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Seeing the World While Staying at Home: Slapstick, Modernity and American-ness

Amanda R. Keeler

Between 14 January 1915 and 22 April 1915, Mabel Normand and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle released six films in the "Mabel and Fatty" series for Keystone Films, including *Mabel and Fatty's Wash Day*, *Mabel and Fatty's Simple Life*, *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition*, *Mabel, Fatty and the Law*, *Mabel and Fatty's Married Life*, and *Mabel and Fatty Viewing the World's Fair at San Francisco*. A year later they made a seventh film in the same series titled *Fatty and Mabel Adrift*, longer and more elaborate than the previous six mentioned.ⁱ Throughout the 1910s Normand and Arbuckle made numerous films together outside of the seven discussed in this essay, but I choose to examine these films for several reasons. For one, that these films share similar titles clearly suggests that they were intended as a series. For another, they form both a diegetic and non-diegetic relationship to one another, between the characters in the films and through their production company, Keystone. As a whole the series also speaks directly to questions of national identity. Lastly, the seven films are connected by genre, as slapstick films, with the associated fare of bodies acting out, propelling themselves through the air and water, wildly down streets and sidewalks, over rooftops, and in automobiles. Aside from these similarities, however, the films diverge

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thematically into two categories – five domestic situation comedies and two exposition films – each group with distinct and provocative elements. This essay intends to show how each sub-group examines national identity in relation to modernity and how the films are situated in the greater American society through their subject matter and setting.

Do the “Mabel and Fatty” films complicate existing accounts of early cinema’s engagement with American identity? In “The ‘Imagined Community’ of the Western,” Richard Abel makes a compelling argument for the western genre’s inclusion and participation in American national identity formation. Abel writes that his “overall aim is to argue for the significance of the western – a crucial instance of what Miriam Hansen has called the ‘new sensibility’ of ‘action’ that characterized American modernity – to a discussion of the intersection of those long-contested cultural artifacts of historical consciousness – *genre* and *nation* – in the ‘transitional era’ of cinema in the United States.”ⁱⁱ Abel’s argument for the western’s significance rests on its popularity in the transitional era and thus its implicit and explicit participation in the contested genre/nation debate. I cite Abel at length not to challenge his notions of the western as the primary genre that helped shape American identity in this time period but because his analysis also speaks to some tendencies of slapstick films, the spaces they occupy, and their own participation in the construction and reflection of national identity.

In terms of numbers, the popularity of slapstick films matches that of the western in the early 1910s in the USA. As Abel notes in *Red Rooster Scare*, “by 1910 one in five films produced by American film companies were westerns.”ⁱⁱⁱ Eileen Bowser cites similar statistics for comedic films: in the same year comedy releases accounted for one in five films as well.^{iv} In his analysis of “new humor,” Henry Jenkins writes, “by 1912 ... some forty comic films a week were being released into the country for exhibition in nickelodeons, making comedy the largest single genre in early cinema.”^v With these numbers in mind, it seems important to question the extent to which comedy, specifically slapstick comedy, along with the western, was also influential in constructing and reflecting American national identity during the early to middle 1910s. In addition to these numbers, another reason for including slapstick in the discussion of genre and identity formation

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comes from Miriam Hansen's argument of a "new sensibility, to be found in particular genres...with their emphasis on action" characteristic of American modernism.^{vi} If the slapstick film (one of Hansen's examples) also is especially marked by "action," then its significance should be considered as well.

The five domestic "Mabel and Fatty" comedies all are located in a similar setting that functions much like early situation comedy. Although, as Jenkins writes, the emergence of the Keystone Studios in 1912 and the resulting popularity of their films generally ran counter to the overall industry's move towards producing films that appealed to "middle-class viewers," these five "Mabel and Fatty" films allowed Keystone to maintain its successful slapstick formula while also appealing to a wider audience. The "slapstick" remained intact, but the overt emphasis was on middle-class values and sentiments.

