

**THE SEVEN
LIVELY ARTS**

By
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“... But, beside those great men, there is a certain number of artists who have a distinct faculty of their own by which they convey to us a peculiar quality of pleasure which we cannot get elsewhere; and these, too, have their place in general culture, and must be interpreted to it by those who have felt their charm strongly, and are often the objects of a special diligence and a consideration wholly affectionate, just because there is not about them the stress of a great name and authority.”

—WALTER PATER

TO MY FATHER

NOTE

THIS book was written while on holiday some three thousand miles away from data, documents, and means of verification. It is written from memory and, although I have had time and have tried to check up, I feel sure that the safest thing is to let it go as cautious merchants do when they send out statements—with the *caveat*: E. and O. E.—errors and omissions excepted. I haven't tried to write a history of any of the lively arts, nor intended to mention all of those who practice them. I should, however, feel sorry if I have omitted anyone who has given me intense pleasure, even though the omission has not, in any way, the countenance of a slur.

Everything else that properly belongs in a preface has found its way into the two chapters: *The Great God Bogus* and *Before a Picture by Picasso*—and the acknowledgments are numerous and serious enough to need a place for themselves in the appendix.

G. S.

Ile St Louis — New York City
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*The Keystone the
Builders Rejected*

THE KEYSTONE THE BUILDERS REJECTED

For fifteen years there has existed in the United States, and in the United States alone, a form of entertainment which, seemingly without sources in the past, restored to us a kind of laughter almost unheard in modern times. It came into being by accident; it had no pretensions to art. For ten years or more it added an element of cheerful madness to the lives of millions and was despised and rejected by people of culture and intelligence. Suddenly—suddenly as it appeared to them—a great genius arose and the people of culture conceded that in his case, but in his case alone, art existed in slap-stick comedy; they did not remove their non expedit from the form itself.

Perhaps only those of us who care for the rest know how good Charlie is. Perhaps only the inexpressive multitudes who have laughed and not wondered why they laughed can know how fine slap-stick is. For myself, I have had no greater entertainment than these dear and preposterous comedies, and all I can do is remember. The long, dark, narrow passage set out with uncomfortable chairs; the sharp almond odours, the sense of uncertainty, and the questionable piano; and then upon the screen, in a drab grey and white, jiggling insecurely, something strange and wonderful occurred. It was mingled with dull and stupid things; but it had a fire, a driving energy of its own—and it was funny! Against all our inhibitions and habits it played

games with men and women; it made them ridiculous and mad; it seemed to have no connexion with the logic of human events, trusting to an undecipherable logic of its own. A few scholars found the commedia dell'arte living again; a few artists saw that the galvanic gestures and movements were creating fresh lines and interesting angles. And a nation cared for them intensely until the remorseless hostility of the genteel began to corrupt the purity of slapstick. That is where we are now: too early to write an epitaph—late enough to pay a tribute.

LEST the year 1914 should be not otherwise distinguished in history, it may be recorded that it was then, or a year earlier, or possibly a year later, that the turning point came in the history of the American moving picture. The first of the great mergers arrived—an event not unforeseen in itself, a “logical development” the press agents called it—seeming to establish the picture as a definitely accepted form of entertainment. It was a moment when a good critic might have foretold the course of the moving picture during the next decade, for at that time the Triangle of Fine Arts (D. W. Griffith), Kay-Bee (Thomas H. Ince), and Keystone (Mack Sennett) was formed. Two of these names were already known, and of the two one was to become, for a time, the most notable name in the profession; the third was hidden behind the obscure symbol of the Keystone; it represented one who had acted in, and was now directing, the most despised, and by all odds the most interesting, films produced in America. Mr Griffith was already entered on that road which has since ruined him as a director; he was producing *Intolerance*, and, if I may borrow a phrase from the Shuberts, his personal supervision was not always given to the Triangle-Fine Arts releases; Mr Ince was presently to meditate

upon the possibility of joining the word “super” to the word “spectacle,” thus creating the word “superspectacle”; and Mr Sennett—by a process of exclusion one always arrives at Mr Sennett. He is the Keystone the builders rejected.

I know nothing more doleful as a subject of conversation than the social-economics of the moving picture; what was remarkable about the Triangle was not its new method of distribution, its new hold on the timid exhibitor, or its capacity for making or losing fortunes. The thing to note is that the two “serious” producers, and the hard-headed business men who invested money in their efforts, thought it well to associate with themselves the best producer of vulgar slap-stick comedy. More than that, they combined in a peculiar ratio for the scheme provided that there was to be released each week either a Fine Arts or an Ince picture; and that with each of these was to be shown a Keystone comedy. So that those who were perpetually being caught in the rain, or missing the eleven-o’clock from Philadelphia to New York, saw twice as many Keystone comedies as (a) Fine Arts or (b) Kay-Bee releases. The recent all-hailing of Mr Chaplin as an artist because of his work in *The Kid*, the bright young reputations of Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton, indicate that most critics of the moving picture caught the train and missed the shower. They certainly missed the comedies; for the Fine Arts and Ince pictures were in their time the best pictures produced; and the Keystone comedies were consistently and almost without exception better.

