

# The Art of Diddling

## *Slapstick, Science, and Antimodernism in the Films of Charley Bowers*

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*The Utopian calling, indeed, seems to have some kinship with that of the inventor in modern times. . . . There is here some affinity with children's games; but also with the outsider's gift for seeing over-familiar realities in a fresh and unaccustomed way, along with the radical simplifications of the maker of models.*

—FREDRIC JAMESON, *ARCHAEOLOGIES OF THE FUTURE*

A little more than seventy years ago, in 1937, the French surrealist André Breton jotted down a crib sheet for a new history of film comedy, inspired by a screening of Charley Bowers's sound short *It's a Bird* (1930). A comedy about one man's discovery of a "metal-eating bird," the film prompted Breton to a fresh conception of slapstick's role in the history of film. To the extent that cinema was a medium of extremes, Breton averred, its encounter with slapstick had been inevitable and primary: "The first comedies of Mack Sennett, certain films of Chaplin, the unforgettable Fatty and Picratt [Al St. John] began the trajectory that culminated in those banquets of the midnight sun, *Million Dollar Legs* and *Animal Crackers*, and those excursions into the caverns of the mind, *Un chien andalou* and *L'âge d'or* by Buñuel and Dali." But, even in such company, Bowers's *It's a Bird* was a turning point—a film that "projects us for the first time to the heart of a black star, our eyes opened to the flat sensory distinction between the real and the fantastic."<sup>1</sup> Fast-forward thirty years. Raymond Borde, founder of the Toulouse Film Library, recovers some French release prints of unidentified silent comedies starring the mysterious "Bricolo"—the French nickname, it transpires, for the same Charley Bowers who had so impressed Breton. The rediscovery of this "lost" comedian is announced in Borde's 1967 article "Le mystère bricolo," from *Midi minuit fantastique*, where the comedian is described as an "imperturbable inventor" who actualizes "delirious conceptions . . . obeying nothing but the logic of a dream."<sup>2</sup> The British film critic Raymond Durnat next takes up Bowers's cause in his 1969 study *The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the American Image*, describing the comedian as "one of the silent cinema's innumerable research problems" and complaining that even the titles of his movies were, in some cases, unknown—powerful evidence of the obscurity in which Bowers had come to languish.<sup>3</sup> Forward to the present: we now know the titles, but, still, it is as a research problem that Bowers's legacy is defined. Who was this comedian who found his greatest champion in a European surrealist before lapsing into decades of obscurity? What sense can be made of a career that took Bowers from the

forefront of film animation in the 1910s, as director on the Mutt and Jeff series, to writer, star, and producer of “novelty” films combining live-action slapstick and stop-motion animation for FBO (Film Booking Office) and Educational Pictures in the 1920s, to his final years as a children’s illustrator in the 1930s and 1940s? The problem is not only that Bowers is unknown but that his career followed a path whose logic belongs to so seemingly alien a cultural imaginary—truly, as Borde put it, a “dream logic,” binding invention to animation to slapstick, where the boundaries separating science from sleight of hand, mechanics from magic appear so imperfectly fixed.

It is my contention that the “Bowers problem” nonetheless opens on to larger issues in the cultural history of American comedy, for Charley Bowers was hardly the only comic filmmaker whose career traced such a path. One thinks obviously of Buster Keaton, a self-confessed “mechanically inclined” boy, whose slapstick form was stamped with the imprint of a fantastical mechanics; of Snub Pollard, whose comedies for Hal Roach similarly exploited little inventions, systems of pulleys and strings for household tasks; of the comedian Larry Semon, a former cartoonist, like Bowers, with a penchant for costly trick stunts; or even of Walter Wright, a director for Mack Sennett in the 1910s whose experiments with in-camera effects and sensation scenes won him a reputation as “the Keystone’s ‘trick’ director,” before he departed filmmaking for a career as an inventor in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Bridging the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, this fascination with invention and entertainment (of invention *as* entertainment) had fueled many aspects of popular culture—not only in cinema—ranging from the *New York Sun*’s famous “Moon Hoax” of 1835, in which a powerful new telescope was reported to have revealed flying people on the moon, to Rube Goldberg’s famous “invention” cartoons almost a century later. Yet Bowers provides perhaps the ultimate expression of this form of humor in motion pictures, a filmmaker whose comedies unfold a delirious *mise-en-abyme* of mechanical spectacle both at the level of content—in comic plots populated with inventors and bizarre contraptions—and at the level of technique—in Bowers’s use of stop-motion animation to depict anything from “eggs hatch[ing] Ford cars” to “oysters div[ing] into soup.”<sup>5</sup> It is, indeed, the very range of Bowers’s activities as an artist and filmmaker that marks his work as a unique occasion for the analysis of cultural forms, a crossroads where animation, slapstick, and even children’s literature reveal a shared lineage in semimagical regimens for figuring technology. Part of the purpose of this chapter, accordingly, is to use Bowers to trace the vestiges of magical thinking—what I will call the “art of diddling”—within American culture’s encounter with technology and to examine those playful diddlings as a way of rethinking slapstick and animation’s complexly intertwined genealogy.

Still, in order to make an unknown comedian known, we need to begin with the basics: once again, who was Charley Bowers?

“BETWEEN FANTASY AND EXACT KNOWLEDGE”:  
BOWERS AS INVENTOR AND TRICKSTER

A first answer: Charley was an inventor. At least, that’s how he described his occupation in the 1930 census report.<sup>6</sup> That, too, was how he was presented to the industry in 1926, when, after a decade directing the Bud Fisher Film Corporation’s *Mutt and Jeff* cartoons, he moved into

live-action comedies for FBO, shortly after Joseph Kennedy's takeover of that organization. "Charles Bowers, inventor of the new 'Bower's [*sic*] Process,'" reported *Film Daily* in May, "claims that . . . his invention permits of the manipulation of the film after the camera has done its work." Bowers "makes the following claims for his process," the report continued: "that he can photograph anyone and then show him doing anything imaginable, such as walking a tightrope, sitting atop the dome of the Capitol, or flying from a skyscraper in New York to the new bridge in Philadelphia [the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, opened to traffic that year]. The inventor further states that he can make the Statue of Liberty bow to the Leviathan as she steams into the harbor, or tie the Washington monument into a knot."<sup>7</sup> What was here described as a single invention—the "Bowers process"—was, in fact, an imaginative assemblage of effects ranging in practice from stop-motion animation to combinations of live-action footage and animated sequences, skillfully contrived by Bowers in collaboration with his technical partner, H. L. Muller.<sup>8</sup> Still, it was Bowers's willingness here to claim the impossible—as though he had actually developed a magic camera capable of severing cinema's indexical bond to the real world—that is the notable point. What was being perpetuated here—and, as will be seen, in much other discourse on Bowers—was a tradition of the technological marvel that had preceded the professionalization of early twentieth-century mechanics, a tradition looking back to the fantastic impostures of an earlier generation of showmen and hucksters who were an important legacy for Bowers's own career.

