

# laughter in an ungoverned sphere

f i f t e e n

actuality humor in early cinema and  
web 2.0

r o b k i n g

## introductory premises

The major premise of this paper can be stated as follows: the forms and strategies of moving image humor have among their conditions of possibility the technological properties of the media by which they are produced and circulated. That is, the technological processes of visual media are preconditions for specific forms of humorous representation. There is nothing earth-shattering in this claim: it has long been established, through the work of critics like Rudolph Arnheim and Walter Kerr, that the silent comedians frequently constructed gags that exploited the peculiarities of film technology (the way in which, say, the reduced sense of depth in the cinematic image allowed the gag of Keaton “entering” the movie screen in *Sherlock Jr.* [1924]).<sup>1</sup> Extended to a principle of comic historiography, however, such a premise becomes more far-reaching. It entails a rejection, for instance, of the idea that visual humor has developed along a linear, evolutionary trajectory of change, as well as of the inverse presumption of a kind of transhistorical permanence to humor’s forms. Rather, at each

technologically given moment, we are dealing with media-technological constellations that become enabling conditions for the emergence—and, as we will see, cyclical re-emergence—of certain forms of visual humor (e.g., various types of gags, sources of amusement, etc.); that is, we are dealing with how the transmission of humor by particular technologies may alter and inflect its capabilities for expression. No doubt such a standpoint risks lapsing into a technological determinism, so it is worth underlining that the issue here is one of preconditions, not necessary effects or consequences. Thus a second premise: that the emergence and development of humorous forms—by which I mean the realization or suppression of possibilities given by moving image technologies—occur in relation to those technologies' changing social and cultural milieus. So we are dealing not simply with conditions of possibility but with the ways in which those conditions may be frustrated or fulfilled given the particulars of the social situation.<sup>2</sup>

This matrix of ideas is adapted from current trends within German media studies, in particular what Wolfgang Ernst dubs “media archeology” as a specific style of media-theoretical thinking. In contrast with the cultural studies orientation of Anglo-American media studies, media archeology proposes a more hardware- and technology-oriented perspective for which analysis must always begin, as Ernst puts it, from a “close examination of technical media as they actually operate.”<sup>3</sup> As such, media archeology has been described as a form of “posthuman cultural studies” that takes the point of view of technological factors as catalysts for mutations in cultural perception and knowledge. Applied to the history of screen humor, what this implies is an approach that seeks the differences and discontinuities that visual media technologies may have introduced into conventions of comic representation.

The present paper will pursue this impulse through a comparative exploration of the role of humor within two distinct media-technological constellations, roughly a century apart. Specifically, I will be comparing the earliest comic motion pictures (that is, from the period prior to the ascendancy of the story film, c. 1903–1904) with contemporary internet humor (particularly so-called viral videos that circulate within the web's socially networked “Web 2.0” incarnation). One of the advantages of such a comparison is that, in bookending the twentieth century, it brackets off the dominant paradigm of moving image comedy as “mass” entertainment, instead allowing an assessment of technological potentialities in a relatively ungoverned sphere of their organization. For much of the last century, I have argued elsewhere, the relevant circumstances that shaped moving image humor were the operations of a mass culture that orchestrated its comedic genres and representational practices in relation to the social formations associated with the idea of the masses.<sup>4</sup> Yet early cinema was not yet inscribed within these standardizing logics, while contemporary media practice suggests their potential displacement by new forms of

grassroots creativity online. The value of comparing early film with online videos, in this sense, is that it generates a purview that opens onto possibilities both *before* and, arguably, *after* the conscription of screen humor to a mass cultural paradigm—onto territories both not yet and no longer circumscribed by a necessary deference to the logic of mass entertainment. What kinds of humor will we find there? And how might attention to these suggest new frameworks for the historiography of screen humor?

Note that I have largely avoided the word “comedy” so far. The term comedy designates an established cultural mode for which laughter is the intended goal (e.g., stand-up comedy, romantic comedy); it stands, in other words, for a discursive practice or tradition. But media archeology is about non-discursive practices, about media effects that precede their symbolization or formalization within culture and discourse; so that we will need to talk not about comedy but about the *comic effects* that moving image technologies make available.

The third premise of our archeology of screen humor will thus be the terminological distinction separating “comedy” from that which is “comic.”<sup>5</sup> Something is “comic,” it is said, if it simply generates our amusement, irrespective of intention. In this sense, the term is identical to “funny” or “comical” in referring to *anything* that causes us to laugh, whether a professional comedian telling a joke in a club or an individual awkwardly stumbling over a paving stone. By contrast “comedy” is limited to spheres of representation and intent: something is presented to us *as a comedy* in the sense in which it obeys certain aesthetic and performative codes that cue us to expect to laugh. These two terms need not converge. It is easy, for instance, to think of a comedy that is not comic, that fails in its mirthful intention, just as it is easy to think of something that provokes a guffaw but that we would never—except maybe metaphorically—describe as being a comedy. (Consider, for instance, Senator Marco Rubio’s thirsty grab for a water bottle during the nationally televised Republican response to President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address—a split-second struggle to maintain political dignity in the face of raw bodily need worthy of the highest slapstick art, yet not itself slapstick comedy.)<sup>6</sup> With that in mind, we might further nuance our terms by differentiating comedy as a *mode of representation* from the comic as a *property of perception*. (Thus, *The Big Bang Theory* [2007–present] “is” a comedy but I do not “find” it comic, etc.). This insistence on perception—that something is comical if and only if it is perceived to be so—is necessary given the socially situated nature of humor. One of the peculiarities of comedy among all the arts, indeed, is the incorrigibility of audience response: a joke, for instance, is funny if and only if you laugh at it. Otherwise—and assuming it has been understood—it is a failed joke. Thus does Sigmund Freud, in his study of jokes, quote Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear/Of him that hears it, never in the tongue / Of him that makes it.”<sup>7</sup>

These qualifications will, it is hoped, bear fruit later. For the present, it suffices to consider how they apply to the objects of our analysis: How, in short, does the distinction between “comedy” and the “comic” provide a rubric for assessing the relation between early cinema and Web 2.0 as these have served as media for humor?