This is not the place to discuss the shortcomings of the feature film; for the moment, let the dreadful opulent gentility of a Cecil De Mille production serve only to sharpen the saucy gaiety of the comic, the dulness of a Universal set off the revelry of slap-stick. There is one serious point which a good critic (Aristotle, for

example) would have discovered when he regarded the screen as long ago as 1914 and became aware of the superiority of the comic films. He would have seen at once that while Mr Griffith and Mr Ince were both developing the technique of the moving picture, they were exploiting their discoveries with materials equally or better suited to another medium: the stage or the dime novel or whatever. Whereas Mr Sennett was already so enamoured of his craft that he was doing with the instruments of the moving picture precisely those things which were best suited to it—those things which could not be done with any instrument but the camera, and could appear nowhere if not on the screen.

This does not mean that nothing but slap-stick comedy is proper to the cinema; it means only that everything in slap-stick *is* cinematographic; and since perceiving a delicate adjustment of means to end, or a proper relation between method and material, is a source of pleasure, Mr Sennett's developments were more capable of pleasing the judicious than those of either of his two fellow-workers. The highly logical humanist critic of the films could have foreseen in 1914—without the decade of trial and error which has intervened—what we see now: that the one field in which the picture would most notably declare itself a failure would be that of the drama (Elinor Glyn-Cecil De Mille-Gilbert Parker, in short). Without a moment's hesitation he would have put his finger on those two elements in the cinema which, being theoretically sound, had a chance of practical success: the spectacle (including the spectacular melodrama) and the grotesque comedy. Several years later he would have added one word more, that grotesque tragedy might conceivably succeed. For it is not only the fun in the Keystones which makes them successful: it is the method of presentation.

The rightness of the spectacle film is implicit in its name: the screen is a place on which things can be *seen*, and so long as a film depends upon the eye it is right for the screen—and whether it is right in any other regard depends upon taste and judgment and skill. Omit as irrelevant the news reels, animated cartoons, educational and travel films—all of them good; omit equally those printed jokes and clippings from the *Literary Digest* which are at once the greatest trial *and* error of the screen. What remains? The feature film and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. This—the only film of high fantasy I have ever seen—is the seeming exception which proves the rule, since it owes its success to the skilfully concealed exploitation of the materials and technique of the spectacle and of the comic film, and not to the dramatic quality of its story. The studio settings in distortion represent the spectacle; they are variations of scenery or “location”; the chase over the roofs is a psychological parallel to the Keystone cops; and the weak moment of this superb picture is that in which the moving picture always fails, in the double revelation at the end, like that of *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, representing “drama.”

No. The drama film is almost always wrong, the slap-stick almost always right; and it is divinely just that the one great figure of the screen should have risen out of the Keystone studios. He came too early; Chaplin spoiled nearly everything else for us, and he is always used by those who dislike slap-stick to prove their case. Their case, regrettably, is in a fair way to be proved, for slap-stick is in danger. The hypothetical critic mentioned above has not yet occurred; Mr Bushnell Dimond, the best actual critic of the movies, is without sympathy for Mack Sennett and calls him a Bourbon, in the sense of one who forgets nothing and learns less. What Mr Sennett has needed long since is encouragement and criticism; and

stupid newspaper critics (who write half-columns about a new Gloria Swanson picture and add “the comedy which ends the bill is *Down in the Sewer*”) have left slap-stick wholly without direction.¹ At the same time the tradition of gentility, the hope of being “refined,” has touched the grotesque comedy; its directors have heard abuse and sly remarks about custard pies so long that they have begun to believe in them, and the madness which is a monstrous sanity in the movie comedy is likely to die out. The moving picture is being prettified; the manufacturers and exhibitors are growing more and more pretentious, and the riot of slap-stick seems out of place in a “presentation” which begins with the overture to *Tannhäuser*, and includes a baritone from the imperial opera house in Warsaw singing *Indian Love Lyrics* in front of an art curtain. In Paris there are one or two Chaplin films visible nearly every day; in New York the Rialto Theatre alone seems to make a habit of Chaplin revivals and of putting its comic feature in the electric sign. The Capitol, the largest, and rapidly becoming the most genteel, of moving picture palaces (but who ever heard of an opera palace?) frequently announces a programme of seven or eight items without a comedy among them; and you have to go to squalid streets and disreputable neighborhoods if you want to see Chaplin regularly. He could ask for no finer tribute, to be sure; but it is not much to our credit that the greatest mimic of our time has no theatre named after him, that it was in Berlin, not in Chicago or New York, that the first Chaplin festival took place, and that *Tillie’s Punctured Romance*, a film intensely important in his development, was last billed in a converted auction room on the lower East Side of New York, where Broadway would find it vulgar.