This also allows a second answer to our question: who was this man? Namely, Charley was a liar. Perhaps Bowers's most widely circulated film, *Now You Tell One* (1926) concerns a search for a champion liar undertaken by a "Liars Club"; the independently produced *It's a Bird*, the film so admired by Breton, offers a "program of tall stories, dedicated to the great American whopper," with an introduction by the radio personality, and tall-tale aficionado, Lowell Thomas;<sup>9</sup> and Novelty Pictures' *Believe It or Don't* (1935) offers "strange news and odd facts from faraway places," including a report from a "Follywood" nut farm, where "they train peanuts to act in the movies." The Bowers's process was itself often described as disproving the axiom that "the camera never lies" ("every [Bowers] short . . . proves the camera is a monumental liar," noted one ad);<sup>10</sup> and the man himself was, in his personal relations, a near-compulsive falsifier. In the only firsthand reminiscence of Bowers to come down to us, Dick Huemer (an animator on the *Mutt and Jeff* films) remembered him as a "bodacious crittur," claiming that "nobody abhorred the truth as much as he did" and that "gaudy falsification of almost any subject afforded him more pleasure than the bald truth." Bowers was, Huemer recalled, practiced in the art of the "whopper," whether amusing his staff with tall stories of how he had once walked a tightrope between skyscrapers or in his proclivity for "financial peccadilloes" and what Huemer enigmatically described as his "bilking" of Raoul Barré.<sup>11</sup> Studio-published biographies of the filmmaker similarly strained credulity: early publicity for his live-action comedies told of the Iowa-born son of a French countess who learned tightrope walking at age five; joined the circus at six; returned home two years later to the surprise of his father, who died from the shock; then supported his mother by mowing lawns, jockeying horses, packing pork, printing menus, and writing history—all before he "animated one hundred reels of cartoons, worked out the Bowers process, invented a

camera and—grew up.”<sup>12</sup>

The figure that emerges, then, is that of the confidence man; and, if I choose that phrase over its synonyms, it is precisely to evoke the title of Melville’s 1857 novel and to suggest, once again, Bowers’s relation to an earlier cultural imaginary. It was Lewis Mumford who wrote that “Between fantasy and exact knowledge . . . there is an intermediate station: that of magic.”<sup>13</sup> And the confidence man, a trickster figure for the industrial age, belonged precisely to this regime.<sup>14</sup> The roots of Bowers’s creativity may thus be said to lie firmly within the comic tradition of the tall tale, the same tradition that, according to Constance Rourke, marked the dawning “consciousness of native [American] humor” in the nineteenth century and that, in Bowers, became a template for the comic reimagining of twentieth-century technologies.<sup>15</sup> Throughout Bowers’s career his work would play on the nexus of invention and deception, of machinery and magic, of fabrication in the twofold sense of *making things* and *making things up*. His short-lived series of daily cartoons, *Life’s Little Phonies*, published in the *Chicago Tribune* for four months in 1916, explicitly linked telecommunications technologies with new opportunities for lying, turning on the playful ambiguity in the term *phony* to associate phone users with deception. Each of the single-panel cartoons depicts talking heads for whom the anonymity of modern telecommunications prompts all manner of white lies: “Why, certainly, I’m master in my own home,” claims a balding man over the phone, while his battleaxe wife shrieks “WHAT!” In another, a dentist’s assistant reassures a prospective patient, “You need have no fear. The doctor’s methods are absolutely painless,” while “Dr. Yank N. Drill” is visible in the background operating with a hammer and chisel (Fig. 10.1). In his live-action comedies of the 1920s, Bowers’s onscreen persona straddled a related dialectic, linking technology not to lying per se but to a broader realm of magic and fable. Here, he appeared simultaneously as both inventor and magus, both engineer and creator of cutesy golems. In *A Wild Roomer* (1926), for instance, Bowers’s character designs a mammoth console for controlling household chores: in a remarkable, five-minute stop-motion sequence the machine sprouts robotic arms, designs a doll on which it performs a heart transplant, clothes the doll (now living), and feeds it a banana. The sequence ends with the doll riding off on the back of a squirrel, predictably. The magical productivity of modern mechanics was also conveyed in star discourse on the comedian, where Bowers’s identity as camera technician and inventor frequently shaded into that of wizard: “he is Aladdin and the camera is his lamp . . . a MASTER of camera wizardry,” ran one promotional piece; “More amazing than Aladdin’s lamp of the magic genii are these mysterious creations,” claimed another.<sup>16</sup>



FIGURE 10.1. Two of Charley Bowers's *Life's Little Phonies* cartoons, from the *Chicago Tribune*, May 5 and 13, 1916.