### early cinema and comedy

A very straightforward—although as I hope to show, misleading—answer might be advanced simply by mapping our two pairings (early cinema/Web 2.0, comedy/comic) atop of one another. Early cinema, one can imagine proposing, was at the start a vehicle for *comedy* insofar as it was shaped by preexisting comedic media—vaudeville, comic strips, etc.—whose practices were simply extended into the new medium. Online humor, by contrast, has proven most reliably viral when it involves a kind of unmediated, real-world encounter with the *comic*; hence the centrality of found-footage or actuality-style material—including such familiar classics as “Double Rainbow,” “Leave Britney Alone!” and many others—whose comicality is not a matter of deliberate staging or intent but exists solely in its perception and circulation, in the “ear that hears it.”<sup>8</sup> Such a hypothesis, at least as it touches cinema, is broadly in keeping with recent historiographic perspectives that insist on the medium’s intermediality—its profound dependence upon preexisting media forms—during its earliest years. What we call cinema, it is said today, initially existed in an intermedial situation for which technological novelty was harnessed to a range of preceding cultural practices. The leading scholarly voice here has surely been that of André Gaudreault, who has gone so far as to propose that “Early ‘cinema’ was *not yet cinema*,” in the sense in which the medium, at least until around 1908, lacked an autonomous institutional identity.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Gaudreault understands early film as no more or less than a tool, an instrument whose optical rendering was put in the service of adjacent media forms and genres. What the Lumières, W.K.L. Dickson, and Georges Méliès “did,” in this respect, was simply to use the new device as a vehicle for reproducing and extending pre-existing cultural traditions (what Gaudreault terms “cultural series”): photography for the Lumières, vaudeville for Dickson, magic sketches for Méliès.<sup>10</sup> The early development of film form was then not a specifically “cinematic” development at all, but rather an application of film to the representational norms of non-cinematic media forms.

There is no trick to applying this model to early film comedy. In point of fact, the very earliest films made by Auguste and Louis Lumière in the spring of 1895 with their recently patented *cinématographe* include a famous case in point: a staged sketch about a bad boy, a gardener, and a hose generally known today as *L’Arroseur arrosé* (*The Sprinkler Sprinkled*). Already at the time of the film’s making, the gag was a familiar comic-strip chestnut in

France: a first version had appeared in 1885, two more in 1887, with a fourth provided by France's leading comic-strip artist Christophe in 1889.<sup>11</sup> Nor was such direct transposition exceptional. The very existence of screen comedy during the mid- to late 1890s was only possible because of a series of appropriations of gag situations and character types from an already existing repertory of comedy in adjacent media—vaudeville sketches and comic strips in particular. A case in point would be the “bad-boy” film—single-shot films depicting the pulling of a prank that constitute perhaps the earliest important genre in American fiction filmmaking, yet which derive from a rich tradition in small-town comic tales and stage farces (dating as far back, for example, as Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *The Story of a Bad Boy* [1869]).<sup>12</sup> Comic strips, equally, remained a mainstay above and beyond *L'Arroseur arrosé*, perhaps nowhere more so than at American Mutoscope and Biograph, which derived material from the funny pictures more than any other US studio (e.g., a series based on Carl Schultze's “Foxy Grandpa” in 1902, a “Happy Hooligan” series in 1903, based on Frederick Burr Opper's strip, Etc.).<sup>13</sup> Such sources accorded well with the brief, one-shot framework of early cinema, generating a proliferation of prank narratives that followed the straightforward cause-effect gag template of *L'Arroseur arrosé*: a rascal—usually a young boy, if not a comic-strip character like Happy Hooligan—sets up a prank to which a second character falls victim (a bucket of water propped atop a door, a shoelace tied to a laundry wringer, etc.). Also well-suited were comedic vaudeville acts, whose modular format readily allowed for brief “bits” to be extracted from longer routines and performed before the camera—a tendency that extends from the earliest Edison shorts through to later films like *The Dog Factory* (Edison, 1904), one of numerous filmed records of the familiar “sausage machine” routine of the turn-of-the-century vaudeville stage.<sup>14</sup>

Other examples could be cited, but only to confirm a point that should already be clear, that the emergence of early *film* comedy was accomplished through a transposition of already existing comedic media. Still, what such an etiology leaves unstated is the presence of material that did not fall within such genres but that nonetheless may have produced laughter—material that was *comic* without actually being *comedy*—and it is here, I believe, that media archeology shows its usefulness. For example, the Lumières' *L'Arroseur arrosé* may well be the brothers' first “comedy,” but is it for that reason any more amusing than their prototypical home movie, *Querelle enfantine* (*Babies' Quarrel*) (1896), showing two babies struggling over a spoon? Interestingly, both films were classified as comedies when released in the US the following year (the latter being a “laughable little comedy”), although the shared designation here masks a fundamental difference—namely that in the case of *L'Arroseur arrosé* the action is predetermined as comic, whereas in *Babies' Quarrel*, the comic nature of what transpires emerges out of accident, from the unselfconscious sadism

with which one baby steals a spoon from the other and uses it as a poking weapon—none of which, surely, was immanent to the decision to start filming.<sup>15</sup>

