter, having a vested interest in Charley's project being declared a failure, refuses to come. In order to make his construction public, Charley must therefore figure a way to get it out of the house. Since the rectangular contraption is too big to fit through any of the doors, he saws a circle in the floor around it, whereupon it plummets to ground level. We learn that the machine is mobile when Charley hops on board, smashes (to his landlady's dismay) through the side of the building, and heads across town toward his grandfather's place. Meanwhile, the hero's villainous uncle has illegally purchased a bunch of bombs, which he hurls at the machine from assorted hiding places. Fortunately, the machine proves to be impregnable, and Charley, assuming the successive explosions are simply his vehicle's engine backfiring, keeps going. Upon his arrival at his uncle's, he drives the machine up the front staircase, parks it in a corner of the vestibule, and rushes into the sitting room. Greeted by his fiancée and her mother, he drags the chaise longue attachment into the room, installs the older woman on it, and encourages her to experiment with the "all purpose housework control panel." Yet unbeknownst to any of them, the frustrated uncle is now in the entranceway vigorously shaking the machine, trying to

dismantle it; and when the mother randomly selects one of the tasks the machine has been programmed to carry out, it aggressively grabs hold of the man and violently blackens his face with stove polish; viciously lathers and shaves him and eventually "pacifies" him by knocking him out with a punch from a boxing glove.

Again, if it remains unclear in the end whether or not Charley ever secures his inheritance, this inconclusiveness is determined by Bowers' valorization of the act of domestic tinkering as sufficiently rewarding in and of itself. Getting rich is of secondary importance in the world he depicts. The promise of acquiring vast sums of money via an entrepreneurial contribution to industrial modernity may stimulate the protagonist's artisanal experimentation, yet such goals are ultimately subordinated to the pleasures he accrues from his domestic tinkering and the anarchic chaos it produces.²⁷

Crucially, as do the other fantastic machines around which Bowers' movies are frequently organized, this one tends to acquire reflexive significance. In the process, it furnishes indirect commentary on his attitude toward and idiosyncratic deployment of cinematic machinery. Much like his various protagonists, who are always eager to show others what their humorous contraptions can accomplish, Bowers' efforts within the entertainment medium were motivated by a desire to impress and amaze his audience with what one can accomplish with a bit of mechanical ingenuity. Correlatively, the combination of laughter and wonder the meticulously constructed inventions generate for those who observe them in the films parallels the reactions Bowers could expect to provoke in the spectators of the films. That the comic surprises in the diegesis often result from performances that visually eliminate the distinction between biological organisms and technological apparatuses is particularly fitting given that the primary outcome of Bowers' singular method of mixing animation and live-action photography was to blur the line between living beings and dead things.

The opening scenes of *The Wild Roamer*, in which several objects vanish into thin air before our eyes, situate Bowers as heir to the two-decade old cinematic legacy of Georges Méliès. Echoing one of the French filmmaker's main tricks, this "series of strange happenings" takes place in a boarding house and includes the disappearance of a stove behind the back of a woman; of a bowl on a dresser while water is being poured into the receptacle; of a bathtub as a man steps into it; as well as a shortwave radio and exercise equipment in use. The exasperating incidents are correctly attributed to that "knucklehead" (Charley) who is shown hammering away up on the fifth floor; his reason for stealing the objects being that this "unknown genius is secretly working on" the aforementioned "marvelous new machine."²⁸ Eventually, he agrees to allow his landlady to see what he has made, and then, after starting it up and completing some minor adjustments, he even lets her operate it on her own, whereupon it performs an amazing feat.

As in *He Done His Best*, the camera focuses on a glove-wearing mechanical arm, this one built out of metal pipe. The arm pulls from inside the machine a wooden plank, grabs with a flourish a cone-shaped tool and ejects out of it a stuffed cloth doll. Facial features are then painted on the doll and it is given a nose. The landlady seems about to pass out, but there is much more to come. Taking hold of a penknife, the arm gently performs surgery on the prone doll, slitting open its chest, inserting a heart-shaped object, and stitching it up with a sewing needle and thread. The operation is evidently successful, for we can clearly see that the heart is beating strongly inside the patient's chest. After wiggling its limbs, the doll sits up, looks around, smiles cutely, and stands up on its own power. It examines its opposable thumb, yet becomes embarrassed when it realizes it is not dressed. To help out, the mechanical arm brings out a wooden window frame and positions it in front of the doll, who pulls down the shade. (The doll's privacy is briefly violated when the shade rolls up before the dressing is finished, providing the spectator with a not terribly titillating glimpse of the doll's exposed behind.) Having donned a frock that genders it female, the doll consumes a banana and then starts rolling around a walnut out of which suddenly pops a realistic looking squirrel. The animal pulls out a miniature purse and begins extracting full-sized objects (comb, nutcracker, box of matches, scissors, and so forth) that should not have fitted inside the bag. Finally, the two put the objects back, the doll climbs on the squirrel's back, and they ride off together.