The first film produced in this series, *Mabel and Fatty's Wash Day*, follows the two title characters doing exactly what the title suggests—household chores. Incidentally, *Wash Day* is the only film in the series that Normand and Arbuckle's characters are not married or engaged to one another; instead, they are neighbors, brought together by their proximity. I categorize this film and the four others under the rubric of domestic comedy because of their settings. All are situated in domestic spaces: the home or farm, usually in a rural landscape, with brief comic interludes outside these spaces. The films also depict the plight of romantic love in relation to familial obligations. In both *Mabel and Fatty's Simple Life* and *Mabel and Fatty Adrift*, Mabel refuses to marry a suitor because she is in love with Fatty, despite the suitor's offer of money and land to her parents. As in the western, the Mabel and Fatty films frequently include scenes full of activity and action, shot in outdoor spaces. Instead of the wide, open spaces of the western, however, these are relatively structured outdoor spaces: parks, fenced in farmyards, dusty but well defined roads, and docks. The rural landscape, especially in *Simple Life*, is depicted as quiet and calm, with a serenity repeatedly disrupted by Fatty and Mabel, who are both depicted as young, playful and generally apt to not follow the everyday routine of their elders. The dominant American society evoked in these films is one of tradition, a blind acceptance of older ways of life (and fear of the new), of children expected to run the farm after their parents can no longer manage, but challenged by youth

who refuse to marry for financial obligations or to stay on the farm, as depicted in *Mabel and Fatty Adrift*.

As with cinema itself as a medium, an apparatus that is at once modernity on display while projecting the same, these films show a fascination with the modern, with moving forward and moving on. In *Mabel and Fatty's Simple Life* the young couple runs away together to escape an arranged marriage. They flee the poverty-stricken farm in a stolen automobile and are chased by an inept police force: the power of new technology is here aligned with youth, while the older and perhaps less wise father and police officers are relegated to travel by bicycle. This display of modernity is further highlighted in an elaborate slapstick sequence with a car that drives itself and three sleeping police officers unexpectedly roused by the noise of gunfire. There is a tie in to consumer culture as well within the depictions of modern household objects. In *Mabel and Fatty's Wash Day* Mabel is lured to Fatty's yard by his laundry wringer, a device that Mabel lacks, and her flirtations lead him to let her borrow it. In their last film in the series, *Mabel and Fatty Adrift*, the young couple receives a cottage as a wedding present from Mabel's parents. Not only does this new cottage move them away from her parent's farm to a seaside location, it is also depicted as a treasured object, with modern conveniences, although Mabel is unable to employ them properly, failing to produce edible biscuits for their dinner. These films rely on the humor of the everyday, such as Mabel's inability to bake, a humor that comes at her expense— not only at her failure to succeed in traditional domesticity but also at her inability to use these new objects effectively. Interestingly, although these films in one way or another both display and challenge modernity, they do so by using the stock character of the "rube." This character type's presence can be seen as an antithesis to the modern world of consumer goods, another version of the "old" versus "new" binary. Additionally, the use of the "rube" character type works to root these films in the tradition of previous slapstick films more traditionally located in rural settings.

Not only do objects in these films represent American modernization in process, but so do attitudes and practices. Idealized romantic love in *Mabel and Fatty's Simple Life* manifests itself in the rejection of the old (Mabel's father's authority over her) and the adoption of the new (Mabel's marriage to Fatty despite her father's

objections). In *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* the purchase of a cottage as Mabel's wedding gift shifts the family from poor farm laborers to middle class homeowners. At the same time, the films explore and negotiate tensions between youth and old age, new and old traditions, anxieties between the urban and rural, and authority and free will, all matters pertaining to the American experience in the culturally fluid years of the early 20th century. The "Mabel and Fatty" series represents a whole generation in the so-called progressive era, Americans workers who, according to historian Michael McGerr, were in search of "More safety for the home, more justice and power for women, more uniform opportunities and experiences for different classes, more external control and regulation."^{vii} [fig. 1]

In the five films discussed thus far, Mabel and Fatty enjoy a close relationship. In all but one film, *Mabel and Fatty's Wash Day*, the title characters are either married or engaged. The use of stock characters creates a sense of stability that allows the situations and actions of the story to be more fluid. Mabel and Fatty are free to partake in comic adventures and innocent extra-marital flirtations precisely because they are solidly fixed in their onscreen marriage, a filmic relationship that would perhaps have been deemed appropriate and acceptable by the progressivists. The audiences' presumed familiarity with these stock characters also eliminates any desire for character development, instead focusing attention on their comic adventures and the playful treatment of the greater society at work in the films. In this way the films deal with offbeat subject matter, under the guise of comedy, while commenting on and negotiating a changing world.

