Reviewed by Judith Mayne

Death by Laughter: Female Hysteria and Early Cinema

by Maggie Hennefeld.
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The cover photograph of *Death by Laughter: Female Hysteria and Early Cinema* is a delightful preview of what awaits the reader. Actress Colleen Moore, famous for her flapper style and comic performances in silent and talking cinema of the 1910s through the early 1930s, is pictured in close-up on a console television. We see her in one of her best-known roles, in *Ella Cinders* (Alfred E. Green, 1926), as she mugs, rolls her eyes, and winks for the camera. The setting is the living room in Moore's home in Chicago in 1963, and the sixty-four-year-old actress stands off to the side of the television, with one hand touching the top of the set and the other clinging to her chest and practically clutching the pearls she wears. Between the pearls and her black conservative dress, she might be taken for a proper middle-class lady. But that suggestion is quickly undercut when we take in her body from the neck up: She is laughing hysterically with her eyes closed, her head thrown back, and her mouth wide open. What a perfect icon for this book: an actress imitating both her cinematic past and the reactions of female spectators to this hilariously funny film from the era when women's laughter was both a selling point and a cause for grave concern in the movie industry.

Maggie Hennefeld has made a stellar contribution to film studies, following on the successes of her previous book, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (2018), and her two co-edited anthologies, *Unwatchable* (2019)

and *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence* (2020).[1] She also co-curated the DVD collection *Cinema's First Nasty Women*, with ninety-nine films that demonstrate what Hennefeld has argued throughout her work, that women in early cinema cannot be relegated to any simplistic categories of, say, "virgin and whore," or "passivity and activity."[2] Such categories project backward from classical Hollywood cinema and its feminist theorizing of the presumably rigid divisions of masculine and feminine roles, viewpoints, and assumptions. Instead, early cinema (1890–1907 in Hennefeld's definition) is a treasure trove of female ass-kicking and turbulence. The turbulence was a matter of concern to moralists and patriarchs-in-charge, while the ass-kicking promised women empowerment and joy. Hennefeld's book joins other feminist explorations of early cinema that provide new outlooks on established categories of film, from the queer perspectives studied by Diana W. Anselmo in *A Queer Way of Feeling* (2023) to the exploration of what constitutes the object of film study in the first place in Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon's edited volume, *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film* (2023).[3]

The book is divided into three sections. In part 1, "Death by Laughter," Hennefeld moves through the fanciful and mind-blowing fascination, in the years between 1870 and 1920, with women who laughed so hard at a joke, a scene, or a situation that they literally died from laughter. The laughter and the deaths were real, but rarely (if ever) did laughter cause death. Rather, these stories made great copy and provided easy ways to pathologize women's behavior. Consider the case of Elizabeth Courtney, a sweatshop worker in a doll factory. In 1894, she was making a hat for a doll and laughingly wondered what the hat might look like perched atop her boss's head. After five minutes of rollicking festivities with her co-workers, Courtney dropped dead. The reported story condemns the woman for showing disrespect for her boss and wasting company time. Hysterical laughter kills and undermines capitalist productivity, a problem for capitalism but not necessarily for the female factory workers. Pathologizing Courtney's hysterical laughter provides a convenient way to avoid the more likely cause of death—the dehumanizing work conditions and potential diseases to which she was exposed.[4]

In most cases of death by laughter, whiteness was assumed. But there were occasional instances of Black women succumbing as well, such as Rosa Walker. She was overtaken by hysterical and fatal heaves of laughter when her husband accidentally used sugar, rather than salt, to prepare pork. Hennefeld ties the situation to the sugar industry itself as it relied on some of the

1. Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Nicholas Baer et al., eds., *Unwatchable* (Rutgers University Press, 2019); and Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond, eds., *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence* (Duke University Press, 2020).
2. Maggie Hennefeld et al., *Cinema's First Nasty Women* (Kino Lorber, 2022), DVD.
3. Diana W. Anselmo, *Queer Way of Feeling: Girl Fans and Personal Archives of Early Hollywood* (University of California Press, 2023); and Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon, eds., *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film* (University of California Press, 2023).
4. Maggie Hennefeld, *Death by Laughter: Female Hysteria and Early Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

most "brutal forms of slave labor, with extremely high rates of mortality."[5] Noting the presence of sugar and its attendant connection to slavery in many forms of Black culture, Hennefeld sees Walker's laughter and death on the edge of sugar's dangerous slippage from sweetness to brutality.[6] Was the sugar industry on Walker's mind, even subconsciously, when she succumbed? Perhaps, or perhaps not, but her death foregrounds sugar as a potentially fatal signifier.