It is in fact precisely the “accidental” quality to what is here recorded that betrays the crucial blindspot in any intermedial reading of screen humor, since it points to forms of comic attraction that cannot easily be related to previous cultural series. After all, to what pre-existing cultural series does *Babies’ Quarrel* belong? The obvious answer would be still photography, with the Lumières’ *cinématographe* here taking on the recording duties of the family photo.<sup>16</sup> But such a position, while it surely respects the impulse behind the Lumières’ use of their invention, leaves the comic upshot of the film strangely untouched, and for a reason that hardly eludes analysis; namely, that *still* photography is not so well fitted to these kinds of comic effects. To describe *Babies’ Quarrel* as “subordinate” to photography thus risks overlooking the mirth-provoking aspect of the film that transcends such subordination. What is required for mirth, as a minimal premise, is a durational temporality: the perception of humor, one recent cognitive study proposes, engages the mind in a “time-pressured heuristic” that involves the framing of expectations and their subsequent derailment.<sup>17</sup> But the temporality of reading a photograph tends toward an “all-at-onceness” that renders this cognitive two-step difficult (albeit not impossible; see below), forcing expectation and deviation to coexist awkwardly within the same moment of apprehension. As Vilém Flusser notes, the process of interpreting still images differs fundamentally from their moving counterparts, since the former tend not to be decoded in strictly linear fashion, from a “start” to a “finish.” Rather, in a still image we “get the message first”—all at once—“and then try to decompose it.” Photographs are, in this sense, like “dams placed in the way of the stream of history, jamming historical happenings.”<sup>18</sup> Humor, however, thrives not on “dams,” but on “happenings”; it requires a form of succession for which meaning unfolds in a process of emergence and surprise. As soon as such successiveness is secured—as it is when photography transitions into moving images—humor becomes permanently available.

None of this is meant to imply a hard and fast distinction: there obviously are funny photos. In such instances, however, humor succeeds only when the still photograph rubs against the grain of its own medial “all-at-onceness” to encourage a more linear decoding. This typically occurs in one of two ways: first, when there is a directional temporality somehow “built into” the image (the way a photo’s composition establishes a primary focus that is then comically deflated by some secondary detail; the contemporary viral trend of photobombing is a good example); or, alternately, when the photo itself, as a whole, is the thing that deviates from expectations (successiveness here being realized in the way the viewer carries certain pre-existing expectations that are overturned at the instant of viewing).<sup>19</sup> In

all such instances, however, the successive temporality required for humor will be generated not so much from the side of the object (the photo) but rather on the side of the subject (the viewer) who encounters the still photograph and who, as such, “creates” humor’s temporality in the process of encounter.<sup>20</sup> Which is to say that the single photograph relies strongly on the viewer to generate the *timing* that comicality implies—hence, arguably, the fragility of still photography’s mirth-inducing capacities. In the case of film, by contrast, such a temporality is immanent to the apparatus itself, which in consequence binds subject to object in the durational unfolding of any number of mirth-producing actions.

It follows, then, that there is a kind of actuality-based humor in cinema that (a) resides precisely in the media distinction between still and moving images and (b) is independent of, indeed logically anterior to, comedy. This surely is why early actuality films, though not strictly *comedies*, are so often profoundly *comic*. As Mary Ann Doane has shown, the basic fact of duration—built into the technology of the medium itself—creates a margin of indeterminacy for the unfolding of events, what she describes as an “unprecedented alliance between representation and unpredictability,” that contains the permanent potential for unexpectedly comic moments.<sup>21</sup> From the medium’s inception, of course, cinema’s unique power was often associated with this kind of dehierarchizing of representation, freed from the codifications of any intended signification. One thinks here of the early commentators who celebrated the breeze rustling the leaves in the trees in the first Lumière films, or the pounding of the surf in Birt Acre’s *Rough Sea at Dover* (1895); or of the English writer who, writing in 1896, compared film with what he called the “realism” of pre-Raphaelite painters, noting that both “are incapable of selection; they grasp at every straw that comes in their way; they see the trivial and important, the near and the distant, with the same fecklessly impartial eye.”<sup>22</sup> One thinks also of that chance poetry of motion that French filmmakers of the 1920s came to name *photogénie*, as a kind of expressive singularity unexpectedly revealed beneath the lens of the camera. Surely, though, the inadvertently comic moments discussed above are simply the humorous side of this same coin? Film’s new accounting of the world—that leveling, “any moment” plenitude of its indexical capture of the real—revealed possibilities for viewing that thus oscillated between a kind of aestheticizing fascination with the everyday, on the one hand, and unmediated hilarity, on the other. Nor, moreover, should we limit our purview to actuality footage: early fiction films similarly give the spectator ample opportunity for witnessing profilmic accidents or happenstance whose meaning comically refuses to be constrained to hierarchies of narrative meaning. The equestrian inexperience of one of the bandit actors of *The Great Train Robbery* (Edison, 1903), who attempts to mount his horse from the wrong side; an actor’s overzealous concern to keep his hat straight while playing an unconscious woman in *From Leadville*

to *Aspen* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1906)—readers will surely have their own favored examples to add to this list.

It follows, though, that our initial hypothesis cannot be quite right; that the humor of early cinema resides *not* only in the medium's role as a vehicle for other comedic traditions. Rather, there are two trajectories of cinematic humor to be explored, each dependent on a distinct reading of the apparatus, as medium or machine: one of these trajectories—predicated on intermediality—insists on cinema as a *medium of reproduction* for extrapolating pre-established genres and traditions of comedy; the other—predicated on media archeology—insists on a new style of reality-based humor emerging from the ontology of cinema as a *time-based machine* bound to the contingency of unfolding events.

### comedification/de-comedification

Media archeology thus ultimately leads to what has been an overlooked dialectic for the historiography of screen humor, one that differentiates between a conventionalized system of comedy genres and a techno-indexical realm of comic contingency. I want, then, to turn to the question of historiographic implications in order to unpack what this dichotomy might mean for a historical understanding of screen humor. What, for example, are the processes that belong to this dialectic? It is perhaps not the least of our consequences that the question of class finds itself displaced. The historiography of early screen humor has been approached by many scholars (myself included) in terms of a struggle between class-based models of “low” slapstick comedy vs. “sophisticated” situation comedy.<sup>23</sup> But it does not detract from the reality of that struggle to observe that this process was logically and, indeed, historically posterior to the dialectic that I am here identifying. The terms slapstick and situation exist only on one side of our dialectic, on the side of genre; whereas what the moving image more uniquely represents for the history of humor, media-archeologically interpreted, is a new episteme for laughter that no longer required generic models—that, in a profound sense, *no longer needed comedy*. The media-archeological exercise, then, will be to track this episteme as it has haunted and shaped the forms of screen humor.