Although Hansen is most interested in theorizing "the juncture of cinema and modernism," she makes some compelling arguments about the popularity of slapstick films and what "action" in this period's films means in terms of American modernity.^{viii} She writes that slapstick specifically helped "deflate the terror of consumption" associated with technology and modernity and that it also helped to negotiate tensions between ethnic groups. Finally, she suggests that slapstick "allowed for a playful and physical expression of anxieties over changed gender roles and new forms of sexuality and intimacy."^{ix} Hansen deems slapstick films from the 1920s on as the privileged example of "vernacular modernism," but the earlier "Mabel and Fatty"

series works in many of the same ways. Furthermore, these films negotiate and ease those social tensions in novel ways, using rural settings and domestic narratives to express the fear of the new mixed with the fascination of change.

The two remaining films stand out from the others: *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition* and *Mabel and Fatty Viewing the World's Fair at San Francisco*. Both the 1915 San Diego Exposition and the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal in August 1914, with the San Francisco World's Fair additionally celebrating that city's rebuilding efforts after the 1906 earthquake. While the other five films in the series focus primarily on domesticity, marriage and the everyday, these two films take the characters outside their everyday world and put them into a public arena that is a celebration of both the past and the future, all accomplished within the framework of the slapstick genre. *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition* in particular relies on standard slapstick fare: an argument between Mabel and Fatty leads to Fatty's flirtations with another woman, resulting in a chase or two, a misunderstanding or two, and finally a bumbling police officer who doesn't exactly save the day. As in *Mabel and Fatty's Simple Life*, the film relies on several symbols of modernity, although they appear in the context of the Exposition. Mabel and Fatty ride electric cars around the fair and stop to enter a pavilion with a sign: "See How Movies Are Made." The "Mabel" and "Fatty" touring the San Diego Exposition are the same characters from the earlier films, a married couple, evidenced by Mabel's repeated gestures to her ring finger in her angry rant about Fatty's flirting, a gesture she has used several times before to indicate the relationship that binds them. [fig. 2]

Four months after *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition* came another exposition film, *Mabel and Fatty Viewing the World's Fair at San Francisco*. This film differs greatly from their earlier San Diego film, and from all the other films discussed so far. Throughout, Mabel and Fatty only briefly participate in their usual slapstick routines. Except for one brief kiss at the beginning of the film, indicating their usual comic couple status, they appear to be playing themselves rather than their filmic personas. This is evidenced by three separate conversations and interactions they have with "real" people in the film: the opera singer Madame Schuman-Heinck, an unnamed tour guide,

and San Francisco Mayor James Rolph. It is only in the company of other people in this film that the two stars engage in slapstick humor. With Mayor Rolph, Fatty pretends to trip on the stairs outside of City Hall. With Madame Schuman-Heink he attempts to sing for her, and she puts her hand over his mouth twice in an effort to prevent his (assumed) warbling. Lastly, during their guided tour, Mabel steps inside the Iron Maiden and Fatty closes the cover, nearly pinning her in its spiny interior. [fig. 3]

Also quite different from the San Diego Exposition film are the objects on display at the fair and the sites that Mabel and Fatty tour. At the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair (also known as the Panama Pacific International Exposition), rather than displays of new technology, such as the "See How Movies are Made" Pavilion, the duo instead view relics of years past, such as the battleship Oregon, and the ship Success, built in 1790. The film does include a few modern objects, from the jitney taxicabs to the display of electric lights, as well as the Aeroscope, a 285-foot crane that served as an amusement ride. They also witness several new structures built after the 1906 earthquake, but these are architectural rather than technological displays. The film works as an educational tour for which Fatty and Mabel function as engaging personalities, guiding visitors around the relics of yesteryear; at the same time the fair acts as a convenient and interesting enough backdrop for a film about the two stars. [fig. 4]

