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*Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film* by  
Kristen Anderson Wagner, and: *Specters of Slapstick and  
Silent Film Comediennes* by Maggie Hennefeld (review)

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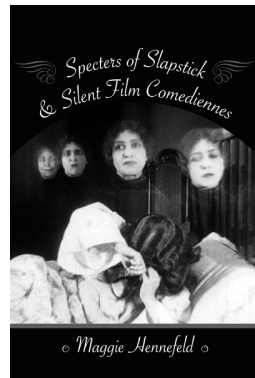
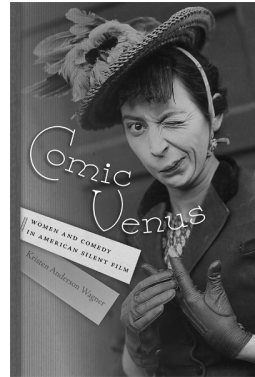
By Kristen Anderson Wagner. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018. 303 pp.

*Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes.*

By Maggie Hennefeld. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 358 pp.

REVIEWED BY DIEGO A. MILLAN

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Both Kristen Anderson Wagner's *Comic Venus* and Maggie Hennefeld's *Specters of Slapstick* make a necessary corrective to scholarship on film comedy performances by examining comedienne contributions from the early silent film era. A focus on major male comic silent film actors like Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin has overshadowed the work of comediennes, especially slapstick comediennes, who have been "virtually erased" from popular memory (Wagner, *Comic Venus*, 1). Hennefeld's and Wagner's efforts to correct the error of these discursive erasures also succeed in highlighting how many comedic and filmic techniques remain indebted to silent-era comediennes. More than projects anchored in recovery, each insists that scholars wrestle with understanding how popular culture relates to power and gender normativity. Perennial questions concerning women's capacity for humor, for instance, reify essentialist notions of femininity and contribute to the casual manner in which women's comedic efforts get disparaged and thus, excluded from histories of comedy and film. The denial of women's humor, Wagner argues, "is essentially a denial and suppression of women's social and cultural power" (3). While *Comic Venus* keeps these broader cultural concerns and feminist discourses in mind, *Specters of Slapstick* foregrounds how these feminist interventions relate to theories of comedy and laughter more explicitly. Hennefeld examines the overlooked nuances of female slapstick comedy in early cinema and in so doing engages

feminist film criticism, comedy, and film history itself. Feminist film critics, she observes, are hesitant about comedy's ability to enact long-lasting change, especially given the myriad ways in which women have served as the butt of jokes and the object of sight gags. Hennefeld argues that a more rigorous engagement with the many representations, developments, and bodily transformations that slapstick comediennes underwent from 1894 through the late 1910s is a necessary step in understanding their significance within film history, gender politics, and protest.

Wagner organizes *Comic Venus* across an introduction, four body chapters, and a conclusion. Her chapters focus on tropes of female humor, beauty standards, explorations of desire adaptability to modern life by comediennes. Throughout, she juxtaposes three related comic genres and shows how each relates to that chapter's focus. "Light" comedies feature fewer physical gags and greater narrative cohesion and gained a greater market share during the transitional period (1907-15). Flapper comedies engage in bawdy humor and sexually suggestive situations. The third genre, slapstick, includes the most uproarious gags and physical comedy. Chapter 1, "Have Women a Sense of Humor?," unpacks the enduring, sexist tradition that maintains that women are unfunny. Rather than simply disprove the stereotype, something her extensive archival research achieves implicitly, Wagner "interrogate[s] this line of thinking, to uncover what, specifically, about femininity is thought to be antithetical to comedy" (29). She concludes that a comedienne's identification with comedy, and with being funny, refuses sexist discourses that position funny women as antithetical to notions of refined femininity (71).

In addition to stereotypes about women not being funny, film comediennes faced strict beauty standards, which Wagner discusses in chapter 2, "An Inferiority Complex in a One-Piece Bathing Suit': Beauty, Femininity, and Comedy." Appearance guidelines often dictated comedienne performances, the roles she could acquire, and marketing. Nevertheless, comediennes staged a subtle rejection of beauty standards as part of their comic practice by actively downplaying or masking their looks with costume and makeup. The variability of appearance—conventionally attractive women playing homelier women or making use of narrative tropes about makeovers/transformations—"served as a means of questioning the concepts of idealized beauty and femininity" for movie-going audiences (107). Against double standards that inevitably reify beauty ideals, Wagner imagines

alternative ways to interpret these films, finding spaces in which comediennes can express their agency and, as her third chapter elaborates, access their desires.