Two historical processes can be specified in this respect. The first concerns the way in which the medium's photographic receptivity to comic accident came to be discursively and practically regulated in relation to an emergent system of comedy genres, thus favoring the apparatus's development as a medium. Attention to this process intersects with recent scholarship that has explored the formal and production methods of narrative cinema as devices for managing contingency.<sup>24</sup> But it differs in the case of humor, where the effort was not simply to *subordinate* contingency to narrative meanings—less to “exclude the unexpected,” as Ernst puts it—but,



more paradoxically, to systematize the non-systemic, to incorporate happenstance as a reproducible formula of comedy; that is, *to turn comic accident into comedic pseudo-accident*.<sup>25</sup> I am thinking here foremost of the numerous “What Happened” films of the early period, the pretense of which is precisely that of the camera having “captured” a chance comic moment to which the viewer becomes privy. To name only a few: *What Happened When a Hot Picture Was Taken* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1898), *What Happened to a Fresh Johnnie* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1900), *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* (Edison, 1901), *What Happened to the Inquisitive Janitor* (Pathé Frères, 1902), *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Edison, 1903), *What Happened to the Milkman* (Lubin, 1903), and *What Happened to a Camera Fiend* (Paley and Steiner, 1904).<sup>26</sup> *What Happened on Twenty-third Street* has been cited by Doane as a key instance of early cinema’s predilection for contingency; more singular, to my mind, is what the film suggests for a media archeology of screen humor.<sup>27</sup> The single-shot film contains no markers of comic intent; rather, it presents itself as a straight actuality, apparently a simple street scene in which passers-by walk hither and thither. A man and woman (actors A.C. Abadie and Florence Georgie) eventually emerge from the crowd, walking side-by-side toward the camera. A gust of air blows up from a sidewalk grate to lift the woman’s skirt; she playfully defuses her embarrassment with an open laugh and the couple walks on.

Note here how such a film conflates our foregoing distinction between comedy and the comic: the film *is* a comedy, in the zero-degree sense of being a representational form designed for laughter, but a comedy whose conceit is that no representational codes are in play, that we are witnessing something that simply happened, something “purely” comic. We may, in fact, speak of the *comedification* of comicality, as though what is being reflexively staged is the discovery of the immanent comic potential of the moving image and its subsequent repackaging as a reproducible formula.<sup>28</sup> But, in that case, what is encountered here is a decisive rupture in the intermedial context in which film comedy first developed—not a filmed vaudeville skit nor a comic-strip adaptation, but nothing less than the first stirrings of a truly *cinematic* genre of comedy, of a new cultural paradigm for the production of laughter whose condition of possibility is the ontology of the medium itself. Following media scholar Brett Mills, we will call this genre—whose pretense is not to be a genre—*comedy verité*.<sup>29</sup>

What happened to the “What Happened” genre? Such films were produced only so long as cinema remained within the prehistory, so to speak, of its subsequent identity as an emerging mass medium. We are, in other words, still under the sway of that basic fascination exerted by the reproduction of movement through time, only here with an effort to regularize the medium’s techno-indexical novelty as the basis of a reproducible comic effect. It is thus significant that the next stage in this “comedifying” process would tilt the delicate balance of the “What Happened” films decisively

toward the standardized formulas of genre filmmaking. Coinciding with the “What Happened” cycle’s decline, for example, there now emerged chase comedies like Biograph’s *Personal* (1904), which, as often noted, implement a kind of “managed irregularity” that permits impromptu variations even as it confines them to an overall sameness—the way, that is, that the repetitive form of chase comedy provides a predictable system for regularizing comically unpredictable variations in the pursuers’ traversals of space (the way in which, e.g., one pursuer will leap over an obstacle like a fence, another will crawl under it, another will fall down climbing it).<sup>30</sup> More telling still is the simultaneous appearance of a number of reflexive film comedies like Biograph’s *The Story the Biograph Told* (1904) that incorporate the medium’s indexical availability to happenstance as a narrative device in situation-style comedies of spousal exposure and shaming. A wayward husband is inadvertently filmed committing some miscreant act—typically adulterous—which is then projected onscreen, commonly at a movie theater attended by his wife. The plot device features prominently in a number of films peppered throughout the nickelodeon era, including titles like *Getting Evidence* (Edison, 1906) and *Bobby’s Kodak* (Biograph, 1908); enters into the stock-in-trade of domestic comedies in the 1910s, with Roscoe Arbuckle’s *A Reckless Romeo* (Comique, 1917), a noteworthy example; and even extends into the sound era, where it is central to the plot of the Laurel and Hardy feature *Sons of the Desert* (MGM, 1933). As Charlie Keil rightly notes, such “reflexive scenarios point to the capacity of cinema [...] to replay past moments of time” in testimony to the medium’s status as a technology of reproduction.<sup>31</sup> But they also serve as memorial to the immanent comicality of that technology, whose “feckless” capacity to capture accident and impropriety fizzed through the early period as a prominent source of mirth—only here consecrated as a plot device within the paradigms of situation comedy, and hence contained.

The path of media archeology thus reveals a history that leads from “genuine” moments of comic contingency (*Babies’ Quarrel*) to the staging of contingency (*What Happened on Twenty-third Street*) to comedies about the filming of contingency (*The Story the Biograph Told*). “Comedification” names this process whereby comic possibilities inaugurated by moving image technology were appropriated to generic categorizations, a thumbnail of how cinema *qua* machine (with comic effects) was subsumed to cinema *qua* mass medium (with comedy genres).