This extended – and from the point of view of the developing narrative all but superfluous – sequence is explicable mainly as a demonstration of the magic of the movies as practiced by Bowers himself. It is therefore appropriate that the depicted actions – the painting of a face, the slicing and stitching of an artificial body, the wearing of clothing – can be correlated with certain cinematic procedures: putting on makeup, the editing process, and wardrobe selection. Given that the goal of these is to produce illusory effects, to create for an audience the false impression of living beings in motion, Bowers can be said to be staging allegorically what other directors customarily keep behind the scenes: the technical conditions of their filmic fabrications. If the belief that the ontological divide between living beings and dead things can be crossed is revealed here to be a product of mechanical craftsmanship, it follows that the stunned landlady is a surrogate for the general spectator, who is in the scene made privy to the critical insight that what appears on screen is unreal or nonexistent. It follows that the marvelous machine the character has previously praised as a vibrantly disruptive force (as an “invention [that] will revolutionize the world”) is an emblem of the cinematic machinery Bowers utilizes in his own uniquely hybrid cultural undertaking.

If, as I am proposing, with support from Bowers’ self portrayals, his cultural intervention in the mid 1920s was aimed at transforming the cinematic apparatus into a desiring machine, then the issue of the impact of his enterprise on his audience deserves at least to be broached (though one can hardly expect to verify the effects in question empirically). One feasible approach would be take up Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “group fantasy,” which they employ on occasion to register the promise of desiring machines to facilitate unconscious libidinal investments on a collective scale, to endorse the flow of revolutionary passions by contesting the conscious interests and needs governing the use of social and technical machines.²⁹ However, here I would like to turn to an earlier critical theorist for help in addressing, if only in a speculative fashion, the social functions of Bowers’ work in silent comedy. I am thinking in particular of a striking passage that appears only in the second version of Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay.³⁰

Specifically, in Section X of the essay, immediately after presenting his celebrated idea of the way film discloses the “optical unconscious,” Benjamin briefly takes up the related notion of the way film handles the major discovery of psychoanalysis: the “instinctual unconscious.” Whereas, in the regard to the former, film technology enables the viewers to apprehend their spatial surroundings in a new manner, opening up visual perspectives impossible for natural perception to attain, in relation to the latter, the movies make it possible to see what has previously been unavailable to ordinary, everyday consciousness. “[I]n most cases the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside only the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions. Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams.”³¹ What the spectator is shown are the aberrant and unreliable visions that are customarily considered to be the exclusive property of irrational subjectivities, to be the byproducts of madness. Cinema displays in a public forum the radically distorted appearances that in the past unstable psyches necessarily kept to themselves. If this procedure allows the masses access to the optical conditions of mental derangement, it does *not* do so in a manner that reduces such pathological states to an object of critical knowledge. On the contrary, according to Benjamin, in such situations, moviegoers experience what had been heretofore locked up, imprisoned in private minds: “Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception. The ancient truth expressed by Heraclitus, that those who are awake have a world in common while each sleeper has a world of his own, has been invalidated by film” (118). The affective force of cinematic machinery is such that it expands the scope of the unconscious, rendering it a decidedly social phenomenon.³²

Crucially, the context of the discussion makes it absolutely certain that, for Benjamin, it is the province of non-serious film genres like Disney cartoon animation and American slapstick to exploit the potential of cinema in this way. The filmic stimulation of mass hallucinations takes place in an atmosphere of communal laughter.³³ What is undoubtedly Bowers’ crowning achievement, *Now You Tell One* (1926), exemplifies this ocular process in truly stupefying fashion.

The film opens upon a group of men sitting around a dinner table. We have been informed that they are members of a liars club, and, appropriately, they then proceed to tell absurdly untrue tales to each other. The first speaker claims to have been invited to dinner by Mussolini and that to honor this occasion forty-seven elephants arrived. As the speaker talks, the camera cuts to a visual recreation of his falsehood: thus we see the elephants marching in succession into the capitol building. The next member of the club declares that he secretly crossed the English Channel and that he would have accomplished the feat in less than forty-five minutes had he not gotten a flat tire. Again, his duplicitous account is produced on screen: thus we see him emerging from the water on the back of a man riding a bicycle. The third speaker, "a delegate to the federation of professional liars," narrates his capture of a thief who had stolen a famous tenor's High C. We watch as the delegate enters an apartment, hears the thief approaching, crouches to the floor, and mysteriously dissolves into nothingness. No longer held up by a body, the delegate's coat and hat fall to the floor. The coat itself then disappears, folding up into the hat. When the thief comes in the room, he casually tosses the hat to the other side of the bed; the delegate miraculously reappears and wrestles the criminal into submission. One of the members of the club remains unimpressed. Finding the narratives to be pathetic and more or less true, he fears the Philadelphia chapter will defeat them in an upcoming competition, so he wanders off in search of a more imaginative individual. He soon comes across our hero, Charley, who for no clear reason has his head stuck in the firing end of a cannon and is trying to light the fuse at the same time.

