

Why fat people are funny in hollywood

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The quote listed in the title comes from 2009 box-office hit *The Hangover*. The events that incite Mr. Chow (played by Ken Jeong) to say laughing “ it's funny because he's fat” feature Alan Garner (played by Zach Galifianakis) charging at Mr. Chow, who is stomping on Alan's satchel, and exclaiming “ Hey! There are skittles in there! ” (*Hangover* 76: 55; 76: 45). In return Alan is punched in the stomach by one of Mr. Chow's henchmen, causing Mr. Chow to laugh hysterically and simultaneously slip “ it's funny because he's fat” out of his mouth (*Hangover* 76: 55).

Clearly in the scene, the overweight character, Zach Galifianakis, is the butt of the joke as he is punched very hard in the stomach and then laughed at for his stupidity and weight. In modern movie making, overweight comedians have had a critical role in humor in films. Stars such as John Black, Seth Rogen, and Zach Galifianakis are modern examples of such characters, but in the last thirty years, many other large comedians have developed and popularized similar roles in films.

The overweight funny man in film has evolved into a more personal, relatable character due largely in part to their accurate reflection of the United States obesity problem. These characters have also created their own genre, a genre that has evolved out of slapstick comedy, yet remains in the realm of realism. This genre, which often involves immature and physical pain, yet remains plausible and not fake (like earlier slapstick humor), continues to bring new fans to the cinema and create greater love for this group of comedians.

This paper will explain funny fat people's emergence, humor, and popularity in American cinema. Evolution of Slapstick Comedy in Films When was the first comedy film? John Montgomery suggests it “ may well have been Fred Off's Sneeze, filmed in 1894 by William K. L. Dickson. The film was produced for Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope Company in the 'Black Maria' Kinetographic Theatre which Dickson built for Edison in West Orange, New Jersey” (Montgomery 17). This film was released just three years after Edison's invention of the Kinetoscope in 1891.

It is not a coincidence that a comedic piece of film was released soon after the production of the moving picture, but it simply suggests the necessity of comedic entertainment in American culture. From the early days of film, comedy became a staple on American cinema. In the early twentieth century, films were silent and featured many comedies. The initial type of comedy featured was slapstick comedy, which “ was a gift to America from France” (Durgnat 67). The term slapstick evolved from “ the double paddles formerly used by circus clowns to beat each other.

The loud crack of the two paddle blades as they crashed together could always be depended upon to produce laughter and applause” (Dale 1). Slapstick is a type of comedy involving exaggerated physical violence and activities which exceed the boundaries of common sense. The first American slapstick comedy producer was Mack Sennett, who with the help of actor/producer Charlie Chaplin, created many hilarious films loved by the American people (Durgnat 70). In these films, there was no audio component, requiring all humor to be dependent on physical actions (Montgomery 18).

Raymond Durnat states that “ in early Chaplin, Dough and Dynamite (1915), the human body is all but reduced to an apparatus for punching, kicking, ducking and dodging” (Durnat 69). Chaplin has been considered the “ master clown” and in 1916, Chester Conklin, an actor and comedian, stated “ without a doubt the one person who has been most successful in making people laugh is Charlie Chaplin” (Montgomery 108). Chaplin and others continued to produce silent slapstick comedy films through the Roaring Twenties, a time when film became increasingly popular and very successful.

In 1926, Warner Brothers introduced the first film with audio attached. Because of the imperfections of the initial product and smaller budgets in the 1930s due to the Great Depression, films with an audio component remained imperfect, allowing silent films to retain their popularity and stay popular and not outdated. Following Chaplin and the others of the first generation of slapstick comedy was the Three Stooges: Larry Fine (born Louis Fienberg), Moe Howard (born Moses Horwitz), and Curly Howard (born Jerome Horwitz) (Matlin 163). This trio continued to produce popular short films and a few feature films until the late 1950s.

The Three Stooges were the last true slapstick comedians, where Leonard Matlin argues that the use of “ clever scripting and direction places the physical burden on others but still gives the Stooges elbowroom in which to clown” (Matlin 168). The Three Stooges were some of the last slapstick films, which essentially died out as many other forms of comedy emerged onto the film scene. One of these styles of humor Louise Dobson describes in a 2006

edition of *Psychology Today* as 'hate-me humor', a style in which “ you are the butt of the joke for the amusement of others” (Dobson 76).