“Cupid Lips and an Ungodly Appetite’: Sensuality, Sexuality, and Desire” centers the physicality of comedienne performances and how they “presented a powerful endorsement of female sensuality” (135). Each of the comedic genres under consideration (light, flapper, and slapstick) featured some version of sexually desirous or sensuous women. Collectively, flapper films and light comedies “make an argument for female sexuality as fun and natural” and a part of increased heterosocial connections happening in modern cities (134). Meanwhile, slapstick comediennes “presented women with an opportunity to test the boundaries of socially acceptable relations between the sexes and revel in bodily pleasures in ways unseen in other genres” through the rough-and-tumble antics they performed (134). Altogether, comediennes represented a spectrum of how to inhabit and negotiate sexuality. The chapter ends with “moments of intriguing queer possibility” found in films containing gender reversals and comic situations brought about by cross-dressing (177). Genre conventions dictated the restoration of normative gender roles, yet Wagner posits that the disruptive effect of these films endured past their end, inspiring audiences to challenge such rigid norms in their own lives.

Chapter 4, “Ever on the Move: Modernity and the New Woman,” examines how comediennes’ quick wit, flexibility, and general good humor represented a triumphant model for navigating modern cityscapes. Comic art on film emerges as ideal for de-terrifying not only modern technologies but also the subjective precarity that is a condition of modernity itself. “In the comedy universe *everything* is unstable,” Wagner writes, “including technology, industry, institutions such as marriage and family, the government (particularly the police), and even the laws of physics and physiology” (190, emphasis in the original). At the center of this commotion were comediennes, whose energy and capacity to withstand the world with an elastic resilience refigured modern technologies as potential sources of pleasure. Tightening the theoretical underpinnings of this claim, Wagner combines Martin Heidegger’s description of “lostness”—the idea that sensation precedes cognition with no overlap—and the potential antidote of a “sensual present” to the visceral sensations experienced by comediennes moving through films. Audience laughter becomes a way to experience the sensual

present vicariously and thereby navigate their own experiences of modern alienation.

Wagner concludes her book on silent film comedienne, as one might expect, with the introduction of sound technology in 1927, which she juxtaposes with the stock market crash of 1929. The crash, she offers, altered the cultural landscape and the types of films produced as much as the introduction of sound. Comic performers were not as adaptable to sound technologies as dramatic actors; additionally, flapper actresses and their fanciful style faced difficulties because they “represented an earlier era, one that increasingly seemed out of place” (234). Slapstick comedienne fared better than other silent-era counterparts, a fact Wagner attributes to the “flexibility and fluidity of their screen personalities” compared to a narrower set of roles that flapper and light comedienne could play (237).

The seemingly infinite elasticity of slapstick comedienne that served them so well in later decades was also central to the animating features of slapstick films—a claim Maggie Hennefeld’s *Specters of Slapstick* explores extensively. The rough-and-tumble humor with sharp turns and fewer expectations of narrative cohesion demanded a type of pliable, elastic performer who could be exploded, stretched, miniaturized, and otherwise decomported to serve the genre. Showing how prolific slapstick comedienne were and how many comic expectations and performances were specifically gendered, Hennefeld poses significant challenges to foundational ideas about the slapstick genre and its gendered conventions that extend beyond the period she explores (1894-1919). Throughout, Hennefeld’s thoughtful reflections on theories of humor flesh out not only her discussions of slapstick but also the fraught relation between what makes us laugh and feminism.

Hennefeld organizes the seven chapters of her book across three sections. Part 1, “Early Film Combustion,” comprises two chapters on early slapstick films (1894-1906) that feature “violent upheavals of female corporeality” such as spontaneous combustion, instantaneous births, and other rapid transformations meant to provoke laughter. Chapter 1, “Early Cinema and the Comedy of Female Catastrophe,” juxtaposes a moment of female combustion in the film *Mary Jane’s Mishap* (1903) with real-life cases of women’s clothing catching fire due to enlarged hoop skirts made of flammable crinoline. Hennefeld links spectator laughter at feminine fashion and modern living to how “the comedy of female catastrophe finds its source materials in the everyday dangers of female embodiment” (35). Yet what is it about

female combustion or catastrophe that provokes laughter, and what does the answer to this say about gender politics? Hennefeld proposes that “laughter at gendered bodily upheaval in early accident films is often a hair’s breadth away from the terror of sexual violence and domestic assault” (45). Building on this suggestion, chapter 1 concludes with instances in which the comic “leap” indexes survival tactics for foiling sexual aggressors and other predatory behavior; the spontaneous combustion of a comic device going off unexpectedly is replaced by “the image of women repurposing everyday things to ward off sexual abuse” (53). Hennefeld’s second chapter, “Female Combustion and Feminist Film Historiography,” extends these insights concerning gender politics and transformation to established trends in film history. According to Hennefeld, female combustion and bodily disarticulation produced experimental narrative devices that were integral to the evolution of filmmaking’s storytelling grammars.