Brought back to the meeting, Charley purports to have discovered a magic formula that allows him to graft anything. Suddenly we see the young inventor at home energetically spraying a bizarre rhizome-like entity. Myriad tubes connect an assortment of vegetables and fruits, all seemingly part of the same plant. Taking from a trumpet case a root, Charley tapes it to a branch of the larger organism, upon which (via Bowers' mastery of cinematic animation) an eggplant grows from a bud and ripens before our eyes. Once the process is complete, Charley slices the vegetable open, and to our surprise, extracts a full saltshaker and a chicken's egg, which he swiftly eats. Planning on heading to the country with his sample case to sell his potion, Charley pours some of his magical substance on a piece of straw, places it in his hair, and then waits as a hat weaves itself together on his head. Noticing as well that his boots are missing their shoelaces, he places some string in a pot and grows a pair of laces, which thread themselves into and tie up his boots without Charley having to lift a hand. In the next scene, Charley demonstrates his wares to an unsuspecting farmer. Placing a sprig in the ground at his feet, a tree immediately shoots into existence, passing through the farmer's overalls and ultimately lifting him off the ground. Charley dashes off as the enraged man, suspended from a branch, flails wildly in the air. Another potential customer watches as Charley douses the handlebars of a piece of farming equipment, whereupon an evergreen appears and decorates itself with Christmas ornaments. Arriving at a home plagued by mice, Charley agrees to help an attractive young woman. The man of the house, an elderly farmer, seems to have already gone crazy trying to get rid of the pests, for he is outside frantically smashing his crops with an assortment of brooms. The family cat has also been defeated; heavily bandaged and wearing a splint, the cat must flee when one of the rodents pulls out a tiny six-shooter and begins firing at the wounded animal. After some experimental trials, Charley manages to solve the problem by growing dozens of cats from the twigs (of a pussy willow?) he has attached to a potted stem. The enchanted spectator watches as the feline creatures magically multiply, taking shape one after the other.

Thus an utterly fictive discourse, an extended lie, appears to the audience as a sequence of compelling moving images. Though in the logic of the diegesis Charley (and the other members of the club) articulates his story verbally, we receive it optically, in the visual register. The effect of this sensory jump (from ear to eye) is that a nonsensical narrative devoid of referential validity seems for the duration of the telling to be a veracious record of what in fact happened. We might say that due to the persuasive force of the cinematic illusion, the filmgoer experiences briefly a mild form of social insanity. Physically occupying the same architectural space, the spectators temporarily lose their respective minds as they allow themselves to be immersed in a shared set of hallucinatory misperceptions. Slapstick cinema thus becomes the site at which the world we conventionally know to

be reality is overrun by a flow of streaming impressions, at which the wildly productive force of the scopical drive breaks through the rational and logical world of modern science.³⁴ The affective corollary to this epistemological breakdown is laughter. Whereas the amused men *in the film* merely applaud politely when Bowers' completes his tale (and then angrily toss him out of the club when he insists the narrative was true), the intent of the film itself was to spark much more intense reactions in its mass audience. Overcome by the impulse to laughter, the spectators were to be initiated into the "experience of un-knowing," were to pass "abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which everything is firmly qualified, into a world in which our assurance is overwhelmed, in which we perceive that this assurance was deceptive."³⁵

III

Conclusion

"It's . . . a miracle of human intelligence and endurance. Look how much he accomplished!" The chaplain clutched his head with both hands and doubled over with laughter.

Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*³⁶

One reason to look beyond the concept of machine aesthetics when discussing modernist encounters with science and technology in the 1920s is that it is the elements designated by such a concept that would prove in the following decade to be most easily assimilated by authoritarian political parties. That a machine aesthetic endorsing the same values and formal priorities operative in industrial processes served the interests in the Depression era of National Socialism has been convincingly demonstrated by Anson Rabinbach in "The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich." The Nazi "emphasis on production and glorification of technology as ends in themselves was affirmed by persons and principles derived from the *Neue Sachlichkeit* that swept Germany in the mid 1920s. The aestheticization of machine technology, Taylorized work-processes and efficiency provided the new requirements of the regime with a cultural *raison d'être*."³⁷ Like the traditional auratic concepts listed by Benjamin at the beginning of his "Work of Art" essay – creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery – the equally cultic or ritualized affirmation of technological "principles of economy of form, efficiency of design, and mathematical precision" (Rabinbach, 203) were appropriated in the 1930s by fascist political movements for their own purposes.