She continues stating this character is often the “ familiar clown” or “ fat guy” and includes examples like John Belushi and Chris Farley (Dobson 76). Dobson directly identifies the “ fat guy” as an example of such comedy because of how popular these comedians have become. From this article it is evident that funny fat people are essential to American comedy, so much so that the author is able to classify them as the 'fat guy' and American readers are able to identify with popular overweight comedians. Although there appears to be a reasonable argument that this comedy genre falls into 'hate-me-humor', I would suggest that these comedians exist as an of slapstick comedy.

The laughs these characters receive come from the same qualities the original slapstick comedians, like Charlie Chaplin, shared. Raymond Durnat describes this stating “ Slapstick comedians are childlike, and in consequence act out the impulses which as adults we suppress” (Durnat 72). If you replace Durnat's word 'slapstick' with overweight, the sentence would read: overweight comedians are childlike, and in consequence act out the impulses which as adults we suppress.

Looking at many overweight comedians we see that this very well could be the case. The characters impulsive and childish actions are very common in their films (many examples to follow in next section) and generate laughs similar to those of traditional slapstick humor. In recent years, no director has released a true slapstick comedy film. The genre has been avoided (except in children's cartoons) in movies perhaps because the producers

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believe that the modern American culture is too advanced for this immature, simplistic, outdated humor.

In reality, current comedy has progressed into a new form of slapstick comedy, where the exaggerations have been toned down and the humor has become a little more realistic. Looking through the last four decades we can see countless examples of films featuring this realistic slapstick humor. These characters tend to be lovable, goofy, wild and consistently overweight. Modernization of Slapstick Comedy: Realistic Physical Humor. In order to analyze the continuation of slapstick humor in American cinema, a look at the period immediately following the Three Stooges (the last true slapstick productions) is essential.

In 1963, the release of the first Pink Panther film, starring Peter Sellers marked a new era for slapstick comedy. The Pink Panther series stretched nearly two decades with Sellers as the star, relied on slapstick humor, yet remained plausible. Most scenes from the Pink Panther movies are absurd and over the top in every manner, yet the events of the plot could be realistic, creating a new breed of slapstick comedy. At the end of the Pink Panther's dominance, National Lampoon released Animal House in 1978, starring several actors including John Belushi.

Following the release of the film, Belushi evolved as the work's centerpiece providing countless hysterical events. In the movie, John 'Bluto' Blutarsky (played by John Belushi) appeared in about a dozen scenes, yet is the most memorable character of the film through his ridiculous actions. In the movie he rarely speaks, and acts very childish, both parallel pieces of the earliest

slapstick comedians. Belushi has a handful of memorable quotes and scenes, most of which are truly ridiculous, yet believable.

He has several immature one line quotes including: “ Toga! Toga! ”, “ Blow-job!”, “ Holy Shit! Holy Shit! Holy Shit! ”, and “ FoodFight! ” (Animal House 44: 00; 63: 55; 30: 25; 35: 37). All of these quotes fit perfectly into the description of “ childlike and in consequence act out the impulses which as adults we suppress” that the classic slapstick comedians possessed (Durgnat 72). Bluto continues to act wildly doing many things including falling off of a ladder trying to peep in a sorority window, crushing a beer can on his head, smashing a guitar someone else is trying to play, and chugging an entire bottle of Jack Daniel's and smashing it on a car.

All of these actions are absurd and exaggerations of what any human might do in a similar scenario, yet all are possibly plausible. A last scene from Animal House that demonstrates the evolution of slapstick comedy begins with Bluto (Belushi) going through the lunch line where he stacks a ridiculous amount of food on his tray and in his pockets. While doing this he also stuffs enormous amounts of the food in his mouth, including a hamburger in one bite. He then proceeds to sit down at a table filled with some clean cut preppy students.