“NOVELTY AND MYSTIFICATION”: BOWERS, THE SHORT SUBJECT, AND THE OPERATIONAL AESTHETIC

What one starts to glimpse in Bowers's films, then, is how native traditions of buncombe and the tall tale could be reconfigured as magical modes of imagining technology.<sup>17</sup> But this is hardly the only relevant context for these films. Shifting to issues of industrial history, one finds that Bowers's work emerged during a major transformation in the American film industry's configuration of its short-subject output; and this, too, helps account for the films' surprising qualities. The mid-to-late 1920s marks an era of major boosterism within the short-subject field, as the major studios began adding shorts to their feature programs, resulting in a jockeying for prominence between independent short manufacturers and majors alike. Organizations such as the “Short Feature Advertising Association” aggressively campaigned to raise the short's profile among exhibitors, launching innovations such as “National Laugh Month” (which one exhibitor described as a “great move to impress the importance of short subjects on the public”).<sup>18</sup> The trade journal *Motion Picture News* lent its hand to these campaigns, establishing a monthly “Short Subject Service Guide” in the spring of 1927 to provide “a specialized and dignified form of service” to the short film, which it described as the “life-blood of the successful theater”; around the same time, both MGM and Paramount announced their move into short-subject distribution, prompting the *News* to predict “a great year for Short Subjects.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, both distributors of Bowers's live-action comedies were at the leading edge in ballyhooing the short subject, Film Booking Office declaring that it would “lay particular stress” on its short-film output at the beginning of the 1926–27 season, while E. W. Hammons's Educational Pictures was, of course, exclusively a distributor of shorts, the leader in the field, having edged out Pathé.<sup>20</sup>

Technical novelty, apparently, was the key to success. Beginning in the mid-1920s, the short subject took over a number of functions banished from features, with many foregrounding achievements in the medium's technological base in ways that the illusionism of the feature film could not have sustained. The landmark innovations of the Vitaphone and Movietone shorts need no comment here; less commonly noted, however, are the frequently bizarre confections of technical effects to be found elsewhere, in, for example, Red Seal's *Marvels of*

Motion series (each one of which exploited the medium's ability to manipulate time—as, for instance, in reverse footage of an egg being “unfried” and then leaping back into its shell); in Lyman P. Howe's Hodge Podge films (in which, as *Film Daily* described them, “unusual views . . . [were] depicted, interspersed with animated bits, art embellishments and a few nonsensical ideas”); or in Alvin Knechtel's “mystery” segments for Pathé Review.<sup>21</sup> The field of the “novelty short” became a major venue for technical showmanship, exacerbating tendencies toward mechanical spectacle already well established in other short-subject genres, such as slapstick and animation. “Only the limits of the camera,” commented one trade journal, could stop the “remarkable” technical feats of the recent short subject.<sup>22</sup> And, certainly, no comedies were so consistently sold in these terms as those of Charley Bowers. Advertisements promoted his work as “the industry's greatest novelty” (Fig. 10.2), promising “camera miracles” that marked “an epoch in novelty-comedy production.”<sup>23</sup> “Novelty, novelty, novelty—that's . . . Bowers,” commented *Motion Picture News*, which elsewhere praised his films for “just the right amount of novelty and mystification.”<sup>24</sup>

**SPECIAL FBO EXTRA**  
**CAPITOL THEATRE New York**  
**Shows Industry's Greatest Novelty**

**"EGGED ON"**  
 THE FIRST OF THE AMAZING  
 CHARLEY BOWERS

**Whirlwind**  
 Comedies

Charley Bowers

**FBO**  
 1560 Broadway  
 New York, N. Y.

At last the industry's greatest novelty! From F. B. O. And the Capitol is the first to nail it! Showing week May 30. Astounding camera tricks—side-splitting comedy!

Eggs hatching Tin Lizies! Animated Oysters in Swimming! Other astonishing surprises!

And eleven others just as good.

Written and Directed by  
**CHARLEY BOWERS**  
 and  
**H. L. MULLER**

FIGURE 10.2. Advertisement for *Egged On* from *Motion Picture News*, June 5, 1926.

This juncture of technical “novelty and mystification” was in fact characteristic of many slapstick films from the 1920s. As I have argued elsewhere, slapstick’s ascendancy as a form with cross-class appeal had, in part, entailed a drift from an aesthetics of popular realism—in which comedy rested on the working-class clown’s contestations of cultural hierarchy—toward a “mode-of-production” or “operational” aesthetic predicated on technological display and spectacular stunts whose exemplars included Keaton, Larry Semon, the directors Del Lord and Walter Wright, and others.<sup>25</sup> At the level of critical discourse, too, slapstick’s disrepute as a comic form associated with the traditions of workers and immigrants had been superseded by a new appreciation that focused on the *mechanical* aspect of comic action, what the musical comedy playwright George M. Cohan termed the “mechanics of emotion.”<sup>26</sup> Henri Bergson’s mechanistic definition of comedy—according to which laughter erupts whenever someone behaves in a mechanical way, like a wind-up person—is well known; but this was only part of a developing mechanistic discourse whose other symptoms included scientific attempts to adjudicate the success of gags with “laugh recorders” and pseudo-medical essays on comedy as a “safety valve”—note the mechanical metaphor—for ensuring the smooth-running of the mental faculties.<sup>27</sup>

In a real sense Bowers’s comic style marks an extreme in this development, a point at which the spectacle of physical slapstick is fully subsumed beneath the display of mechanical process. Bowers’s comedies depended on a single master plot—and that master plot was simply the process of invention itself. Typically, Charley portrays an inventor who must demonstrate a machine; he designs the device (e.g., a system for perfecting a nonslip banana peel in *Many a Slip* (1927), a labor-saving device for restaurant management in *He Done His Best* (1926), the aforementioned console from *A Wild Roomer*); and that machine is either successful or not. At the center of these films comes the spectacle of mechanical process in elaborate sequences that, like Rube Goldberg’s contemporaneous “invention” cartoons, invite viewers to trace absurd, nonpurposive chains of cause and effect through the image of the machine—an “operational spectatorship,” as it might be defined, focused on technological means rather than technological ends. The main invention sequence from *Many a Slip* may serve as a representative example. “After some meticulous tests with the infinite enlarging Bowerscope,” a preliminary title explains, “Charley finally succeeded in isolating the *iskaytelos*, a slippery germ.”<sup>28</sup> The sequence commences with Charley climbing atop a ladder and peering down through the giant Bowerscope (Fig. 10.3a); a cut to his point of view and we are shown an animated germ skating around on the microscope slide (Fig. 10.3b). Charley next applies various solutions to banana skins, each of which he carefully attaches to the arms of a giant centrifuge. A lever is pulled, turning a large windmill on the side of the house (Fig. 10.3c) and causing the centrifuge to rotate (Fig. 10.3d). The banana skins are removed, each one tested for slipperiness on a flight of steps that Charley drags in from the side of the lab (Fig. 10.3e). After numerous banana-skin pratfalls, Charley finds one peel that fails to slip; he examines it through the Bowerscope, sees that the *iskaytelos* is dead—a wreath of flowers on its inert body—and declares, “I’ve discovered iskaytocide!” (Fig. 10.3f). As reviews of the time observed, it was the sheer spectacle of mechanical process—as opposed to the (nonexistent) logic articulating those processes—that provided the film’s main point and

appeal: “The various machines which he invents for diverse purposes function and accomplish something, but just what really does not . . . matter because you are fascinated watching the inventor set them in motion, watching the various wheels and belts revolve and do something or other.”<sup>29</sup> Or, as an ad for a later Bowers film put it, “Don’t ask us how the darn thing works. That’s Bowers’ secret process idea.”<sup>30</sup>