If the concept of a machine aesthetic encompasses the aspects of modernist art that were eventually seized upon by the forces of reaction, I have proposed that the idea of a slapstick modernism, in conjunction with the category of desiring-machines, enables us to isolate the more recalcitrant qualities of interwar cultural practices. The present essay has concentrated on the work of a silent screen comedian to elaborate this idea, but it strikes me that it may well be applicable to certain literary phenomena as well. One point of reference in this regard would be Thomas Pynchon's great anti-fascist novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), in which assorted allusions and borrowed scenes indicate clearly the writer's debt to the cinematic genre that flourished on the other side of World War II. (The most salient of these is a German cocaine dealer's metaphor of the drug trade in Berlin as "a gigantic Laurel and Hardy film, silent, silent" and the remarkable custard pie fight in the sky between Tyrone Slothrop, traveling in a hot air balloon, and Major Marvy, attacking by plane.³⁸) Yet even more pertinent in the present case is Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), in particular the achievement of a seemingly minor or peripheral character: Orr.

From his tent mate's perspective, Orr exists in a state of vulnerability and is therefore to be pitied: "Yossarian felt sorry for Orr. Orr was so small and ugly. Who would protect him if he lived? Who would protect a warmhearted, simpleminded gnome like Orr . . .?" Yossarian does realize that this "eccentric midget, a freakish likable dwarf" possesses "a thousand valuable skills":

He [Orr] could use a soldering iron and hammer two boards together so that the wood did not split and the nails did not bend. He could drill holes. He had built a good deal more in the tent while Yossarian was away in the hospital. He had filed or chiseled a perfect channel in the cement so that the slender gasoline line was flush with the floor as it ran to the stove from the tank he had built outside on an elevated platform. He had constructed andirons for the fireplace out of excess bomb parts . . . and he had a real gift for bringing water for them both in cans and canteens from the tanks near the mess hall. He could engross himself in an inconsequential task for hours without growing restless or bored, as oblivious to fatigue as the stump of a tree, and almost as taciturn. (323)

Yet the bricoleur's mechanical ingenuity and accompanying capacity to become absorbed in the most mundane of activities are registered here as further evidence of his poor prospects, guaranteeing only that he will remain "in a low income group all his life" (323). The resources of a handyman are, as Yossarian sees it, useless when it comes to defending oneself against the aggressive nature of an unjust social system. The "happy imbecile's" compulsively repetitive tinkering, his fanatical attention to tiny details when laboring on mechanical devices, tend to drive Yossarian crazy and certainly do not constitute a solution to their shared predicament:

"Don't start working on your stove."

Orr cackled quietly. "I'm almost finished."

"No, you're not. You're about to begin."

"Here's the valve. See? It's almost all together."

"And you're about to take it apart. I know what you're doing, you bastard. I've seen you do it three hundred times."

Orr shivered with glee. "I want to get the leak in this gasoline line out," he explained. "I've got it down now to where it's only an ooze."

"I can't watch you," Yossarian confessed tonelessly. "If you want to work with something big, that's okay. But that valve is filled with tiny parts, and I just haven't got the patience right now to watch you working so hard over things that are so goddamn small and unimportant."

"Just because they're small doesn't mean they're unimportant." (320-321)

However, as it turns out, the decidedly odd pilot is the only individual in the novel able to figure out a way to resist the excruciatingly coercive force of the military commanders, who keep escalating the number of bombing missions the squadron must fly before they can be sent home. Yossarian finally realizes that Orr's apparent ineptness in the air, the fact that he keeps getting shot down, is part of the latter's plan; he has been practicing crash landing, has been rehearsing this so that when the right time comes he will be ready to put his survival skills to use and row across the ocean in a raft to safety. His exemplary accomplishment, then, is predicated on his success at converting a weapon of destruction into an escape vehicle.³⁹

Lastly, taking the character as a surrogate for the writer – Orr as a figure for the author – makes available an understanding of Heller's literary method as a machinic endeavor. Just as the pilot meticulously dismantles and reassembles mechanical contraptions, utilizing pieces of one device in the process of fabricating another, the novelist relentlessly takes apart and recombines linguistic utterances, appropriating in deviously twisted fashion fragmentary elements of the spoken phrases and written enunciations of others in the process of constructing his hilariously dysfunctional verbal gag apparatus. A kind of critical joke machine that runs by repeatedly ruining referentially authoritative discourses, *Catch-22* is a textbook example of the fact, articulated long ago by James Agee, that "words come at many of the things which they alone can do by such a Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would fatten any other art into apoplexy if the art were not first shamed out of existence."⁴⁰

This is to say that the concept of a slapstick modernism may help map features of the historical landscape that the term postmodernism has the potential to obscure. For if we wish to perceive the (counter) cultural continuities that extend in this country from a relatively minor film genre of the 1920s to a notorious literary phenomenon of the 1960s, we need only recognize that both silent screen comedy and American black humor were similarly motivated by the desire to transform machine technology into an ally rather than an adversary in the ongoing struggle to elude social subjugation.