There he is ridiculed for his eating habits and called a “ P. I. G. pig” (Animal House 34: 35). In response to being classified as a pig, he attempts to be a zit, stuffing his mouth with mashed potatoes and spraying everybody at the table by mashing his cheeks with his hands as seen in the following picture (Animal House 34: 55): The focus of the scene is the unrealistic quantity and

grossly unhealthy quality of food Belushi eats as well as the animalistic, childish manner in which he feasts.

Following the incident he proceeds to be chased around the cafeteria, ultimately ending in a brawl and food fight. The sequence of events in this scene all are extremely humorous, yet very childish and exaggerated beyond what any viewer would expect from a twenty year old man. However, all of the actions in the scene are perfectly capable of being true, making this portion of the film extremely humorous in its realistic slapstick fashion. Nearly a decade later, in 1987, Planes, Trains, and Automobiles featured John Candy, another overweight comedian.

In this film, the progression of slapstick comedy continues paralleling Belushi's contributions to the genre. Candy acts extremely childish and wildly, yet his actions remain plausible, exhibiting similar humor to that of John Belushi. In Planes, Trains, and Automobiles Candy's humor can fully be grasped in a scene on a commercial plane flight. On the plane, co-star Steve Martin has just been downgraded from first class to coach seating, and finds his seat next to John Candy. It quickly becomes clear that Candy fills up way too much of the seat, creating an uncomfortable situation.

To make things worse Candy proceeds to take off his shoes in order to help relax, clearly releasing a disgusting odor observed by others in seats around him. He continues his gross movements by taking off his socks and spinning them around to air them out. When doing so, his dirty sock is very close to Steve Martin's face, and based on the expression on Martin's character it is clear that the sock smells wretched. This act is unbelievable, childish, and ridiculous, all similar characteristics of slapstick comedy.

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Later in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, John Candy continues to provide humor through another similar evolution of slapstick comedy, where he accidentally spills several beers on the bed in which he (who barely fits on the bed alone because of his enormous frame) and a complete stranger share. The move is very careless and results in an incredibly uncomfortable situation that makes the audience laugh hysterically because of the continuation of unfortunate events all linked to Candy's childish careless actions.

A last scene from this film takes place in a rental car, after the duo (Martin and Candy) have managed to run into every problem possible on a trip to Chicago to get home for Thanksgiving. In the car, Candy attempts to get comfortable by tampering with the seat position. He uses the buttons on the side of the seat, jerking the seat around for a few minutes, failing to find a satisfactory position. Although Martin has persistently told him to stop and that he will break the seat, he continues on until ultimately he breaks the seat, making it uncomfortable and unmovable.

Following the seat incident, he continues his path of destruction. After smoking a cigarette, he drops the butt out the window. However due to the wind, it blows into the back seat of the car ultimately sending the back seat up in flames and roasting the entire car. In this quick scene, Candy manages to act immaturely and rambunctiously resulting in the destruction of the car. The remains of slapstick comedy are clearly evident in this scene, climaxing with the unreasonable fate of the rental car.

The absurdity of someone so overweight that he breaks a seat and the reality of seeing a car explode in flames seem like a moment from a slapstick

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cartoon, yet the film is completely plausible due to the overweight and clumsy nature of Candy. Following John Candy's death in the early 1990s, Chris Farley emerged as the next overweight star, both on television and in a few Hollywood films. His humor was similar to that of John Candy and also very comparable to the works of John Belushi.

In an article praising the life of Chris Farley following his death in Rolling Stone magazine, the author states “ we talked about his hero and Saturday Night Live predecessor, John Belushi. It was well known that Farley had been obsessed with Belushi, and people loved making much of this fact, since the two seemed to share a love of certain rather common excesses” (Hedegaard 39). Looking at Tommy Boy, produced in 1995, John Belushi's influence on Chris Farley becomes apparent through Farley's role and performance in the film.

In Tommy Boy, Chris Farley stars as the protagonist, an immature and dimwitted heir to an auto parts factory who must save the business to keep it from take-over and away from evil relatives. Throughout the film, Farley's childish actions bring laughs to audiences of all ages. To begin the film, Tommy (Chris Farley) is shown in a flashback as a young school boy rushing to class, late as always. In this scene he runs full speed into a glass sliding door, shouting “ Holy Schnike! ” (Tommy Boy 0: 44). The film then skips several years and shows an older Tommy, in his seventh year of college.

