

The Real Danger of Minions

by [Aidan Kash](#)

Last week, I printed out valentines for my classmates. Out of all the designs on the Internet, I chose one with an image of the iconic yellow henchmen next to the text, “You’re one in a Minion.” A few weeks prior, I’d wanted to include a wholesome meme at the bottom of an email. I chose a picture of a Minion next to the text, “Happy Saturday Everyone! Forget all the bad things you have encountered this week and have a great Weekend.” Last summer, I visited Universal Studios and purchased a plush Minion backpack as my souvenir. I even dressed up as a Minion for Halloween one year, ordering a handmade crocheted Minion hat off Etsy.

But I don’t particularly like Minions. I think The *Despicable Me* (2010, 2013, 2017) series and the *Minions* spinoffs (2015, 2022) are mediocre at best. I know I’d get more value from any of the critically acclaimed films targeted at people over twelve on my watchlist, yet I gladly drove to the theater to see Illumination milk every last drop of immature antics they could in *Minions: The Rise of Gru*. I keep coming back to those goggle-eyed, overall-wearing, pill-shaped creatures. It’s not just me – the mere existence of the valentines, memes, backpacks, and hats proves the Minions have cemented their place in popular culture. We cannot escape their stupidity.

The Minion’s stupid brand of humor is distinct from other children’s media, which commonly features witty wordplay and celebrity voice acting. While the *Despicable Me* franchise does offer these more ‘mature’ comedic features (notably starring Steve Carell as Gru, the Minions’ boss), they feel like a distraction. Instead of telling carefully crafted jokes, Minions speak Minionese, a form of gibberish. Still, we understand what they are saying through their tone, actions and, above all, physical comedy. The Minions epitomize slapstick, a form that is difficult to define due to its lack of language: it is situational, rather than conceptual. According to the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, “Slapstick is a form of physical comedy generally involving broad humor, horseplay, absurd situations, or violent actions,” but this definition just provides a list of things that could be slapstick, rather than explaining its essence (Marshall 700). While slapstick features in other contemporary children’s media, I cannot think of an example where it exists as purely or as effectively as the Minions, where its success overshadows other aspects of the film. Perhaps by looking at the history of slapstick and its contributions to the Minions’ wild popularity, we can solidify our understanding of the genre, as well as the implications of the Minion phenomenon.

Slapstick comedy originated from *commedia dell'arte*, a theatrical style created by sixteenth-century Italian theater troupes whose improvisational style was based on *lazzi*, meaning "action." In his book *Lazzi*, performance studies scholar Mel Gordon categorizes 250 different examples of *lazzi* under labels like "Acrobatic and Mimic" (falling from a large height, falling asleep, imitating animals or objects), "Comic Violence/Sadistic Behavior" (flogging, killing, expressions of anger), "Food Lazzi" (hunger, taste testing, eating fruit), and "Stupidity/Inappropriate Behavior" (insults, stupid discovery, failing at household tasks) (8, 14, 21, 43). *Lazzi* encapsulates many of the physical elements of slapstick outlined in its encyclopedic definition, and the word "slapstick" itself comes from a paddle used in flogging *lazzi*s that generated a slapping sound without hurting the actor (Marshall 701). In *commedia*, actors agree upon a *lazzi*, and then use it as the basis for an improvised scene. Rather than having layers of jokes and meanings, slapstick uncovers the humor in simple situations.

While the Minions are not improvisational, their humor is reminiscent of *lazzi*. They imitate humans to get past a royal guard ("Acrobatic and Mimic"), have fun torturing each other in a dungeon ("Comic Violence/Sadistic Behavior"), and obsess over bananas ("Food"). But a majority of the Minions' screen time falls into the category of "Stupidity/Inappropriate Behavior." Story-wise, this is a very effective tool: the Minions are ordered to do something by their boss, and their stupidity causes them to fail in comical ways. They are ordered to make photocopies and instead photocopy their butts. They are ordered to go to the store and buy a toy and instead return with a plunger. They are ordered to change a lightbulb and instead use a Minion as the bulb. The list goes on, exemplifying Minions' use of *lazzi* as a comedic device.