My idea of a slapstick modernism would at first glance appear to coincide with what Fredric Jameson has recently theorized under the heading of “late” or “neo-modernism,” since his two exemplars of this post World War II phenomenon – Nabokov and Beckett – were profoundly inspired by cinematic comedy.⁴¹ But in truth, the concern above is with a feature of the cultural terrain that Jameson does not map in *A Singular Modernity*. For him, the works of Nabokov and Beckett signal a decisive break in the history of modernist practice. What fundamentally distinguishes these two paradigmatically late modernists from their “classical” or “high” modernist predecessors is, according to Jameson, that the earlier writers did not have a solid ideology of modernism available to them.⁴² A full-fledged devotion to the autonomy of art as a supreme value is a defining characteristic of the practice of *late* modernism, and it is on the basis of a passionate adherence to this notion that Jameson marks the difference between “modernism proper” and its historical repetition. The aesthetic faith of the neo-modernists (anachronistically projected backward in time onto their precursors) is that their work is something other, something better to believe in than mass culture. It is because neither the films of Charley Bowers nor the narrative fictions of the black humorists are predicated on “the radical disjunction and separation of literature and art from culture” (176-177) that a different category is needed, lest their specificity be lost.

The underlying implication of my proposal that black humor in the 60s be considered an outgrowth of slapstick modernism is the notion that the literary and the cinematic phenomena gave birth to related forms of mad laughter. Preliminary support for this claim (one deserving of further research) can be found in the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari. Towards the end of *Anti-Oedipus*, they cite a lengthy passage from an essay by Michel Cournot on the audience reaction that Chaplin’s “psychotic gestures” in the factory scenes of *Modern Times* provoked. The purpose of the citation is to underscore the fact that “schizophrenic laughter” functions as a deterritorializing force, one that cuts existing connections, that breaks established circuits in order to set up new pathways, in order to facilitate flows of energy along different lines (317). Crucially, on the following page, Deleuze and Guattari describe Proust’s procedure in almost identical fashion. The narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* is, according to them, a spider that “never ceases undoing webs and planes, resuming the journey, watching for the signs of the indices that operate like machines and that will cause him to go on further. This very movement is humor, black humor” (318). The key point is that in arriving at a conceptual formulation of black humor, Deleuze and Guattari pass through the playful behavior of a silent comedian *and* the labors of an experimental modernist. It is exactly this combination of traits that, I have argued, constitutes the distinctive nature of Bowers’ cinematic accomplishment in the 1920s.⁴³ His body of work thus marks the historical site at which two ostensibly discrete cultural practices began to intersect. And the end product of his fusion of the inventive passions of the avant-garde artist and the comic aspirations of popular screen performers was a joyfully delirious kind of laughter.⁴⁴

Notes

¹ Marianne Moore, “The Pangolin,” *The Poems of Marianne Moore* (New York: Viking, 2003), 226.

² Ezra Pound, *Machine Art & Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 69, original emphasis.

³ Cecilia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Tichi of course has a good deal to say about Pound, whose advocacy of verbal efficiency in emotive or communicative expression dates back to the 1910s. "The Serious Artist" (1913) is perhaps his most important critical formulation of this aesthetic. See *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1935), especially 50-51, 56. For another significant treatment of American literary modernism that emphasizes an adherence to the general priorities of a machine aesthetic, see Lisa M. Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁴ Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). The fascination within modernism with a machine aesthetic is of course a vast topic. R. L. Rutsky's *High Techn : Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) provides a useful critical overview of some of the basic positions adopted on this matter in the first half of the twentieth century. Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1960) remains the canonical account of Machine Age architectural pursuits in this regard; see in particular his discussion of Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* (1924) – an influential text at the time (220-246). Barbara Zabel, in *Assembling Art: The Machine and the American Avant-Garde* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), examines this issue in the visual arts.