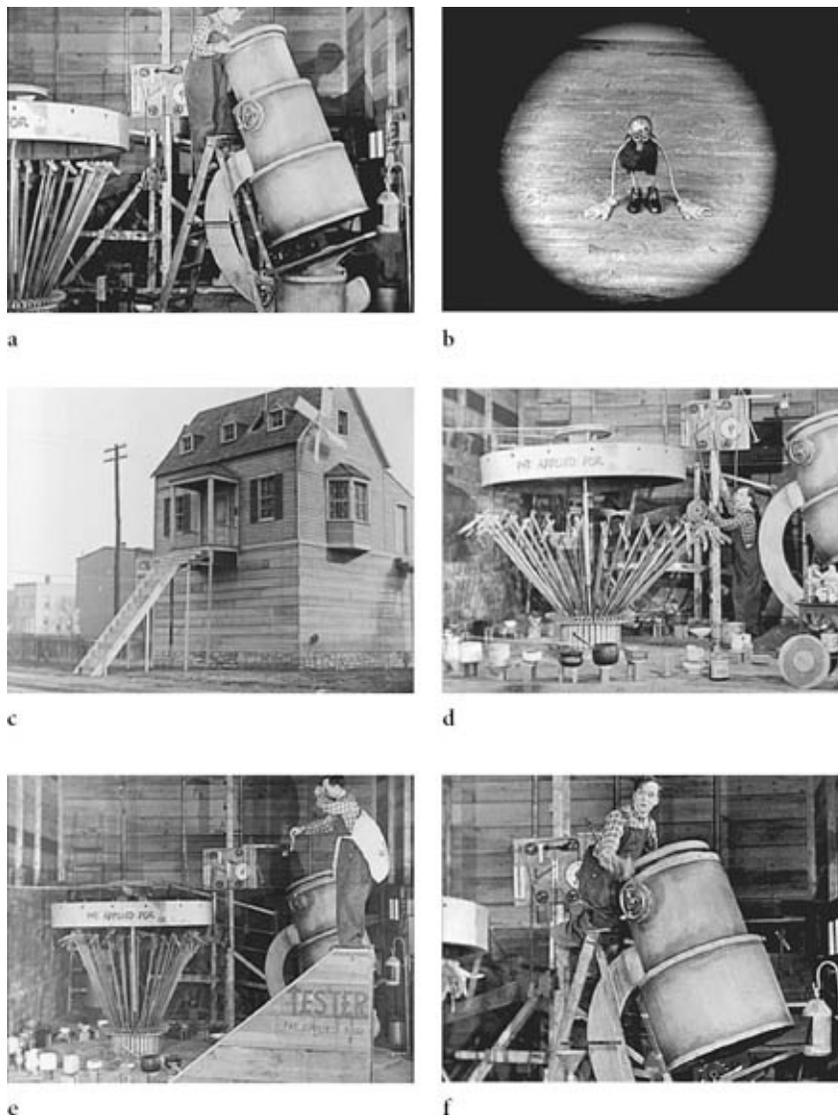


FIGURE 10.3. Charley inventing nonslip banana peel in *Many a Slip* (Bowers, 1927).

“TO DIDDLE IS HIS DESTINY”: BOWERS,  
ANTIMODERNISM, AND THE ART OF DIDDLEING

It is perhaps not wholly accurate to describe Bowers’s aesthetic as one of means rather than ends. Ends remain important, even while—or even *because*—they are absolved of all practical possibility. Unlike Goldberg’s cartoons, which linked their spectacles of process to everyday—indeed, mundane—tasks (“Simple Way of Hiding a Gravy Spot on Your Vest,” “How to Tee Up a Golf Ball without Bending Over”), Bowers’s machines were more notably linked to the production of wonders (from unbreakable eggs in *Egged On* [1926] to ostriches

made of old clothes in *Say Ah-h* [1928]). As such, and to return again to a previous point, these films belonged to an earlier imaginary in which technological progress had accustomed the public to a belief in the continued appearance of mechanical marvels, a magical conception of technology that had preceded the famous decay of “aura,” of magic and metaphysics, a decay that Walter Benjamin associated with the era of mechanical reproduction. Wonder had, of course, been a central figure in the American response to the machine age, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of technological possibility; but it was also an experience that generated the mechanical hoax as part of a vernacular tradition of popular technology, whether in any number of sham “perpetual motion” machines, in the flagrant humbug of a P. T. Barnum, or in the string of elaborate tall tales perpetuated in New York’s antebellum popular press (including the aforementioned “Moon Hoax” as well as phony reports of transatlantic balloon crossings and the like).<sup>31</sup> The growth of industrial technologies had thus been accompanied, from the mid-nineteenth century on, by a structuring of implausibility through those very same technologies, establishing the art of the lie—what Edgar Allan Poe termed the “exact science” of “diddling”—as an essential component of the aesthetics of machinery. As Poe wrote: “A crow thievs; a fox cheats; a weasel outwits; a man diddles. To diddle is his destiny.”<sup>32</sup>

It is arguably within this orbit of technical “diddling” that stop-motion animation and slapstick find their shared heritage. The earliest examples of stop motion appealed to a similar spirit of inquiry provoked by Barnumesque humbug, making their reception a form of intellectual exercise centered on puzzling out how the illusion was achieved. The first famous instance was Vitagraph’s 1907 *The Haunted Hotel*, a film whose European success was followed by the publication, in the French weekly *L’illustration*, of two articles exposing the stop-motion technique, in turn prompting an indignant response from Georges Méliès, who proposed a code of filmmakers’ confidentiality as a remedy for future breaches.<sup>33</sup> Yet one does not have to look abroad, nor only to animation, to find equivalent dramas of cinematic secrecy and exposé; the history of live-action slapstick abounds in them. In late 1917, for instance, a publicity agent for the Paramount Pictures Corporation sent out a press release injudiciously explaining the camera trickery employed in one of Paramount’s new line of Mack Sennett comedies—live-action, of course—prompting a furious letter from Sennett himself: “We do our utmost here to keep any and all of our mechanical contrivances a studio secret,” Sennett insisted. “Can you imagine, as an illustration, a magician explaining to his audience how a trick is done and then going ahead and doing it? Naturally there ceases to be the required illusion; therefore it is of no interest to the spectators whatever.”<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the differences in the techniques employed, slapstick and stop motion evidently shared a stock-in-trade in baffling illusionism.