But we will also need at this point to add a second, corollary process of “de-comedification” that in turn merits analysis as to *its* media and technological conditions, although tracking this logic will require that we now leave the confines of early cinema. Inverting the logic just described, de-comedification names the ways in which the increasing dissemination and ease of use of indexical moving image technologies have subsequently permitted the cyclical re-entry of contingency over the last century, a kind

of recurrent de-semanticizing of humor that has periodically restored the happenstance pleasures of the recording apparatus's machinic functioning. A full analysis of this second process would, then, have to move not merely beyond the confines of early cinema but also beyond cinema itself, in order to take into account a much broader moving image history. It would need to examine, for instance, the specific media conditions that enabled television shows like Allen Funt's hidden camera series *Candid Camera* (1948–2004), the idea for which initially evolved out of Funt's experiences with military surveillance technologies at the Army Signal Corps; or to consider how the dissemination of home video technologies in the 1980s gave rise to programs like *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1989–present)—all testifying to a kind of technologically enabled escape from comedy whose recurrence belies any assumption that screen humor's is a linear development. It would have to consider, too, how such reality-based pleasures have themselves been subject to a continued process of comedification that would appropriate them to reproducible formulas, in keeping with the operative procedures of the earlier "What Happened" cycle; how, for instance, the burgeoning of reality television over the last two decades has inspired a surfeit of "comedy vérité" shows like *The Office* (UK, 2001–2003; US, 2005–2013) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015) that mimic the format of the television "docusoap" as the basis of a new style of contemporary sitcom.<sup>32</sup> Above all, however, attention to these processes will need to address how and why the humor of real-world happenstance has recently made a historically unprecedented resurgence in the form of non-comedic viral videos online, to which this paper now turns.

### web 2.0 and the forms of online humor

Over a century after the Lumières offered up the comic spectacle of bickering children in *Babies' Quarrel*, audiences had another chance to laugh at sibling squabbles, this time online, when the YouTube video "Charlie Bit My Finger—Again!" began to go viral at the end of 2007. Like the Lumières' "Childish Quarrel," the video testifies to the comic dimension of unwitting infant cruelty. Uploaded by the children's father, who used the YouTube platform simply to distribute the footage to relatives, the one-minute video shows Harry Davies-Carr (aged three) putting his finger in the mouth of his one-year-old brother Charlie, who bites. "Charlie bit me!" Harry exclaims. He again puts his finger in Charlie's mouth and again is bitten. "Ouch! Ouch, Charlie! OWWWW! Charlie, that really hurt!" The infant Charlie inadvertently breaks into something resembling a sadistic laugh. "Charlie bit me," Harry adds, recovering into a smile. Internet users evidently found something they liked. By the end of 2007, the video had over a million views; two years later it was the most viewed online video ever, with 130 million views.<sup>33</sup> As of the time of writing, it has been viewed

over 800 million times and remains the most viewed YouTube video that is not a professional music video.

It might seem strange to offer “Charlie Bit My Finger—Again!” as an immediate comparison with the Lumières’ family movies; nobody, surely, would argue for more than a circumstantial similarity, a chance linkage between infant media and infant subjects. For our purposes, however, the similarity can clarify the linkage binding digital platforms to the re-entry of a kind of actuality-based humor in our contemporary moment. Marginalized by the standardization of comedic genres during the mid-1900s, the humor of real-world contingency and accident has in recent years made an unprecedented resurgence to claim center stage in the form of non-comedic videos that acquire viral status online. When *Time* magazine posted its list of “YouTube’s 50 Best Videos” in 2010, fully a third of the clips fell within this category, including such now-classic instances as “David after Dentist” (depicting a seven-year-old boy’s reaction to anesthesia), “Grape Lady Falls!” (wherein a woman stomping grapes falls over and howls), and “Miss Teen South Carolina” (in which a contestant at the 2007 Miss Teen USA contest offers a garbled response to a pageant question).<sup>34</sup>

How can we understand the popularity of such viral actualities? Any answer must first acknowledge the very broad array of comedic material that today circulates online. The situation of the internet, in terms of humorous content, is in this respect somewhat parallel to that argued by Gaudreault for early film: digital media have indeed developed in part in a “state of complementarity” vis-à-vis pre-existing comedic practice. Internet humor can thus be viewed, at least to some degree, as a kind of hodge-podge of traditional modes, only now dressed up with the special sauce of online culture: jokecraft has been relocated onto comedians’ Twitter feeds, where the traditional practice of sharing jokes is absorbed into the process of retweeting; sketch comedy is adapted to sites like Fun-nyorDie.com, which now allows viewers to vote (“funny” or “die”); and catchphrases and one-liners take electronic form in the meme images and gifs that online users circulate as shorthand comic ripostes. A writer for the comedy news website *Splitsider* summarizes the dynamics of humor’s online circulation:

Between the rise of Twitter, Tumblr, podcasts, and web videos, it’s no secret that mobile comedy is quickly becoming the next big thing. While the accuracy and relevance of TV ratings continue to dwindle, online view counts, retweets, and comedian/fan interconnection have flourished and changed the way we discover and share our favorite performers, and in turn how they choose to release and promote their work. Few forms of entertainment are better designed for on-the-go enjoyment than comedy, and a

bevy of websites, production companies, and comedians have taken advantage of the age of constant mobile connectivity to redefine comedy as we know it.<sup>35</sup>

Mobility certainly is key here, as the *Splitsider* writer implies. The modular, bite-sized basis of much humorous expression makes it eminently appropriate for circulation and consumption online (just as, a century earlier, it facilitated the production of brief, one-shot comic films).<sup>36</sup>

Still, what such a perspective fails to explain is why virality has most intensively attached to non-comedic/actuality material. Granted that contingency remains equally available for digital as well as analog visual media, the question arises: why this return now? Here, I would argue, it is less the mobility of new media than their sociality that is the pertinent issue. For if there is one thing that digital technologies have notably added to our experience of this kind of material it is the ability to annotate, link to, remix, and, ultimately, share it. A number of properties of our contemporary media infrastructure are pertinent in this respect: digital interfaces that are configured for both output and input, streaming video technologies enabled by greater network bandwidth, HTML documents that permit the embedding of video files—all of these allow for a continual reincorporation of videos into new online contexts that percolate rapidly through dispersed social networks.

Some care is, however, needed on this point, since the appeal to sociality alone cannot support a distinction between actuality-based humor and other kinds of comic material. As noted earlier, *all* humorous discourse, of whatever kind, is socially situated in the sense in which it is uniquely audience-dependent, requiring an act of transmission for its very existence (no audience, no joke, Freud noted). Humor is also inevitably social in the sense in which it functions strongly as an in-group discursive operator, binding together those who “get” a given joke against those who don’t, those who laugh against those who are laughed at. As such, humor of whatever kind has been a good fit for—arguably, a prime catalyst in enabling—the participatory and networking aspects of contemporary convergence culture: not only does it demand to be shared but, in being so, it validates the shared sensibilities upon which online communities thrive.