⁵ For an approach to the period compatible with the one I adopt here, see Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

⁶ Raymond Borde, while working in the 1960s as the director of the Toulouse Cinémathèque, was the first to come across the materials that along with other subsequently rediscovered works have recently become available on DVD. See *Charley Bowers: The Rediscovery of an American Comic Genius* (Image Entertainment: 2004). At the time, Borde had no idea who the actor/director was. Eventually he learned that André Breton was a fan of Bowers' only sound comedy *It's a Bird* (1930), writing in a 1937 review that it opened our eyes for the first time "to the dull sensory distinction between reality and legend." This quote and other background information on Bowers comes from the documentary "Looking for Charley Bowers" (dir. Christophe Coutens), contained at the end of the aforementioned DVD. Bowers' remarkable *Now You Tell One* (1926) was included in volume 8 of Kino's *Slapstick Encyclopedia*; but with this singular exception, his body of work has been out of circulation for at least the last half century.

⁷ Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism / Modernity* 6. 2 (1999): 59.

⁸ Hart Crane's expression, in "Chaplinesque," of the affinities he felt he had with Chaplin, insofar as both were poetic performers suffering amidst the burdens of everyday life in a hostile environment, is a salient starting point for such re-evaluations. One of the most eloquent and convincing critical commentators on this topic has been Garrett Stewart, who has brought out the reflexive intensity with which the two major silent stars examined the material elements of their medium. See his "Modern Hard Times: Chaplin and the Cinema of Self-Reflection," *Critical Inquiry* 4. 2 (Winter 1976): 295-314, and "Keaton Through the Looking Glass," *Georgia Review* 33. 2 (Summer 1979): 348-367. See also Hugh Kenner's discussion of Keaton in *The Counterfeiters: An Historical Comedy* [1968] (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005). Kenner notes there that the filmmaker's "great creative period" was the age of *Ulysses* and "The Hollow Men" and that Keaton, Joyce and Eliot had in common a propensity to take themselves as the subjects of their work (68). More recently, Erik Bullot has drawn

attention to the “highly modernist character” (22) of Keaton’s art. See “Keaton and Snow,” trans. Molly Stevens, *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 17-28.

⁹ The opposition between the engineer and the *bricoleur* goes back to Claude Levi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* and was the target of one of Jacques Derrida’s early deconstructions. See “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966) in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 285-286.

¹⁰ A reproduction of this cartoon can be found in the exhibition catalogue, *Rube Goldberg vs. The Machine Age* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1968), 14.

¹¹ Rube Goldberg, quoted in Maynard Frank Wolfe, *Rube Goldberg: Inventions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 53.

¹² See however Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1979), 186-187. The year before, Pollard had starred in *Strictly Modern*, in which he is ordered by his boss at the “Rundowne” Hotel to bring his place of business up to date. He accomplishes his task, albeit in Goldbergian fashion – fixing the elevator, for instance, by placing inside it a dog, who barks viciously when the gate is opened, whereupon the frightened patrons dash up the stairs.

¹³ *Slapstick Encyclopedia Volume 7 Hal Roach: The Lot of Fun* (Image Entertainment 1998).

¹⁴ For a more thorough treatment, see the first part of *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 1-50.

¹⁵ Although he does not utilize the notion of desiring machines, Tom Gunning, in his essential essay, “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy,” does bring the constellation of Goldberg, slapstick comedy, and Deleuze and Guattari into proper focus. See *Classic Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 87-105, especially 97-104; for a more conventional approach to this topic, see George Basalla, “Keaton and Chaplin: The Silent Film’s Response to Technology,” *Technology in America: A History of Individuals and Ideas*, ed. Carroll W. Pursell, Jr. (2nd Ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 230.

¹⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 173-177. Deleuze repeats with slight modifications his assessment of the burlesque nonsense of the filmmaker and the cartoonist. For more on Keaton from this point of view, see Lisa Trahair, “The Narrative-Machine: Buster Keaton’s Cinematic Comedy, Deleuze’s Recursion Function and the Operational Aesthetic” (8), *Senses of Cinema* <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/033/keaton_deleuze.html>.

¹⁷ Felix Guattari, *Chaosophy* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995), 120.

¹⁸ In an interview titled “Capitalism and Schizophrenia” and contained in *Chaosophy*, the two thinkers emphasize that when they speak of the mechanism of desire, they mean something that functions “to make cuts, to let certain contrary flows run, to take samplings of the flows, to cut the chains that are wedded to the flows” (76).

¹⁹ Joseph Losey, for whom Bowers worked as an animator on the film *Pete Roleum and His Cousins* (1938), remembered him as an "obviously first-rate technician" (cited in the documentary film *Looking for Charley Bowers*).