It is possible, in fact, to see in these parallels something of stop motion’s specificity as a “diddling” technique of animation, in contrast with other techniques like cutouts, drawing, and rotoscoping. For what stop motion shared with slapstick’s aesthetic of fantastic machinery was precisely a foundation in profilmic reality, a direct bond to three-dimensional objects recorded “out there” in front of the camera (*direct* here being used to distinguish stop motion from the more mediated bond in rotoscoping). The stop-motion image preserves a world of real objects

that have been reworked to behave in unreal ways, much as in the wire-assisted stunts and double exposure spectacles of slapstick's own world of crazy machines and uproarious inventions. The rationalization of vision built on the putative veracity of the camera ("the camera never lies") was thus studiously assaulted in stop motion as in other in-camera effects, whose unique property was to generate an indexical record of an apparently "impossible" objectivity. This, surely, is why contemporary critical discourses tended to gravitate toward the language of deception in accounting for these techniques and why Bowers acquired a reputation for proving the "camera is a monumental liar." (Perhaps Bowers's own *Believe It or Don't* put the point more succinctly: "The eye of the camera never lies," declares a voice-over narrator, while stop-motion peanuts arrange themselves onscreen to respond "AW NERTS.")

That Bowers operated within this aesthetic of deceptive vision was no doubt part of his appeal for European modernists, whose own fascination with the perceptual instabilities of modernity must have prepared the way for Bowers's enthusiastic reception by Breton in the 1930s ("our eyes opened to the flat sensory distinction between the real and the fantastic"). In the U.S. context, however, such an aesthetic spoke rather to fundamental fault lines in the American imagining of technology, contrasting sharply with discourses of industrial rationalization and scientific certitude. This sense of a contradiction between fantasy and reason, between diddling and professional science, welled up nowhere more powerfully than in the field of popular culture, where the "impossible" pleasures of mechanical mystery vied increasingly against more secular representations that tilted the rhetoric of invention in line with a Taylorist emphasis on efficient productivity. The growing primacy of positivist expertise is clear, for instance, in Susan Douglas's study of the amateur wireless-radio hobbyists of the 1910s and 1920s. The "radio boys" were urban middle-class youth who pursued not magic but an entrepreneurial culture of technical expertise, following in the footsteps of Thomas Edison and the Wright Brothers.<sup>35</sup> In children's fiction, meanwhile, the more rationalized paradigm was supplied by the Tom Swift series, which was introduced in 1910 with the stated goal to "convey in a *realistic* way the wonderful advances in land and sea locomotion" and which turned repeatedly on the less-than-marvelous theme of patent rights.<sup>36</sup> *Tom Swift and His Airship* (1910), for instance, contains the following passage:

Tom's task was to arrange the mechanism so that, hereafter, the rudder could not become jammed. . . . This the lad accomplished by a simple but effective device which, when the balloonist saw it, caused him to compliment Tom. "That's worth patenting," he declared. "I advise you to take out papers on that." "It seems such a simple thing," answered the youth. "And I don't see much use of spending the money for a patent. Airships aren't likely to be so numerous that I could make anything off that patent." "You take my advice," insisted Mr. Sharp. "Airships are going to be used more in the future than you have any idea of. You get that device patented." Tom did so, and, not many years afterward he was glad that he had, as it brought him quite an income.<sup>37</sup>

Contrast this, for instance, with Bowers's own first foray into the world of children's literature, *The Bowers Mother Goose Movie Book* (1923), a nursery rhyme flip book whose cover blurb bestowed a quasi-animistic quality to its pages: "FLIP THE PAGES . . . THE PICTURES LIVE!"<sup>38</sup>

What must in addition be reckoned with here is a further, overarching distinction pitting an

alienated experience of technology, as emblemized in modern industry, against a nonalienated one, as embedded in the premodern notion of magic. For what in the Tom Swift series is a commitment to technology in relation to the capitalist logic of profit and exchange—whereby invention ultimately becomes investment—is in Bowers a vision of technology as a vehicle for realizing and giving concrete form to the workings of fantasy itself. Bowers’s comedy is thus not that of the assembly line—it is not the comedy of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1935), in which the clown’s body is subordinate to the relentless onrush of cogwheels, factory belts, and pistons—but rather that of the workshop, as a secluded space of invention that recurs over and over again in his comedies and that links his own labor as an animator and inventor to that of the characters of his films. The workshop appears in *Egged On*, in the form of the old barn where Charley assembles his system for making unbreakable eggs; it is the kitchen in *He Done His Best*, which he redesigns as the control room for a fully automated restaurant; and it is the apartment lodgings in *A Wild Roomer*, *Fatal Footsteps* (1926), and *Many a Slip*, all of which become impromptu laboratories in which Charley’s fanciful contraptions are incubated and brought to term. A pocket of stasis, the Bowers workshop can be thought of as a kind of enclave within which fantasy can operate—in some sense akin to Johan Huizinga’s vision of the “ideal playground,” a “temporary world within the ordinary world” where “special rules” apply.<sup>39</sup> One thinks of the fascination that other, similarly secluded, enclaves have exerted in modernity’s imagination of technology, those subterranean spaces and high-tech caverns that supplemented the efficient organization of modern industry with a more ancient fascination with mystic underground realms.<sup>40</sup> The technological regime of these films thus rests on a combination of elements excluded from the more obviously hegemonic spaces of modern industry: where the idea of the factory, for example, is that of a mode of production in its rationalized and public guise, the idea of the workshop configures technology according to a more private imaginary, its bonus of pleasure residing not in the utility of the product but in the autonomy of productivity itself. The operative dialectic here—factory vs. workshop, or industry vs. magic—seems, moreover, to correspond to a tension Fredric Jameson has identified as fundamental to modernity’s representations of technology; and this is the tension, drawn from Coleridge, between Imagination and Fancy, Imagination designating that architectural faculty of the mind that shapes new worlds in the image of the machine versus the more purely local and decorative pleasures of Fancy.<sup>41</sup> As an illustration of Fancy’s private dimensions, Jameson notes a well-known scene from Jean Renoir’s *La règle du jeu* (1939): “the nascent embarrassment of Dalio as he exhibits his heart’s desire, . . . an immense mechanical orchestra, which, in full animation, leaves its owner to blush and prance awkwardly in imitation alongside it.”<sup>42</sup> One only wishes to add that the path from here to the factory as a space divorced from the home and the craftsman’s shop exemplifies the logic of disembedding that is characteristic of modernity, a “lifting out” of technology from the realm of private fantasy and its restructuring across social space—an observation to which I will return.<sup>43</sup>