But there is a question of degree here, and the case can be made that actuality footage engages those sensibilities in a uniquely prominent way. Because these texts are *comic* without being *comedy*, any attribution of humor to them becomes a particularly forceful declaration of sensibility—a potent assertion of cultural capital in which the user declares her own role in the discovery and production of the comic. Unbidden, the user’s laughter imposes the incorrigibility of its own reading; shared, the footage becomes a gambit for other users staking their claims to similar comic discernment. Actuality-based humor thus achieves a symbolic centrality

in social terms that comedy proper cannot so readily achieve; for what is at stake in such instances is not simply “funniness,” but more pertinently the agency of the user who declares her ability to repurpose texts as a gesture of sensibility. One may indeed speak of such videos, in an online context, as constituting a kind of “found-footage” comicality, in the sense in which online communities reappropriate, relabel, and recirculate material originally generated for non-humorous reasons. There is then, once again, a de-comedifying of humor, which is now freely discovered outside of the borders of generic conventions; but there is also a way in which such actuality-based videos now provide surplus value as “social activators” for the networked exercise of taste. If the indexicality of the moving image (*qua* technology of reproduction) first permitted the *capturing* of comic contingency, then the sociality of the internet (*qua* technology of distribution) has augmented its *spreadability* across the current media landscape.<sup>37</sup>

### cultural capital and comic perception in action

A particularly revealing instance of this intertwining of cultural capital and comic apprehension was provided by the recent “Worst Twerk Fail EVER” video that went viral in the late summer of 2013, generating nine million views on YouTube within a week, following its appearance on *The Jimmy Kimmel Show* on 3 September.<sup>38</sup> Circulated on the heels of the controversy generated by Miley Cyrus’s now infamous performance at that year’s MTV Video Music Awards, the YouTube clip consisted of home video footage of a young woman attempting to twerk while standing on her head, only to fall crashing down onto a coffee table, in the process setting her pants leg on fire from a tumbling candle. Initial YouTube comments included many that simply endorsed the validity of a comic reading (“lol that shit was funny,” “holy shit I almost died laughing,” etc.), a large number of sexualizing puns (“She is so HOT!”), an even larger number of puns riffing on the title of Alicia Keyes’s 2012 song “Girl on Fire,” and a number of complaints from those who refused to see the humor in an apparently dangerous accident (“Cause you know guys, people getting set on fire is really funny”).<sup>39</sup>

A week later, however, a sudden twist profoundly altered the terms of the clip’s reception: on 9 September, Kimmel revealed that he had staged the stunt with the help of a professional stuntwoman named Daphne Avalon. Kimmel gloatingly showed a montage of TV hosts whom he had successfully suckered, and then said to Avalon: “Thank you for helping us deceive the world and hopefully put an end to twerking forever.” In the wake of this revelation, the battle lines of YouTube commenters were reconfigured—not between those who found it funny and those who didn’t, but between those who knew it to be fake vs. Johnnies-come-lately unwittingly treating the film as genuine. A typical exchange would now involve one of the latter claiming their right to a comic reading (“Am

I wrong for laughing so hard? . . . lmaoooooooo”) only to be immediately disabused by throngs of others mocking their lack of savvy (“Sorry to break the news but this was fake”).<sup>40</sup>

Kimmel’s trick here was to game the presumption on which comic discrimination is practiced in actuality-based online videos; namely, that the footage has not been staged with comedic intent—that is, that it is not *comedy*—such that the perception of comicality is a function of the user’s sensibility alone. In the dispersed and anonymous culture of the internet, I have suggested, actuality footage has become a privileged site for online users seeking to assert their comic discernment; yet a hoax like Kimmel’s embarrasses such assertions by negating the faith in contingency on which they depend. One’s claim to perceive humor in real events is ruined by the revelation that one has misperceived the “reality” of those events in the first place. No doubt this is why Kimmel’s stunt was characterized as “trolling” and greeted with hostility by many users, none more extensively than *Slate* contributor Daniel Engber in a 10 September piece titled “Why We Should Be Mad at Jimmy Kimmel.” Kimmel’s fakery, Engber argued, constituted nothing less than:

a hostile, self-promoting act [. . .] rendered as ironic acid that corrodes our sense of wonder. If the Web provides a cabinet of curiosities, full of freakish baubles of humanity, the hoaxer smashes it to bits [. . .]. YouTube shows the world in all its weirdness, and gives a window on the geek sublime. When liars spread their hoggish propaganda, they mist the landscape with distrust.<sup>41</sup>

Or, as YouTube commenter TheKevinDaniel summarized more pithily: “we fell for it. Shiet.”<sup>42</sup>

### laughter in an ungoverned sphere

The media-historical two-step is clear: indexical moving images enable our perceptions of comicality to enter a space of anteriority *vis-à-vis* what cultural traditions have accumulated as comedy; new media add the platform on which those perceptions can be widely shared, contested, or even—in the case of Kimmel’s prank—undermined. Still we have to be sure that we do not too readily identify this anteriority to the conventional *forms* of comedy with any necessary deviation from humor’s conventional *functions* or *effects*. Has the media character of comic forms like early actualities or contemporary viral videos come into play in a way that facilitates genuinely alternative possibilities for humor? Certainly, it has steered laughter far beyond constraints of propriety. That the various comic forms discussed here are *not* comedies (in the case of actuality-based footage) or at



least do not present themselves as such (in the various forms of comedy *verité*) is in fact the crucial point, since it is this that provides them with the sheen of lying outside the symbolic forms that ordinarily govern representation and response. What is in all instances encouraged is a form of laughter that operates outside of considerations of decorum; that allows laughter to be directed at real-world situations in self-conscious repudiation of what would ordinarily be an appropriate response. This point is especially pertinent to an understanding of streaming viral videos that, precisely because they are consumed outside of socially coded frameworks of theatrical or television exhibition, promise all the more to deliver what Casper Hoedemaekers has termed a “‘forbidden’ dimension that elicits the thrill of illicit *jouissance*.”<sup>43</sup> That is, we know it’s wrong to laugh—at grape lady’s howls of genuine pain, at a woman’s pants apparently catching fire, at “Afro Ninja” falling flat on his face—but we feel ourselves within an “ungoverned sphere” in which we can and do laugh at these things anyway, which indiscretion becomes the source of a forbidden pleasure.<sup>44</sup> The controlling and repressive gaze of the Other has been suspended so as to produce online the space for a laughter that knowingly seeks pleasure in disregard of taboos (hence the alignment of much viral footage with an idea of “political incorrectness”).<sup>45</sup>