²⁰ When Bowers revisited this gag in a short Depression-era sound film, *Believe it or Don't* (1935), he made the parodic link to industrialized methods of mass production explicit. While we look at a hen in a nest, the narrator informs us that in Detroit Henry Ford has bred a new kind of bird that lays eggs at the rate of a million a month and that if we wish to purchase a new car, all we need to do is buy one of these eggs. We then see a series of automobiles drive away as the eggs crack open. Bowers also reworked this bit in the silent comedy *Say Ah-h!* (1928) – only the second reel of which has been preserved. Set on an ostrich farm, it features Charley as a harassed laborer who puts a broom, garden hoe, pillow, feather duster and some old clothes into a grinder and then feeds the mixture to one of the birds. It lays an egg out of which springs an indescribably weird-looking young ostrich wearing cut-off pants, a pair of work boots, a shirt sleeve around its neck; the duster has become its tail and its legs are made out of broomsticks. The newborn then proceeds to consume a deflated tire tube, a small metal oven, and a workbench vise. When Charley returns to the feed house where he has left the bird, the shed is empty, the fowl evidently able to digest "harde yron" (Marianne Moore) and anything else in sight.

²¹ In the passage from which the citations are taken, Deleuze and Guattari touch on two crucial issues that I will take up below. First, they introduce the concept of "group fantasies," which artists create when taking advantage of the tendency of desiring machines to "continually break down as they run"; in such fantasies "desiring production is used to short-circuit social production, and to interfere with the reproductive function of technical machines by introducing an element of dysfunction" (31). Second, they characterize certain works of art as themselves desiring-machines.

²² Notably, at the beginning of *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari offer an infant at the breast as an exemplary model of how desiring-production works (1, 5).

²³ Pollard plays his dishwasher in this short film, which ends with Lloyd wildly squirting water from a hose after having set one of the patrons on fire, a "mischief gag" that recalls the film that for Gunning (1995) is one of the origins of American comedy: *L'Arroseur arrosé*.

²⁴ For Deleuze and Guattari, what they call machinism is not reducible to mechanization. "Mechanics refers to the protocol of some technical machines; or else the particular organization of an organism. But machinism is something else entirely: it designates every system that cuts off fluxes" in a manner that exceeds "the mechanics of technology and the organization of the organism, whether it be in nature, society, or man." Félix Guattari, "In Flux." *Chaosophy* (New York, Semiotext(e): 1995), 99.

²⁵ Christine Frederick, *Efficient Housekeeping* (Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1925), 8.

²⁶ For more on this topic, see Ellen Lupton and J. A. Miller, "Hygiene, Cuisine and the Product World," *Incorporations*, eds. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Urzone, 1992), 496-515.

²⁷ On the other hand, Bowers seems to have found the movie business to be financially remunerative. According to a recent internet piece, press releases from the 1920s show Bowers was at the time worth close to a million dollars, in part because he formed the Bowers Comedy Corporation and then went public with its stock . See Del Walker "Charley Bowers: The Story of an American Genius," <<http://www.dvdtoons.features> 67>

²⁸ Charley Bowers: *The Rediscovery of an American Genius* (Image Entertainment 2003).

²⁹ See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 31, 56-64.

³⁰ In a series of indispensable articles, Miriam Hansen has persuasively argued for the primacy of this relatively unfamiliar version of the essay. See, most recently, Miriam Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 3-46. For a good discussion of the incipience of a comedic critique in Benjamin's oeuvre, see Tom McCall, "'The Dynamite of a Tenth of a Second': Benjamin's Revolutionary Messianism in Silent Film Comedy," *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford University Press: 2002), 74-94.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility," *Selected Writings, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 117-118.

³² Benjamin goes on to claim that these genres amount to a kind of homeopathic cure; they prevent mental illness from becoming a mass pathology by triggering "a therapeutic release of unconscious energies" (118). The brief theses on mass subjectivity articulated in this section of the "Work of Art" complement his utopian idea of innervation, articulated variously in the late 1920s and 1930s, as a physiological process whereby the masses are currently forging a collective body for themselves, one with the capacity to appropriate machine technology for revolutionary ends.

³³ Notably, a few years earlier, in "Chaplin in Retrospect," Benjamin had praised the silent film comedian on the grounds that he "appeals both to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter." See Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 224.

³⁴ In *Many a Slip* (1927), a one-reeler, Bowers again takes scientific experimentation as the object of his critical mockery. Playing a young inventor whose basement laboratory is littered with goofy contraptions, all of which have labels pasted on them indicating he has applied for patents on them, Bowers' primary goal is to create a formula for no-slip banana peels. After a series of meticulous tests, he succeeds in isolating the slippery germ, what he calls the *iskaytullos*. He does so by utilizing his "infinitely enlarging Bowerscope," a huge microscope. As he looks through the unwieldy device, and focuses in on the "slimy," "skating devil" (a silly-looking figure made out of wire), who proceeds to perform a series of gymnastic routines, the gaze of the spectator at the screen coincides with that of the character through the lens, thus suggesting an equation between the Bowerscope and the cinematic projection apparatus. In any event, he soon concocts a formula to eliminate the aforementioned germ, but before he can sell his invention, the interested buyer is revealed to be an escaped lunatic from the madhouse. On the roughly contemporaneous convergence of the motion picture camera and the microscope, in more serious scientific practices aimed at observing imperceptible life processes, see Lisa Cartwright, "A Microphysics of the Body: Microscopy and the Cinema," *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995), 80-106.