Why the San Diego Exposition and the San Francisco World's Fair, then, as subject matter? What made them settings worth filming? In *The Anthropology of World Fairs*, Burton Benedict writes, "The Panama Pacific International Exposition epitomized a whole view of American society, conceived in optimism and carried through despite the outbreak of World War I. It was, perhaps, the last collective outburst of this sort of naïve optimism."^x Although World's Fairs had occurred outside as well as within the United States prior to 1915, the latter had become decidedly American, showcasing the achievements of the American people in contrast to the ancient practices and rituals of other cultures. On the one hand, the San Diego Exposition pavilion enticed fairgoers to "See How Movies are Made," an homage to Edison's successful invention and the laboratory that would eventually lead to the "Mabel and Fatty" film itself. Also on display I were the American battleship "Oregon" and the electric lights courtesy of

General Electric. On the other hand, fairs quenched the American public's thirst for knowledge about foreign lands and peoples, an education reconfigured and disguised as entertainment, evidenced by the San Diego screen audience's rapture over the Royal Hula Dancers, presented as consumable knowledge of a foreign culture. Although many nations and cultures were on display or in attendance, the spectators in *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition* were white, middle-class patrons, like Mabel and Fatty, which set them off visually from the Royal Hula Dancers on stage. But even with this performer/audience division, the San Diego Exposition presented a more diverse environment than the rural world pictured in earlier "Mabel and Fatty" films. The two main characters could also be considered performers within the San Diego Exposition film, not only as stars but also within the context of the Hula performance. Both Mabel and Fatty come on stage and briefly take part in the performance, at one point inserting a slapstick routine. Again, here is an instance of the new inserting itself into the old, new comic slapstick in a traditional native dance.

Given the frequent repetition across these films, the variations that do occur are intriguing, particularly in *Mabel and Fatty Viewing the World's Fair at San Francisco*. This film differs from the others in a way that calls for closer examination. The San Francisco World's Fair offered an ideal backdrop for inserting the stars in hopes of creating an entertaining film, and the film articulated a desire for new technologies and products similar to that in their domestic comedies—but in different, more concrete form. In the domestic comedies such desire appeared in character motivation, setting and plot. In the Exposition films, upwardly mobile desire instead was implicit, suggested by the importance and interest attributed to the Fair's exhibits by the filmed visit of two key movie stars of the 1910s.

In terms of national identity there is something very telling about the American experience at work implicitly and explicitly in the "Mabel and Fatty" series. The characters that Mabel Normand and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle play, as a couple, occur in all seven films as a microcosm of the American family—defined by marriage through romantic love, a quest for upward mobility, and an attraction to the larger world around them. All of these are afforded them through a visit to the San Francisco World's Fair, or, to other middle-class folks,

through a screening of the Exposition and World's Fair films at their local motion picture theater. *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition* exemplifies slapstick's participation in American society of the time; just as ordinary citizens went to the Fair for education and entertainment, slapstick films with Mabel Normand and Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle became part of the fair as well, forming an advertisement for emulation: visit the fair and be like the film stars, or, inversely, see how the stars are like everyone else, visiting the World's Fair, like everyday, normal people. Both the domestic comedies and Exposition films give a sense that Mabel and Fatty were just ordinary citizens (characters), which suggests that their films offered ways for audiences to work through the tensions brought about by the new technologies and changing society of the 1910s— and possibly accept them. In much the same way that audiences found relevance and a collective national identity in the western, slapstick film offered some of the same "benefits" in a different package.

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- ⁱ The release dates are as follows: *Mabel and Fatty's Wash Day* (14 January 1915); *Mabel and Fatty's Simple Life* (18 January 1915); *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition* (23 January 1915); *Mabel, Fatty and the Law* (28 January 1915); *Mabel and Fatty's Married Life* (11 February 1915); *Mabel and Fatty Viewing the World's Fair at San Francisco* (22 April 1915); and *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (10 January 1916). I can find no overt reason why some of the titles lead with "Fatty" while others begin with "Mabel."
- ⁱⁱ Richard Abel, "The Imagined Community of the Western, 1910-1913," in Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp, eds., *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 132.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 172.
- ^{iv} Eileen Bowser, *History of the American Cinema 2: The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 180.
- ^v Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, 39.
- ^{vi} Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons," *Film Quarterly* 54.1 (2000): 13.
- ^{vii} Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 114.
- ^{viii} Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999): 59.
- ^{ix} Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 71.
- ^x Burton Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs* (London: Scholar Press, 1983), 60.