Here, however, it is well to remember our opening premise—that the forms and possibilities of moving image humor have as their preconditions specific media-technological constellations—and to consider whether indexical imaging technologies themselves play a role in loosening our relation to taboos. Put simply, does indexicality itself have consequences for the kinds of things we feel ourselves entitled to laugh at? Such is perhaps the implication of Wolfgang Ernst, who describes indexical imaging technologies in terms of the “cool mechanical eye,” or the “cold gaze,” to refer to that grounding property of technologically enabled vision that logically and ontologically precedes the “human” or “scenic” uses that any camera may be made to serve. “With the emergence of photography, the idea of the theatrical gaze literally staging the past [as in prior imaging techniques like, e.g., painting] is displaced by the cold mechanical eye, a technologically neutral code rather than a subjective discourse.”<sup>46</sup> What indexical media record is first of all the “noise” of the world that comes before any effort to shoehorn that noise into a system of semantic codifications. It is, moreover, precisely an awareness of this “de-subjectified” cold gaze to which the viewer is returned whenever contingency strikes. In such instances, our viewing is restored to that base-level mechanical functioning of the camera as a neutral witness that, simply in the act of recording, has “happened” to register inadvertent events. Whether generated by the Lumières’ *cinématographe* or a Logitech webcam, visual evidence of this sort is thus what Ernst describes as a “*cold medium* of the past as opposed to *hot historiography*”; it is an indexical trace, not a discourse.<sup>47</sup>



But if that is the case, then the social dynamics of actuality humor are problematized from the outset by the technological properties of its mediation. To the extent to which the cold gaze becomes a way of stepping outside a human perspective, then it also initiates a mode of perception that implies a social separation, a rupture that frees us from the ordinary proscriptions that shape our relation to people and things. The “cold gaze” of indexical media enables a machinic way of seeing utterly un beholden to social niceties. What is permitted, in such a mediation, is a separatist laughter whose object no longer has any claim to empathy or understanding; what is risked, in the process, is a power of exclusion freed to direct its derisory impulses at those who are already “other,” already excluded (again, witness the flagrantly racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic qualities of many viral videos). The irony and the danger is that actuality-based humor, so far from securing something new, is instead merely channeled back toward that zero-degree laughter that operates as a Hobbesian gesture of superiority and remove—that hostile laughter that revels in the disgrace of an “animal-like” character and that, in contemporary viral form, has been raised to a principle of relating to social reality itself.<sup>48</sup>

### beyond comedy/beyond mass culture

It is time to offer some concluding thoughts. In contrast to some two-and-a-half thousand years of basically written or theatrical comedy, the technology of moving image media announced, at the close of the nineteenth century, the arrival of a radically new kind of humor belonging to the “real,” rather than to the symbolic order of existing genres, and which has more recently been brought to a kind of fruition online. This sense of fruition obviously needs qualification: nobody, surely, would argue that the conventional genres of comedy have somehow been dispatched as modes for the enjoyment of laughter, although arguably their dominance is now more thoroughly displaced than at any previous moment in the history of moving image media. Equally, one should be cognizant of the broad array of pressures that have already begun to circumscribe online actuality humor in the present: for instance, the rise of YouTube hoaxes that, like Kimmel’s, abscond the presumption of authenticity to redirect humor at the viewer, who now becomes the “mark” in a carefully orchestrated prank; or the operations of a show like Comedy Central’s viral video compendium *Tosh.0* (2009–present), whose regular “Web Redemption” segments subordinate contingency by inviting people from embarrassing videos to provide an explanatory context for the acts depicted; or a rising generation of brand-sponsored online personalities who have begun to professionalize viral humor, using apps like the six-second Vine to distribute an ultra-compressed, pranks and skits to millions of followers. What

nonetheless remains quite singular in our contemporary media moment is the resilience of found-footage comicality against such predations: the networking properties of the internet and social media in general, which allow users to distribute content that affirms shared sensibilities, have sustained contingency-based humor far beyond its earlier media incarnations.

What can be described as the techno-epistemological paradigm of this kind of humor thus finally emerges not only as prehistory and postscript but also as an ambiguous and fraught alternative to mass cultural screen comedy. *Prehistory*, because when the Lumières offered audiences the comic pleasures of *Babies' Quarrel*, this was primarily the result of a kind of research phase into cinematic possibilities, the discovery of potentials that were not accounted for by preexisting representational forms. *Post-script*, because the contemporary digital paradigm in which streaming videos thrive is one for which the architecture of mass culture (which is mass produced and distributed for the broadest audience possible) has been challenged by the networked infrastructure of today's convergence culture (which is characterized by the grassroots circulation of media content within and among a diversity of user groups). And *alternative* because such humor has permitted the shift of accent that displaces the intention of the producer in favor of the sensibility of the user who now flouts symbolic forms and structures by finding humor in material generated with no comedic intent. It thus proves impossible to understand the history of moving image comedy without also acknowledging a counterforce, zigzagging through that history that uncovers humor not in the conventions of "comedy" per se but as a property of recorded reality. Unfortunately, it has so far proven difficult to place much faith in that alternative.

### acknowledgment

This one's for Sam and Sully. I wrote it when you used to bite my finger.