³⁵ Georges Bataille, "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears," *October* 36 (Spring 1986), 95, 90.

³⁶ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 459.

³⁷ Anson Rabinbach, "The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich," ed. George L. Mosse, *International Fascism: New Thoughts and Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 1979), 216. Benjamin railed on several occasions against the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, accusing the photographers involved in the movement of a fetishistic "capitulation to fashion," and declaring that their pernicious accomplishment was to have successfully commodified "abject poverty," to have converted it "into an

object of enjoyment" by rendering it beautifully. See "Little History of Photography" (1931) and "The Author as Producer" (1934) in *Selected Writings Vol. II*, 526, 774-775. See also Edward Dimmendberg's fine piece, "The Will to Motorization: Cinema, Highways, and Modernity," *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 110-111. See also Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

³⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 357, 332-336. The latter scene most directly recalls the Hal Roach picture, *Battle of the Century*; starring Laurel and Hardy, it has been praised by Henry Miller as "the greatest comic film ever made" and described by James Agee as being "[a]t full pitch," like "Armageddon." See respectively "The Golden Age," *The Cosmological Eye* (New York: New Directions, 1939), 54 and "Comedy's Greatest Era," *Agee on Film* (Beacon Press, 1958), 6.

³⁹ Orr's endeavor is similar to the "minorations" Deleuze detects in Buster Keaton, who dreamed "of taking the biggest machine in the world and making it work with the tiniest elements, thus converting it for the use of each one of us, making it the property of everyone" (Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 176).

⁴⁰ James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), 236.

⁴¹ On the informing presence of slapstick film within the Russian author's oeuvre, see Alfred Appel Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 154-193. "In Europe I went to the corner cinema about once in a fortnight and the only kind of picture I liked, and still like, was and is the comedy of the Laurel and Hardy type. I enjoyed tremendously American comedy – Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Chaplin" (154).

⁴² Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002), 197-198.

⁴³ To some extent, Deleuze and Guattari discover a comparable mixture of elements in Kafka's contemporaneous body of work. After noting that "[e]verything leads to laughter, starting with *The Trial*," they go on in a later chapter to comment on the two poles of what they characterize as his "schizo-buffoonery" from a point of view that strikes me as strongly conditioned by Chaplin's physical routines. In other words, it is their exposure to the corporeal style of the silent comedian that enabled Deleuze and Guattari to perceive the becoming-child of the adult and the mannerism of politeness that Kafka "made ample use of in his life as well as his work: the machinic art of the marionette." See *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 42, 79-80. The possibility of adopting this perspective seems to have been first glimpsed by Benjamin, who once surmised that "Chaplin holds the genuine key to the interpretation of Kafka." Quoted in Miriam Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* (Summer 2004) 109: 25. n. 59.

⁴⁴ The kind of laughter generated by what I am calling slapstick modernism also differs from the non-mirthful laughter that Tyrus Miller has located as a constitutive element of "late modernism." As Miller sees it, the self-reflexive laughter (which is devoid of humor) that manifests itself in the texts of Djuna Barnes, Beckett, and especially Wyndham Lewis serves as a protective force; it functions as a means for the fragile individual to defend itself against a loss of corporeal integrity. Alluding to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of negative or reduced laughter, Miller equates the use by such modernists of predominantly satiric or ironic techniques with their recognition of the alterity of the world, of the hostility of their surroundings to their continued existence. See *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 46-62. In contrast,

the laughter of the slapstick modernist was an integral component of the decidedly utopian ambition to facilitate a liaison between organic beings and technological apparatuses on the scale of the social body. The project of slapstick modernism was to join on the physiological level masses and machines, and in this sense it constitutes a rediscovery of the positive and communal pole Bakhtin found to be operative in thoroughly carnivalized cultural practices. The renewal or revitalization of the aspirations informing folk or pre-industrial festive practices was especially feasible in the cinematic medium give the collective conditions of reception. Whether, as I suggest, this populist impulse carries over into the literature of black humor, remains open to debate; especially given the fact that the figure of Orr arises at the end of *Catch-22* from the margins of the narrative as an alternative to the rather apocalyptic laughter that echoes throughout the novel. On “the laughter of the apocalypse” in Céline (who greatly influenced Heller), see Julia Kristeva, *The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University, 1982), 204-206.