The changing landscape of narrative storytelling during the transitional period (1907-15) exemplifies this relationship, which serves as both the historical backdrop and thematic focus for part two of the book, “Transitional Film Metamorphosis.” The transitional period, during which there was increase in the types of films starring comediennes, gave shape to the film industry as it became an effective vehicle for storytelling. In charting a tidier story about the growing use of narrative in film and industry standardization, historical and critical conversations often leave out the more experimental trick films of the period. The result is a critical consensus that ignores “issues of female corporeality and gendered slapstick violence, particularly as they pertain to practices of film narration” (113). Chapter 3, “Slapstick Comediennes in Transitional Cinema,” illuminates how violence remains an underlying component of slapstick despite demands within the industry for greater narrative clarity. What ties together the many filmic tropes Hennefeld examines is how narrative expectations deemphasize material concerns and vacate any expected sympathies for wronged women and their respective plights. As a part of this deemphasis, film conventions emerged that sought to contain slapstick female corporeality, which resulted in alternative modes of expression that skirted them (107). One such alternative mode is the use of facial expressions, which appear with greater frequency due to the incorporation of close-ups into standard film technique. When narrative expectations forced the body to comport itself, the face became the space for greater expression.

The discussion of facial versus bodily expression also reveals at a micro level how material techniques and aesthetics in filmmaking relate to cultural and social contexts. Chapter 4, "The Geopolitics of Transitional Film Comedy," takes this idea and considers its international valences by juxtaposing two leading film companies: American Vitagraph and the French Pathé-Frères. While Vitagraph played the conservative, bourgeois counterpoint to Pathé's more experimental trick films, Vitagraph's "stylistic diversity" includes more than just the films that have been traditionally studied (111). Significantly, Hennefeld redefines "transitional" in a way that does not privilege a historical timeline and progression across film styles; instead, she considers how both companies' treatment of women's bodies facilitated the changing landscape of film itself. In her words, both companies "played with women's bodies as if they were lab rats," consolidating their differing house styles as the geopolitical economies of film developed (113).

If chapter 4 offers an international scope comprised of many players in its reading of film history and the role of female corporeality, chapter 5 provides a focused analysis of one filmmaker: D.W. Griffith. This chapter, "D.W. Griffith's Slapstick Comediennes," analyzes Griffith's early film work, in which one finds a greater amount of slapstick-inflected melodrama and aesthetic variety than in his later work that together constitute a formative branch of Griffith's cinematic grammar. "Female performances in Griffith's films function," much as they do in the films produced by the companies explored in the previous chapter, "as sounding boards for his own articulation of film syntax" (144). These overlooked elements of his earlier films put into relief Griffith's lionized status as progenitor of film techniques. For example, Hennefeld points out how his films use excessive female corporeality "to act out bodily what [the films] struggle to express visually" (163). Given the breadth of materials Hennefeld surveys, this focus on one director provides a change of pace from other chapters. Overall, Hennefeld's attention to the relationship between technical form and social context in these middle chapters successfully revises the position of women in relation to the transitional period and clears a path for how scholars should approach this period moving forward.

Part 3, "Feminist Slapstick Politics," underscores the prominence of and ambivalences concerning suffragette movements in both the United States and United Kingdom. Whether the films were for or against women's suffrage (and inevitably, they were one or the other), in presenting the real-life violence visited on suffragettes, these films functioned as a "cultural

mediator between escalating feminist protests and their sensationalist media depictions" (213). US comedies, the focus of chapter 6, arguably played a role defusing social tensions insofar as they were a place where "the political potentials and social consequences of feminism were . . . imagined and episodically resolved through film-spectator laughter" (175). Chapter 7, "Radical Militancy and Slapstick Political Violence," looks to the UK and the relationship between slapstick corporeality and radical feminist protest tactics. Hennefeld uses a growing split between militants and reformists to dilate a conversation on politics, aggression, and laughter. She links the possibility of revolutionary laughter to feminist justice via the temporal assertion of the future perfect: "Revolution always has the capacity to become funny," she writes; "it appeals to a humorous temporality by asserting a future that has yet to emerge" (227). Revolutionary laughter sometimes remains at arm's length for some, however, especially when the comic aspects have failed to enact change. Yet, it is here that Hennefeld connects radical suffragette tactics and slapstick comedy insofar as both figure female corporeality as a tool for disruption: "Militants inherited the necessity of their own annihilation and transformed it beyond a cultural weapon into a corporeal tactic" (228).

Read as a pair or individually, *Comic Venus* and *Specters of Slapstick* compel readers to take seriously the contributions of silent-film-era comediennes. These two books are essential resources for anyone researching this era of film comedy moving forward. As if to help in that, each has an appendix that provides extensive annotated filmographies covering films both examined and not. These filmographies represent the vastness of comedienne contributions to silent film that have yet to be considered and serve as an invaluable resource for future research on comedy, film, and gender politics.

DIEGO A. MILLAN is Assistant Professor of English and Africana Studies at Washington and Lee University. His research gathers at the intersection of Black Studies, theories of laughter, and Black diasporic literature. He is completing his first book, tentatively titled "Laughter's Fury: The Double-Bind of Black Laughter," which examines the cultural politics and critical traditions that structure the racialization of laughter. Work from this project is forthcoming in a special issue on Nella Larsen's *Passing* in the *South Atlantic Review*.