Another hallmark of *commedia* that contributed to slapstick is the subversion of language. *Commedia* troupes would travel throughout Europe and perform in areas that spoke a wide array of languages. So, to accompany their *lazzi*-based physical improvisations, actors often spoke a wide-ranging gibberish known commonly as *Grammelot* (National Theatre). Actors would thus not need to slow down their improvisations by the need to translate, nor rely on puns or wordplay that could get lost in translation. This principle also drives the Minions' nonsense language: Minionese allows both toddlers who have barely learned to speak and mass international audiences to understand the characters' humor.

Finally, the most influential styling of *commedia* is its use of stock characters. Some examples of these were Pantalone (the avaricious merchant), Zanni (clownish servants), and Il Dottore (the pompous doctor). Performers wore masks denoting which character type they were portraying (Italy Mask). This allowed audiences to enjoy the slapstick without any distractions; there was no need for backstory or emotional development, since they could easily identify the characters. As for the *Despicable Me* franchise, the

obvious comparison is that Minions are the Zanni to their grouchy boss Gru's Il Dottore.

While stock characters have extended beyond slapstick, permeating contemporary stories as well, commedia's use of archetypes is distinguished by its use of masks, gibberish, and lazzi to create a parody of society. For instance, while Charles Dickens uses Scrooge's greed, which is reminiscent of Pantalone, to provide social commentary in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is still a nuanced character living in a recognizable society. In commedia, the characters lack nuance, and their foolish actions reflect the absurdity of their roles as dictated by society's structure. In the lazzo of "Why don't you?" the Captain archetype orders a Zanni to do stupid and difficult tasks, to which the Zanni responds "Why don't you?" each time (39). This parodies the upper-class privilege, the servants' incompetence, and their hierarchical relationship. By combining stock characters with slapstick, Commedia criticizes real-world roles and their originating social structures.

There is a clear argument for reading Minions as a modern evocation of the commedia Zanni, the clownish servants. Their humor is lazzi-based, their 'language' is universal, and their repeated character design is the instantly recognizable mask of their near-identical faces. Their one goal, which remains consistent throughout the franchise, is "to serve the most despicable master they [can] find," distilling their essence to servitude, like Zanni (Minions 00:02:08). But crucially, when the Minions perform lazzi that disserve Gru, the humor comes only from the Minions' failure rather than their hierarchical relationship. Here, Gru is absent from the slapstick. He has plot goals, language-based jokes, and a design distinct from the other characters. While Gru comically reflects Pantalone's greed by wanting to steal the moon, he also experiences emotional development and learns to prioritize fatherhood over villainy, transcending his archetype. Thus, the Minions have their own slapstick commedia world within a conventional story. But they are the only such archetype in the story. Without a proper Pantalone or Dottore to compliment the Zannis, the potential social commentary falls apart. Rather than laughing at the absurdity of the master/servant structure, we are laughing at the servants' stupidity. So, what does our laughter at the Minions really mean?

To understand this particular brand of slapstick, we can look to a more recent historical precedent: the fool in a world of straight men as embodied by the early twentieth-century silent-era film comedies of Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin is known for the Tramp: a working-class character, denoted by a mustache and ill-fitting clothes, whose incompetence and charm lead to comic moments. In the vein of commedia, he foolishly performs the tasks that are asked of him, creating lazzi situations. In these silent comedies, his humor does not rely on language. His signature look functions as a recognizable mask. As a worker, he serves a boss, fulfilling the role of Zanni. With all of