### notes

1. See, for example, Rudolph Arnheim on Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) in *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 36–37, as well as Walter Kerr's chapters "Keaton: Exploring the Gap Between Life and Lens" and "Keaton as Film" in *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 135–142, 225–235.
2. For example, it may well be the case that representational technologies lend themselves to a range of possibilities in their formative stages; but it is also true that that flexibility will typically be closed down as each medium develops toward a consensus identity. See, for instance, Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijke's "The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts: Or, How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the*

- Sociology and History of Technology*, eds. Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor J. Pinch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 17–50.
3. Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, ed. Jussi Parikka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 25.
  4. See my *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
  5. This distinction derives from Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), 15–16.
  6. The online video of course went viral: “Marco Rubio Pauses Speech for Water Break,” *YouTube* (12 February 2013): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19ZxjVnM5Gs>. Accessed 17 September 2013.
  7. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963), 177. The quoted passage is from Act V, Scene 2 of the Shakespeare play.
  8. “Leave Britney Alone!” *YouTube* (10 September 2007): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHmVnRoEowc>. Accessed 27 November 2013; “Yosemite-bear Mountain Double Rainbow 1-8-10” *YouTube* (8 January 2010): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSNhk5ICTI>. Accessed 27 November 2013.
  9. André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 67.
  10. *Ibid.*
  11. Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 37. See also <http://www.topfferiana.fr/2010/10/arroseurs-arroses>. Accessed 26 June 2014.
  12. On the “bad boy” film, see Peter Krämer, “Bad Boy: Notes on a Popular Figure in American Cinema, Culture and Society, 1895–1905,” in *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema*, ed. John Fullerton (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Press, 1998), 117–130; and Tom Gunning, “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy,” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1994), 87–105.
  13. See Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 37–44.
  14. The routine involved a large box-like device, into which puppies would be dropped and sausages come out the other end. Earlier examples include *Charcuterie mécanique* (Lumière, 1896), *The Sausage Machine* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1897), and *Fun in a Butcher Shop* (Edison, 1901).
  15. The “laughable little comedy” description is quoted in Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 141.
  16. Indeed, Gaudreault is quite explicit on this point, claiming that “Lumière’s kinematography was a continuation of photography.” Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, 87.
  17. See Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, Jr., *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 121.
  18. Vilém Flusser, *Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 23, 127; quoted and discussed in Mark Poster’s introduction to Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvi.
  19. What I have in mind are photos where widely accepted conventions of photographic representation are themselves violated, as in the case of other viral trends like awkward family photos, awkward prom photos, etc.

20. I am indebted to Paul Flaig for this observation.
21. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 180.
22. Quoted in Stephen Bottomore, "1896: Ain't It Lifelike!" *Sight and Sound* Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1982): 295.
23. See, for example, my own *The Fun Factory*, as well as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik's influential chapter "Hollywood, Comedy, and the Case of Silent Slapstick," in their *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, 96–131.
24. Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, esp. ch. 6; Rob King, "The Discourses of Art in Early Film or, Why Not Rancière?" in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, eds. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 141–162.
25. Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, 107.
26. I derive this list from Jane Gaines, "What Happened to the Philosophy of Film History?" *Film History: An International Journal* Vol. 25, No. 1–2 (2013): 74.
27. Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 180–181.
28. The term "comedification" is taken from John Limon's *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
29. See Brett Mills's essay, "Comedy Verité: Contemporary Sitcom Form," *Screen* Vol. 45, No. 1 (2004): 63–78.
30. My term "managed irregularity" is adapted from Doane's description of the chase film as a genre that "subsum[es] individual irregularity beneath the rule of aggregate regularity." Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 192.
31. Charlie Keil, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907–1913* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 85.
32. Notable other examples include *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–present), *Extras* (2005–2007), *Life's Too Short* (2011), *Derek* (2013), *Summer Heights High* (2007), *Angry Boys* (2011), and *Ja'mie: Private School Girl* (2013), and *The Comeback* (2005, 2014).
33. See Matthew Moore, "Finger-biting Brothers Become YouTube Hit," *Telegraph* (5 December 2008): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3564392/Finger-biting-brothers-become-YouTube-hit.html>. Accessed 11 November 2013. And "Harry and Charlie Davies-Carr: Web Gets Taste for Biting Baby," *The Sunday Times* (1 November 2009): [http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/ingear/tech\\_and\\_net/article189173.ece](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/ingear/tech_and_net/article189173.ece). Accessed 11 November 2013.
34. "YouTube's 50 Best Videos," *Time* (29 March 2010): [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1974961\\_1974925\\_1974954,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1974961_1974925_1974954,00.html). Accessed 21 November 2013.
35. Megh Wright, "Jokes to Go: A Guide to Mobile Comedy," *Splitsider* (18 October 2012): <http://splitsider.com/2012/10/jokes-to-go-a-guide-to-mobile-comedy>. Accessed 14 October 2013.
36. On modularity and online humor, see David Gurney, "Recombinant Comedy, Transmedial Mobility, and Viral Video," *Velvet Light Trap* No. 68 (Fall 2011): 8–9.
37. The notion of "spreadability" is derived from Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).
38. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CddMD3QqTFs>. Accessed 18 October 2013.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. Daniel Engber, "Why We Should Be Mad at Jimmy Kimmel," *Slate* (10 September 2013): [http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/09/10/worst\\_](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/09/10/worst_)

- twerk\_fail\_ever\_video\_hoax\_jimmy\_kimmel\_should\_be\_ashamed\_and\_we\_should.html. Accessed 21 October 2013.
42. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CddMD3QqTFs>. Accessed 18 October 2013.
  43. Casper Hoedemaekers, "Viral Marketing and Imaginary Ethics, or the Joke That Goes Too Far," *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2011): 176.
  44. Predating YouTube, "Afro Ninja" is a classic Internet meme depicting a stunt man who attempts a back flip during an audition for a Nike commercial: <http://www.ebaumsworld.com/video/watch/169>. Accessed 19 December 2013.
  45. The point here is Hoedemaekers'. See "Viral Marketing and Imaginary Ethics, 174.
  46. Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, 46.
  47. *Ibid.*, 47.
  48. "Animal-like" is from Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom,'" in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1985), 2.