There were always elements in the Keystone which jeopardized its future—it lacked variety, it was often dull, its lapses of taste were serious. (I transfer the name of Keystone to the *genre* of which it was the most notable example; it was for long, and may still be, superior to most of the others.) But, while there is still time, its miraculously good qualities can be caught and possibly preserved. The ideal comedy of Mack Sennett is a fairly standardized article; too much so, perhaps, but the elements are sound. They include a simple, usually preposterous plot, frequently a burlesque of a serious play; more important are the characters, grotesque in bulk, form, or make-up; and, finally, the events which have as little connexion with the plot as, say, a clog dance in a musical comedy. In the early days of the Keystone, it is said, the plot was almost nonexistent in advance, and developed out of the set and the props. The one which was called, in revival, *The Pile Driver*, must have been such a film, for its plot is that two men meet a pretty girl near a river and they find a huge mallet. It is a film full of impromptus—not very brilliant ones, as a matter of fact—in which Sennett and Chaplin and Mabel Normand each occasionally give flashes of their qualities. A few years later you see the same thing when the trick of working up a film from the material in hand has become second nature. *His Night Out* presents Ben Turpin and Charlie Chaplin as equal comedians: two men on a drinking party, stumbling into a luxurious hotel, reverting automatically to the saloon from which they have been thrown, mutually assisting and hindering each other in a serious effort to do something they cannot define, but which they feel to be of cosmic importance. Later, one finds a more sophisticated kind of comic. *Bright Eyes* has to do with a gawky young man, reputed rich, received into a wealthy family, engaged to the daughter, denounced as an impostor, reduced to the kitchen, flirting there with the maid,

restored to favour, and, nobly refusing the daughter's hand, marrying the maid. Here Ben Turpin had good moments, but much of the gaiety of the film depended upon Chester Conklin (or one who much resembles him) as another servant in the house, bundling himself up in furs like Peary in the Arctic, bidding farewell at an imaginary outpost of civilization, and striding into—a huge refrigerator, to bring back a ham before the adoring eyes of the cook.

The comic film is by nature adventurous and romantic, and I think what endears it to us is that the adventure is picaresque and the romance wholly unsentimental—that is, both are pushed to the edge of burlesque. For the romance you have a love affair, frequently running parallel to a parody of itself. The hero is marked by peculiarities of his own: the Chaplin feet, the Hank Mann bang and sombre eyes, the Turpin squint, the Arbuckle bulk; against these oddities and absurdities plays the serene, idle beauty of a simple girl (Edna Purviance or Mabel Normand in her lovely early days), and only on occasions a comic in her own right like Louise Fazenda or Polly Moran. In some five hundred slap-stick comedies I do not remember one single moment of sentimentality; and it seems to me that every look and gesture of false chivalry and exaggerated devotion has been parodied there. The characteristic moment, after all, is when the comedy is ended, and just as the hero is about to kiss the heroine he winks broadly and ironically at the spectators. Our whole tradition of love is destroyed and outraged in these careless comedies; so also our tradition of heroism. And since the moving picture, quite naturally, began by importing the whole baggage of the romantic and sentimental novel and theatre, the moving-picture comedy has at last arrived at burlesquing its silly-serious half-sister. Two years before *Merton*

of the Movies appeared, Mack Sennett, with the help of Ben Turpin's divinely crossed eyes, had consummated a burlesque of Messrs Griffith, Ince, and Lubitsch, in *A Small Town Idol*, far more destructively, be it said, than Chaplin in his *Carmen*, and with a vaster fun than *Merton*.

Everything incongruous and inconsequent has its place in the unrolling of the comic film: love and masquerade and treachery; coincidence and disguise; heroism and knavishness; all are distorted, burlesqued, exaggerated. And—here the camera enters—all are presented at an impossible rate; the culmination is in the inevitable struggle and the conventional pursuit, where trick photography enters and you see the immortal Keystone cops in their flivver, mowing down hundreds of telegraph poles without abating their speed, dashing through houses or losing their wheels and continuing, blown to bits and reassembled in midair; locomotives running wild, yet never destroying the cars they so miraculously send spinning before them; airplanes and submarines in and out of their elements—everything capable of motion set into motion; and at the height of the revel, the true catastrophe, the solution of the preposterous and forgotten drama, with the lovers united under the canopy of smashed motor cars, or the gay feet of Mr Chaplin gently twinkling down the irised street.

And all of this is done *with the camera, through action* presented to the eye. The secret of distortion is in the camera, and the secret of pace in the projector. Regard them for a moment, regard the slap-stick as every moment explains itself, and then go to the picture palace and spend one-third of your time reading the flamboyancies of C. Gardner Sullivan and another third watching the contortions of a famous actress as she “registers” an emotion which action and photography should present directly, and you will

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