The methodological point, at any rate, is that the aesthetic of fantastic machinery sustained in Bowers’s comedies—grist for the mill for scholars who have related early slapstick to the technologies of turn-of-the-century modernity<sup>44</sup>—is perhaps best seen through the matrix of

pre- or even antimodernism, a retreat from the rationalization of modern science toward earlier, less alienated imaginings. In an era of unprecedented technological advance, the idea of technology's magical productivity—Bowers's idea—could hardly be other than *residual*, as a representation not only formed in the past but marginalized within the present as “comic” or nonserious, suited best to the realm of slapstick, of cartoons, even of children's literature, to name the major areas of Bowers's creativity.<sup>45</sup> It belongs, that is, to a moment preceding the recognition of industrial modernity as a system in its own right, when it was still possible to consider uses for technology that were not already assimilated to a vision of productive labor. What has been described by Miriam Hansen as slapstick's “vernacular modernism” may, in other words, have emerged paradoxically as a *withdrawal* from the modern.<sup>46</sup> But if this is so, then it becomes easier to discern something of slapstick's ambiguity, as a form that not only “play[ed] games with the violence of technological regimes” but that, in doing so, ultimately marked a major accommodation to those regimes.<sup>47</sup> As the historian T. J. Jackson Lears has written, the paradox of turn-of-the-century antimodernism was that, in its quest to recover irrational and vitalist forces in the face of the banality of modern life, it helped ease an acceptance of that very banality, smoothing the path for more secular and corporate modes.<sup>48</sup> Magic may have been opposed to rationalized science in its celebration of mystery, of the impossibility of connecting cause to effect; yet such an aesthetic also assumed an important ideological role, as a highly charged site of pleasure, in making tolerable the growth of corporate industry. Perhaps nowhere was this functioning more dramatically clear than in the closing phase of Bowers's career; and one of the last of his films would also be the most obvious in its structure of accommodation.

### “SOUNDLY SOLD ON THE COMPANY”: BOWERS, THE OIL INDUSTRY, AND THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR

Whatever the reason, Bowers did not remain with Educational, or with any Hollywood firm, after 1928. Early that year, E. W. Hammons's organization fumbled its transition to sound—a short-lived attempt to back the unreliable (and scarcely less short-lived) Vocafilm disc system—complicating the programming of Educational's forthcoming season.<sup>49</sup> When that program was announced in May, Bowers's name was nowhere to be seen. According to census records, Bowers soon relocated to the East Coast—first to Connecticut, later to New Jersey—where he seems to have devoted much of his time to illustrating, turning out children's books, and contributing cartoons for the *Jersey Journal*.<sup>50</sup> Increasingly spotty, his film output was, after 1935, exclusively in the field of stop-motion animation (including what appears to have been two entries in a planned series on a family of mice for release through Paramount, *Wild Oysters* and *A Sleepless Night*, both 1940), before a serious illness terminated his creative career in 1941, bringing death five years later.<sup>51</sup> Still, his work found one last moment of acclaim, not in picture theaters but at the New York World's Fair of 1939, for which, in collaboration with first-time director Joseph Losey, Bowers contributed a promotional short for the oil industry, *Pete Roleum and His Cousins*. With its theme of “The World of Tomorrow,” the New York Fair made unprecedented use of motion pictures, the ideal vehicle

for the combination of education, entertainment, and promotion that made up most of the fair's commercial exhibits. And of the more than six hundred films testifying to the "scope and importance" of cinema as "one of the seven modern means of communication," *Pete Roleum and His Cousins* won the highest plaudits—the "fairest screen fare at the Fair," according to Walter Winchell.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, this would not be the last time that the oil industry would hire a liar to publicize its product; more surprising is that this was not Bowers's first association with that industry. Back in 1926, when he had first entered the field of live-action filmmaking, it was reported that Bowers had recently completed a noncommercial "six-reel picture for one of the big oil companies using [the Bowers process] for gushers and other effects."<sup>53</sup> Certainly, the qualities of Bowers's operational aesthetic were attuned to the promotional rhetoric of modern industry. Historians of the 1939 World's Fair have noted how several companies marketed their product precisely by fusing technology with the spectacle of magic, as in General Electric's House of Magic exhibit (in which, according to *Business Week*, "tricks . . . with thyratons and stroboscopes" left audiences "thrilled, mystified, and soundly sold on the company").<sup>54</sup> Planned as a demonstration of enlightened engineering, the fair thus became what *Life* magazine described as "a magnificent monument by and to American business," and Bowers's picture was part of the hard sell—a "fantasy" film, as it was described, featuring a drop of oil as a "new hero."<sup>55</sup>