Although the older character is much larger (Chris Farley was very large), he mirrors the young middle school version of Tommy because he is pictured doing the same action: rushing to class (late again). In this scene, he is scene trying to take a short cut through some hedges, but runs full speed

into a newly put up fence, hitting his head very hard and exclaiming “ Holy Schnike! ” again (Tommy Boy 2: 02). From these scenes which mesh together, we can clearly see the immaturity of the character, yet the viewer gets many laughs through the physical pain Farley endures.

These actions take place in the first minute of the film, and really set the tone for the rest of the movie. In the film, Tommy is seen acting very foolishly on many accounts: he consistently runs into sliding glass doors, he gets hit in the head with a two-by-four piece of construction wood, he hits his head on a forklift after not listening to his father say heads up, he slips and gets covered in cow manure when trying to go cow tipping, and he rips his friend's blue blazer because he is too big for it. Consistently, Tommy releases very childish comments, and he is largely responsible for destroying his friend's beloved car.

In the film, the actions Farley takes mirror concepts that defined slapstick comedy. His childish and extreme actions are all very similar to this genre of comedy. Farley extends this comedy to make it more personal and relatable as the protagonist becomes more developed. His actions are all very extreme and in many incidents would cause physical pain. Although painful or ridiculous, all actions that take place in the movie could take place in real-life, making the audience relate to the comedy. In one scene in particular, Tommy pushes the realm of reasonable office behavior.

In an attempt to sell auto products for his company, he acts out an anecdote with his customer's nice model cars. In his story he gives two examples of how a similar scene could play out with two different brakes. In the first action, the car has on Callahan Brake Pads (his company's) and is able to

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stop in front of a obstacle that is suddenly in front of the car (a lighter also on the desk). While showing this action he has a complete narrative stating “ You're drivin' along, la-de-da, woo. All of a sudden there's a truck tire in the middle of the road. And you hit the brakes. EEEEEEEEEEE!

Whoa, that was close” (Tommy Boy 35: 30). He then proceeds stating “ Now let's see what happens when you're driving with the “ other guy's”[does quotation marks with fingers] brake pads. You're drivin' along, you're drivin' along, the kids start shouting from the back seat, 'I gotta go to the bathroom, Daddy! ' 'Not now, damn it! ' Truck tire. EEEEEEEEE! I CAN'T STOP! ” (Tommy Boy 35: 45). He then rams the model car into the lighter smashing the car of the customer. Farley then gets really into the story acting out voices of a narrator, the kids, the parents, and eventually the paramedics who respond to the scene.

In the scene, some of his quotes include “ No! I can't feel my legs ... Here comes the meat wagon ... And the medic gets out and says, 'Oh my God. '... New guy's around the corner puking his guts out” (Tommy Boy 36: 05). He also finishes the crash by setting the crushed car on fire with the lighter and calmly collects himself making his point casually stating “ All because you want to save a couple extra pennies” (Tommy Boy 36: 20). This scene is a clear example of Farley taking over a scene that could have easily been executed much more peacefully, maturely, and professionally.

But the director and Chris Farley decided to execute the scene wildly and immaturely so that viewers see the scene in awe as they cannot believe how overdone he makes the episode. The film is full of scenes like this one, which leave the audience in shock at how a human could act in such a manner.

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The key to the humor brought about in the film is much like that of Belushi and Candy, it remains believable: although unlikely, all actions in the film could possibly occur in a person's life. Through looking at these three overweight comedians we see the progression of the same genre of comedy.

The slapstick comedy that first featured Charlie Chaplin and other silent film comedians progressed into slapstick comedy with audio, like the Three Stooges. Following the Three Stooges, the horseplay that was extreme and in many ways violent and not possible for a person to survive, died out. In return, several years later comedians like Belushi rediscovered the art of making a career out of horseplay in every film or television show in which they appeared. Following the mold Belushi made, many other actors have morphed their careers into similar roles.