Part 2, "Female Hysteria," traces the arc of hysterical laughter to its sources, from Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud to feminist re-imaginings such as Hélène Cixous's famous laughter of the Medusa. Hennefeld begins, in chapter 4, "Gaslighting the Libido: Feminist Politics of Madness, Laughter, and Power," by reminding us that there are three foundational elements of female hysteria. First, it was a "hotly gendered condition" that affected mostly women.[7] Second, it was defined by a historical era, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Finally, it may have engendered scientific study, but it was "exploited as a total sideshow."[8] The third certainty is particularly important, for as much as the spectacle of hysteria objectified, reified, and pathologized women, it also opened possibilities for other understandings of how the female body lives, moves, and expresses itself under patriarchal conditions not designed for or made to the measure of female desire and freedom. If hysterics become examples not only of what women cannot do but also of what male figures impose on women in the name of scientific discourse, then one of the primary feminist impulses in relationship to hysteria is to turn around the terms in a radical version of *he says, she says*. The most famous example of such a reversal is Cixous's refiguring of the Medusa, rescued from her deathly status as she-who-cannot-be-looked-at to a joyous figure laughing at the ridiculous pretenses that have been committed in her name.

Readers familiar with Hennefeld's work might be surprised that early cinema does not take center stage until part 3. The wait is worth it. This book is a history of an obsession that found its most delicious and problematic expression in the antics of women, both performers and spectators, in the earliest decades of cinema. Female hysteria did not evaporate vis-à-vis the cinema, but rather laughter and hysteria "crash-landed into the nervous body of the uproarious film spectator."[9] If spectatorship is foregrounded in this section, Hennefeld also elaborates and sharpens a contradiction that runs throughout the book, between the simultaneous patriarchal pathologizing and capitalist exploitation of women's laughter, on the one hand, and the possibilities for feminist self-expression, revolt, and rebellion, on the other. The developing film industry needed women to laugh but always within the boundaries of good taste (not too loud or too demonstrative!). Women's laughs, Hennefeld states, "were aggressively solicited and often anxiously

5. Hennefeld, 70.
6. Hennefeld, 70–71.
7. Hennefeld, 93.
8. Hennefeld, 93.
9. Hennefeld, 190.

bracketed."[10] The bracketing was rarely successful, and Hennefeld's imaginary figure of Madame Medusa assumed many different guises, from the viewer's raucous laughter that sparked contagion (and not death) in the movie theater, to the large hats she insists upon wearing to cause havoc in the rows.

Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show (Edwin S. Porter, 1902) is a film about a country bumpkin's first trip to the movies and his subsequent attempts to tear down the screen separating film and real life. This film might have "sucked up all the oxygen" as a demonstration of the spectator's inability to distinguish between reality and cinematic projection, but Madame Medusa is thrilled by what confused the hapless Uncle Josh.[11] For her, the gap between everyday reality and cinematic spectacle offers a celebration of possibility, and early cinema is thus a "somatic language and a proxy reality for spectators on the cusp of having their own symbolic voice in the world."[12] What then of that possibility? A bracketing of capitalist and patriarchal exploitation through the "throaty powers of Medusan laughter" allows the emergence of feminist writing, seeing, and spectacle."[13] *Death by Laughter* is a very hopeful book, claiming for feminism the possibilities that Madame Medusa embraced whole-heartedly.

While reading Hennefeld's book, I found myself returning to a scene of my own hysterical laughter. In 1960, at the age of twelve, I entered junior high school as a seventh grader. I met Sally (a close friend to this day) in the school lunchroom, and I was drawn to her quick sardonic wit. My tendency to laugh at nearly any joke soon became apparent. Sally quipped, "A pig fell in the mud." I laughed hysterically, with uncontrollable gasps of air and tears running down my cheeks. Soon my laughter made everyone else laugh, although I suspect it was pity more than joy. As I returned to this scene from my own past while reading Hennefeld, I could see that my laughter was, indeed, hysterical, in that it concealed what I was not yet ready to acknowledge. I was drawn to Sally. We adopted roles, jokester and hysteric, that could easily be decoded later in life but were indecipherable to us then. Sally and I were both gay, and while it took many years (and many failed attempts at pleasing the patriarchy), we both eventually embodied what was contained in our repartee of (non-)joke and uproarious laughter. In our adolescence, we were both Madame Medusas, and I hope we still are today.

Judith Mayne is emerita professor of French at the Ohio State University. She is the author of eight books on film studies, including *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (1990) and *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (1994).

10. Hennefeld, 194.
11. Hennefeld, 207.
12. Hennefeld, 207.
13. Hennefeld, 207.