The film unfolds as a history of technological advance in which oil is celebrated not only as a lynchpin of industry and transportation but also, increasingly, for its benefits to an American consumers' republic. As the narrator proclaims early on: "Oil turns the wheels of industry! Of pleasure! Of comfort! It cools and heats! Builds cities! Makes a paradise on earth!" The slippage here from "wheels of industry" to an air-conditioned, comfortable "paradise on earth" is replicated over the course of the film: the picture's initial focus on heavy industry shifts into the realm of consumer goods as Pete Roleum introduces products like chewing gum, suntan lotion, and nail polish. The film's visual aesthetic further reinforces these consumerist associations, corresponding to what the historian William Leach has described as a "commercial aesthetic" in which "color . . . and light" functioned as the principal "visual materials of desire."<sup>56</sup> Filmed in Technicolor, *Pete Roleum and His Cousins* recalled in its color design "some of the scenes in 'Snow White' " in the opinion of one reviewer, who also noted how the film's exhibition at the fair created an immersive environment that, not unlike a vaudeville show or cabaret act, broke down the barriers separating audience and spectacle. "A 'Hellzapoppin' touch is added by having two interlocking sound tracks on the film, one of which carries, through an amplifier in the back of the hall, derogatory statements and questions from a heckler addressed to Pete the central character. As in all good acts, Pete always gets the last word or last laugh."<sup>57</sup> Refiguring technology as entertaining, multisensory spectacle, the film culminates in a musical extravaganza—penned, bizarrely, by Oscar Levant and Brecht's former collaborator Hanns Eisler—in which a chorus line of oil drops declares, "Muscle and strength have we! We're the spirit of energy! . . . We're the modern musketeers! The oil men!"

Inescapable here is a structural shift in the imagination of modern technology; and we may speak of something like a recathecting of Bowers's filmmaking in accordance with the

ideological imperatives of industry and commerce. From the opening image of the world turning, to subsequent scenes envisioning a planet desolate without oil, *Pete Roleum and His Cousins* projects a global and systemic perspective—the oil industry as a framework for modernity itself. Yet this, in turn, entails a dissociation of Bowers’s animation techniques away from the more private terrain of fantasy—away, that is, from the representational regime of the workshop—and effaces that properly magical productivity in which Bowers’s earlier diddlings had found their material. There is nothing “fantastic” about the products celebrated in this film; we are no longer in the realm of unbreakable eggs and metal-eating birds. Instead, fancy shifts its center of gravity from the level of the product to that of representation, the aura of the magical surviving only in a consumer sense, to the extent that stop motion supplies an appealing gloss on the products themselves. Diddling thus reaches its limit as the source of an alternative conception of technology, and industry finds its meaning as the loss of magic.

In conflating magic and consumerism, comic process and corporate promotion, *Pete Roleum and His Cousins* nonetheless provides an appropriate conclusion to this chapter, a testimony to the shifting and unstable role of comic mechanics as an anarchic supplement to industrialization. “Our ability to lie,” Jacques Derrida once wrote, “belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom.”<sup>58</sup> Certainly, there could be no history of American humor in general—and no histories of slapstick or animation in particular—outside of the particular creative freedom afforded by the diddling arts. The same, too, could be said of the history of American corporate advertising, which, as several historians have observed, emerged from its own tradition of preposterous humbug and snake-oil salesmen in the patent medicine era.<sup>59</sup> In straddling all of these vectors, Bowers’s career thus speaks to the remarkable prevalence of the tall tale as a resource through which individuals in diverse fields negotiated their transition to modernity. But it also signals the precariousness of that resource—its evasiveness, even its complicity—in the face of the twentieth century’s dominant technocratic idiom. In a society committed to industrial progress and control, Bowers’s resurrection of the art of fantastic machinery, of the art of mechanical deception, attained a fetishistic charge as a refusal of rationalization; yet the appeal to the irrational was always recuperable as appealing fantasy, the mystery of technology as mystification. And no wonder, for, by proving the camera “a monumental liar,” Bowers only intensified mechanization’s allure, charting unexpected relations linking slapstick to surrealism, animation to commercial ideology.

## NOTES

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1. Breton, “Note sur le cinéma à propos du film *It’s a Bird*,” 1206–7 (my translation).

2. Borde, “Le mystère bricolo,” 62; quoted in Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror*, 98.

3. Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror*, 98.

4. Keaton and Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*, 41; “Three-Minute Visit to Keystone Studio.” Information on Larry Semon’s father is derived from “Prof. Semon at the Bijou.” I am indebted to Brent Walker for information on Walter Wright’s post-Keystone career.

5. The quotes are from an advertisement for FBO's 1926–27 release schedule in *Motion Picture News*, May 22, 1926, 2425–29.

6. U.S. Census Bureau, *The 1930 Federal Population Census Microfilm*, 27.

7. "New Process," *Film Daily*, May 30, 1928, 14.

8. Very little is known about Harold Muller, Bowers's longtime collaborator, and even less about the exact division of labor between the two filmmakers. According to his entry in the 1923/24 *Motion Picture Studio Directory*, Muller's early film career had included work with color and synchronized sound technologies (as cinematographer at Charles Urban's Kinemacolor and the Talking Motion Pictures company, respectively). Evidently a skilled and inventive technician, he was credited as director and cinematographer on the majority of Bowers's live-action comedies and up until the fully animated *Wild Oysters* (1940). See clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. I am grateful to Steve Massa and Richard M. Roberts for this information.

9. In 1931, the year following the release of *It's a Bird*, Thomas published *Tall Stories: The Rise and Triumph of the Great American Whopper*. The exact relation between Bowers's film and the publication of this book is unclear. Three years later, however, in 1934, Bowers and Thomas seem to have entered into a more official collaboration when it was announced that a series of Lowell Thomas "Tall Story" comedies was to be produced with the "world famous Bowers Process." According to early advertisements, the series was to be backed by a multimedia campaign involving "the Lowell Thomas daily broadcasts," "tens of thousands" of members of Thomas's "Tall Story Club," and nine new editions of the *Tall Stories* volumes. Evidently the collaboration was unsuccessful, since none of the proposed series ever made it to release. See "Bowers Plans Comedy Series with Thomas," *Motion Picture Herald*, Feb. 24, 1934; and the advertisement for Lowell Thomas "Tall Story" Comedies, *Film Daily Yearbook 1934*, 116.

10. Advertisement for Educational Pictures, *Photoplay*, Feb. 1928, 13.

11. Huemer, "Humoresque."

12. Advertisement for Educational Pictures, *Photoplay*, Feb. 1928, 13.

13. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 36.

14. See Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

15. See Rourke, *American Humor*, 60. Rourke proceeds to list some famous nineteenth-century whoppers: "An old gentleman was so absent-minded that he tucked his pantaloons into bed one night and hung himself on the back of his chair, where he froze to death. Another had whiskey so good that when he drank it he spoke broad Scotch. A man was so tall that he had to get up on a ladder to shave himself. There was the immemorial oyster, so large that two men were required to swallow it. . . . Such tales were told throughout the century and perhaps have never died. Their lineage is long; they appear in shy forms on the New England frontier of the eighteenth century. . . . [But it] was in the West that these tales took on their final inflation; and from the West they spread over the country" (60–61).

