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| **Slapstick Comedy** |
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| The term “slapstick comedy” refers to film comedies in which the humor relies upon physical gags and stunts. The slapstick—a wooden paddle to which a second piece of wood was attached by means of a hinge—was a tool of the Italian *commedia dell’arte*. When swung against an actor’s body, it made a loud thwacking noise that helped to emphasize an act of stage violence. |
| File: Keystone Kops.pdf  1 Image of the Keystone Kops  The term “slapstick comedy” refers to film comedies in which the humor relies upon physical gags and stunts. The slapstick—a wooden paddle to which a second piece of wood was attached by means of a hinge—was a tool of the Italian *commedia dell’arte*. When swung against an actor’s body, it made a loud thwacking noise that helped to emphasize an act of stage violence. Like the instrument to which it owes its name, slapstick film comedy derives from the popular stage. In the United States, this was the short-lived tradition of vaudeville, a form of live variety entertainment consisting of musical numbers, acrobatics, monologuists, and untold other miscellaneous acts. In England, such acts toured as part of the tradition of the music hall. Many of the physical comedians of the popular stage found their way to the cinema. These include the famous four slapstick comedians of the silent era—Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, and Harold Lloyd—as well as less well-remembered comedians like Ben Turpin, Charley Chase, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, and Marie Dressler, as well as comedians such as W. C. Fields and Stan Laurel, who found success after the adoption of synchronized sound.  File: <https://archive.org/details/filmcollectief-01-680>  2 Harry Langdon, *The Capture of Cactus Cal* (1925)  File: <https://archive.org/details/W.c.Fields-TheDentist>  3 W. C. Fields, *The Dentist* (1932)  Although early gag films such as *L’Arroseur arrosé* (Lumière, 1895) seem retrospectively to belong to the history of slapstick comedy, the genre achieved formal and popular recognition in the studio of Mack Sennett, the Keystone Film Company. The silent comedians who came after Sennett crafted films that incorporated the increasingly narrative form of the popular cinema while at the same time preserving the pantomime and acrobatics of the stage.  File: Mack Sennet Studio.pdf  4 Image of Mack Sennett’s Studios  After the adoption of synchronized sound in the late 1920s, the formal devices of slapstick comedy were largely absorbed into other film genres. The tradition is still operative today in the work of comedians such as Jim Carrey, Will Ferrell, and Melissa McCarthy, as well as in less narrative-driven material like the *Jackass* television series and movies and in innumerable amateur videos on the internet.  File: The Scrublady.pdf  5 Marie Dressler in *The Scrublady*  As this history would suggest, much of the most interesting scholarship on slapstick comedy has sought to understand the relationship between slapstick comedy and narrative. In Donald Crafton’s influential account, the slapstick gag constitutes an interruption in the horizontal force of film narrative, anarchically stopping the orderly progression of story. In his history of Keystone, Rob King has documented Sennett’s attempt to infuse early slapstick comedy with the narrative characteristics of other film genres. Still other scholars have sought to understand the relationship between slapstick, machines, and the devices of film narrative.  File: <https://archive.org/details/TheShriekOfAraby1921BenTurpin>  6 Ben Turpin, *The Shriek of Araby* (1921)  Interestingly, many modernist filmmakers have found in slapstick a means of escaping from the constraints of conventional film narrative. Luis Buñuel’s surrealist *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) displays the formal devices of slapstick film comedy; the influence of Jerry Lewis is evident in certain films of Jean-Luc Godard; and—perhaps most enigmatically—Samuel Beckett’s *Film* (1965) charges Buster Keaton with enacting the philosophical relationship between subject and object. |
| Further reading:  (Agee)  (Crafton)  (Dale)  (Karnick)  (King)  (Krutnik)  (Paulus)  (Shaviro) |