

Thursday 18 October

1pm Milgate Room, AD Hope Bldg, SLLL



Buster Keaton in *The Goat* (1921)

## Russell Smith

### The dead pan: Nathanael West's unfunny jokes and modernist anti-sentimentalism

Though Nathanael West's novels are often read in terms of an ancient and revered mode of misanthropic humour—satire—in this paper I want to draw on recent work that seeks to situate his work in relation to distinctly modern comic modes—slapstick, burlesque, black humour, and especially, dead pan. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), we read of the constantly-joking newspaper editor Shrike:

Although his gestures were elaborate, his face was blank. He practiced a trick much used by moving-picture comedians—the dead pan. No matter how fantastic or excited his speech, he never changed his expression. Under the shining white globe of his brow, his features huddled together in a dead, gray triangle.

Drawing on Michael North's *Machine-Age Comedy*, and recent readings of West by Jonathan Greenberg and Justus Nieland, I want to draw out the inhuman aspects of West's anti-sentimental modernist comedy. In particular, where for other modernists the mechanical aspects of human behaviour are a source of comedy, and laughter itself the most mechanical of human behaviours, West's 'strange and unfunny jokes' (as he called them) depict these human mechanisms of collective emotion in breakdown, pulling out the rug of *sensus communis* on which satirical humour traditionally rests. The result is a comedy which may not, in fact, be funny.

**Russell Smith** is a Lecturer in English in SLLL. This paper will be presented later this month at the annual conference of the Australasian Modernist Studies Network on the theme of *Modernist Comedy and Humour*.



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