16. Advertisement for Educational Pictures, *Photoplay*, Feb. 1928, 13; review of *Whoozit?* *Motion Picture News*, March 17, 1928, 896.

17. Rourke's *American Humor* accounted for the emergence of the tall tale in the nineteenth century as a way of coming to terms with the "expansive effect" of the western frontier. That tradition survived in Bowers, I am beginning to suggest, as a way of playfully negotiating the no less "expansive" impact of turn-of-the-century technological change. See Rourke, *American Humor*, 61.

18. "Exhibitors Lining Up for Laugh Month," *Motion Picture News*, Dec. 18, 1926, 2429.

19. "Short Subject Service Guide," *Motion Picture News*, April 15, 1927, 1335; "The Week in Review," *Motion Picture News*, March 25, 1927, 1024.

20. "F.B.O. Has 54 for 1926–27," *Motion Picture News*, May 22, 1926, 2458a. On Educational see Richard M. Roberts, "'Mixed Nuts' and Educational Pictures," *Classic Images*, Jan. 1992, 26–28.

21. "Expansion of Short Subjects," *Film Daily*, May 30, 1926, 16.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Advertisement for *Egged On*, *Motion Picture News*, June 5, 1926, 2645; advertisement for *Now You Tell One*, *Motion Picture News*, Dec. 4, 1926, 2112–13.

24. Review of *Hop Off*, *Motion Picture News*, June 23, 1928, 290; review of *Whoozit?* *Motion Picture News*, March 17, 1928, 896.

25. See King, "'Uproarious Inventions.'" The terms "popular realism" and "operational aesthetic" are drawn from, respectively, Oberdeck, *The Evangelist and the Impresario*; and Harris, *Humbug*.

26. On Cohan and the "mechanics of emotion" see Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* 32–37.

27. On the "laugh recorder" see "'Laugh Recorder' Try Out in Los Angeles," *Motion Picture News*, March 31, 1928, 1029; on comedy as a "safety valve" see Bisch, "What Makes You Laugh?"

28. The quoted titles are taken from the Image DVD release (2004), which translates back into English the title cards from the surviving French release print (in which the slippery germ is named *patynhos*). The original English titling does not survive.
29. Review of *Many a Slip*, *Motion Picture News*, Jan. 21, 1927, 235.
30. Advertisement for *Say Ah-h*, *Motion Picture News*, Feb. 25, 1928, 609.
31. The principle of “perpetual motion”—that a machine might run continually without any source of power beyond its own momentum—was much debated during the late nineteenth century, giving rise to many humbug inventions.
32. Poe, “Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences.”
33. See Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 17–18, 29–30.
34. Mack Sennett to Adolph Zukor, Dec. 13, 1917, Correspondence folder (1915–1919), General Files, Mack Sennett Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science. Sennett’s “outrage” here was perhaps more than a little specious: his own publicity staff made a habit of revealing tidbits of technical information, even including an exhibitors’ slideshow the previous year. See “Start a Lecture Campaign in Your Theatre,” *Triangle*, April 22, 1916, 1, 6.
35. See Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922*.
36. Appleton, *Tom Swift and His Motor Cycle*, dust jacket (italics added).
37. Appleton, *Tom Swift and His Airship*, 66–67.
38. *The Bowers Mother Goose Movie Book* (1923) has recently been reprinted by Optical Toys of Putney, VT (opticaltoys.com).
39. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8–10; quoted in Nasaw, *Going Out*, 80.
40. See Williams, *Notes on the Underground*.
41. See Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 42–56. On the dialectic of factory vs. workshop see n. 43 below.
42. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 47. The sequence is also cited in Jacques Lacan’s 1958 seminar “Le désir et son interprétation.”
43. I am here paraphrasing Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 138: “It was the existence of a central building, divorced from the home and the craftsman’s shop, in which large bodies of men could be gathered to perform the various necessary industrial operations with the benefit of large-scale co-operation that differentiated the factory in the modern sense from the largest of workshops” (emphasis added). Readers of Marx’s *Capital* will know, however, that the relation of the factory to the workshop is more complex than Mumford’s metaphor of “divorce” might suggest; for, as *Capital*’s chapter on modern industry explains, industrial work processes incorporate older systems of production rather than supersede them, a phenomenon evident in the continued presence of artisanal workshops within the early twentieth-century factory. Thus, while the phenomena of factory and workshop may be juxtaposed in theory, that opposition must be understood as neither a rigid historical nor a spatial separation but rather a mixed development. See, on this issue, Samuel, “Workshop of the World.” On “disembedding” see Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 21–29.
44. See, e.g., Gunning, “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths”; and Rabinovitz, “The Coney Island Comedies.”
45. I am using *residual* here in the precise sense suggested by Raymond Williams: “The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process. . . . Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 122).
46. See Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses,” esp. 70–71.
47. *Ibid.*, 70.
48. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 58.
49. On Educational and Vocafilm see “Educational Acquires Vocafilm,” *Motion Picture News*, Jan. 14, 1928, 121; “Vocafilm Busy Preparing New Acts,” *Motion Picture News*, Jan. 21, 1928, 201; Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 84.
50. See “Charles Bowers; Pioneer in Film Cartoons; Jersey Writer, Director and Producer’s Career Began at 6 on Tightwire.”
51. *A Sleepless Night* seems never to have been released, since it survives only without a soundtrack.
52. Crowther, “Films for the Fair”; Winchell, “Walter Winchell on Broadway.”
53. See “F.B.O. Has New Comedy Series,” 2260.
54. Quoted in Susman, “The People’s Fair,” 224.
55. *Life* magazine, quoted in Susman, “The People’s Fair,” 223; see also “Oil Industry Movie Presents New Hero.”
56. Leach, *Land of Desire*, 9.
57. “Oil Industry Movie Presents New Hero.” On the stage production of *Hellzapoppin* see Henry Jenkins’s contribution to this volume.

58. Derrida, "History of the Lie," 95.

59. See, e.g., Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, esp. part 1; and Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, chap. 1.