Through the years the importance of the overweight comedian has grown dramatically. In 1978, John Belushi was a minor character in *Animal House*. Although his few scenes (around a dozen) are the most memorable from the film, his role contained very few lines and he was never intended to be the star of the film. Looking forward nearly a decade later, John Candy in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* promoted his role to the supporting actor, though not the protagonist of the film.

In this film, we learn much more about the character (a back story, his emotions, etc.) than we did of Belushi in *Animal House*. Belushi's character, Bluto, has apparently been in college for several years and the odds of him graduating appear slim. Other than this, we have no other information on the character. For Candy's character, Del, we find out much more about his life as a shower ring salesman as he appears in nearly every scene and is a

much better developed character. Finally looking at *Tommy Boy*, released almost two-decades after *Belushi*, the American audience sees the fat wild character as the protagonist of the work.

Chris Farley's character, Tommy, is the clear protagonist of the film (the film is even titled after the character's name). Farley's character has a well developed character, as the viewer is well informed of the character's entire family and Tommy's flaws and strengths. *Why Overweight?* Following in the footsteps of the unrealistic, unsurvivable slapstick comedy to the more plausible realistic feature films, the role of the fat comedian progressed to the center of the film. Perhaps the movement towards realism reflects American's recognition of their own overweight society.

The United States is the world's most obese country. In an attempt to explain this epidemic, Greg Critser published *Fat Land: How Americans became the fattest people in the world*. This work highlights new research that claims cheap fats and sugars as the source which causes our calories to stick and shows why children are too often the chief metabolic culprits of such foods. He clearly claims that we (Americans) have been telling ourselves lies about how much we can eat and how little we can exercise.

He attempts to expose the nutritional value (or lack thereof) in schools as well as political and cultural forces that have caused American's fitness to continue to decrease (Critser 23). Critser debunks all eating patterns and even diet books in an attempt to explain why they do not work and only supplement the obesity problem in the United States. Although a slightly humorous book, Critser's message is very serious; the lack of a balanced nutritional diet (which he provides to the best of his understanding) and

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reduced exercise has set a death trap for many people in America, leading to an obesity problem.

Hollywood has capitalized on the acceptability of overweight people, and has used and continues to use actors bearing this unhealthy lifestyle in order to provide entertainment (usually humorous) to the United States (Critser 25). The comedians explored in the previous pages share one common obvious trait, their weight. John Belushi, John Candy, and Chris Farley were all obese. The reason why they were overweight will never be fully understood, whether it was genetics, poor eating, lack of exercise, pressures of society, or bad habits. The fact is that all these men were huge, and remained large until their respective deaths.

Not only were all of these men overweight, they were also well loved. In a People Magazine article following the death of John Candy, the author concludes “ in the end, of course, no one can say for certain whether diet and self-denial would have prolonged Candy's life a single day. Only one thing is sure: Already Candy is missed” (Harmes 97). Similarly in a Canadian magazine an author begins “ While all of us feel as though we've lost someone we knew personally,” showing another example of the attachment fans had with such comedians (Candy in both of these instances) (The Untimely Passing 9).

Like Candy, Chris Farley had his fair share of praises in a Rolling Stone Magazine stating “ almost everyone loved Farley, and it was a genuine love, not a Hollywood love” (Hedegaard 40). Through these accounts praising the lives of such overweight comedians, it becomes clear that the actors really connected with their audience and gained a sincere affection from their fans.

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The love they generated came through both the laughs they consistently provided America as well as their big loving appearance.

Perhaps people connected with the characters because they thought their enormous build made them more resilient and therefore they could endure the slapstick comedy they provided. Maybe the reason they were admired was because their large appearance was not the typical Hollywood 'Barbie'-like figure that so many stars possess, but a reflection of how America really looks: overweight. Or, perhaps their size made them more human because they embodied the flaws in all of us. By the simple act of laughing at and with them, the audience is put at ease and feels better about their own shortcomings.

In any case, the success of these comedians came through their realistic appearance on stage. The people and actions in these films could occur in everyday American lives. The men were not living a sophisticated lifestyle and did not have special skills; they portrayed an overweight male (which is common in the United States) and shined in immature and physical humor evolving the slapstick genre that has been a staple of American comedy films since their beginning a century ago.