these characteristics combined, the Tramp is distinctly slapstick. Pierre Coffin, the co-creator and voice actor of the Minions, may not have been thinking about commedia dell'arte when he was developing the characters, but he definitely was thinking of Chaplin, frequently citing him as a source of inspiration. He told the *New York Times*, “The reason why Chaplin was perceived as a genius was that he managed to mix slapstick with emotion, without dialogue, and that’s the essence of animation” (Coffin qtd. in Murphy). There is even a direct homage to Chaplin in *Minions* (2015). After Bob the Minion is crowned King of England, he delivers a speech in Minionese to a crowd of confused citizens, mirroring Chaplin’s gibberish speech as the Hitler stand-in Adenoid Hynkel in *The Great Dictator* (*Minions* 00:50:13–00:51:08). Yet for Chaplin, “The whole point of the little fellow is that no matter how down on his ass he is, no matter how well the jackals succeed at tearing him apart, he’s still a man of dignity” (qtd. in Prashad). Even if Chaplin’s slapstick pokes fun at working-class characters, his vision morally raises the ‘little fellow’ above ‘the jackals,’ pointing out the absurdity of the structure itself, à la commedia. It’s little surprise that J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI denounced Chaplin as a communist sympathizer, despite a lack of tangible evidence (Pak). But we shouldn’t be too fast to read our laughter at Chaplin as subverting hierarchies.

In his essay “Silent Slapstick Film as Ritualized Clowning: The Example of Charlie Chaplin,” humor scholar James E. Caron complicates the idea of Chaplin as anti-authoritarian by considering the ancient figure of the clown. While one idea of the clown evolved in the sixteenth century from commedia dell’arte’s Zanni as a “comic character usually distinguished by garish makeup and costume whose antics are both humorously clumsy and acrobatic,” clowning is in fact a far older and more widespread tradition, appearing (for example) in the traditions of Native American and Polynesian societies (“Clown”; Caron 5). In a cultural practice known as ritual clowning, “The clown typically opposes a figure who literally embodies the ideology of the society, a mythic god for instance. The audience therefore witnesses a dramatization of improper and proper behavior, and that drama shows people the means by which their society is reproduced” (Caron 6). This improper behavior was, of course, slapstick, with examples including a Zuni Indian clown drinking urine during a ritual for the rain gods. For Caron, the ritual clown has a dual societal function. On one hand, the clown’s slapstick performance provides a forum for a community to share laughter, specifically, as Caron notes, “laughter at taboos” (6). On the other hand, showing a clown opposing authority through the foolishness of slapstick reinforces what is model behavior and provides a cautionary tale about how community members should act. As such, Caron asserts, “ritual clowns are functionally conservative” rather than subversive (7).

Caron argues that Chaplin is this kind of ritual clown for Western culture, with all the complexities of the role: “‘Charlie’ at first glance symbolizes a norm in modern industrial society: he is gainfully employed. However, ‘Charlie’ in the act of performing his duties routinely disrupts the norm because he is so laughably incompetent” (14).

One example Caron points to is in *The Pawnshop*, where after being told to clean with a feather duster, the Tramp sticks the duster into the fan, creating more mess than there was before (13). And so, through the ritual of going to a theater and seeing a movie, the audience will laugh at the Tramp because his transgression of cultural structures is funny, but also recognize those structures as ones to which we already submit. We are familiar with receiving a command from a superior, and in laughing at The Tramp's failure to do things his own way, we are subtly reminded to listen and perform tasks competently. We may identify with the low-status character as Chaplin intended, but, Caron claims, the Tramp's adventures ultimately affirm our place in a structured society.

The theories of Nobel Prize-winning philosopher Henri Bergson legitimize Caron's claims about what our laughter at Chaplin really means. In "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," he concludes that "Laughter, above all else, is corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness" (Bergson 197). When we laugh at the ritual clown, that is, we do not laugh out of sympathy, but because we want to humiliate them for taking social liberties. Through this lens, rather than being unintellectual or even 'stupid,' slapstick – and in fact all comedy – is inherently loaded with sentiments about proper behavior in an ordered society.

But Caron's reading of Chaplin and Bergson's theory of laughter may both feel too narrow. Does laughter really exist solely as a 'corrective'? It isn't just as true that laughter is a powerful force in healing and catharsis? Bergson's claims begin to make more sense when we link 'corrective' to context. The 'society' Bergson posits does not have to be the prevailing one. It is possible to write a joke that pokes fun at a white supremacist with capitalistic and patriarchal values, for example, in which case you would be laughing at someone who violates your own idea of a good society, making your laughter both ethical and potentially subversive. Your sense of humor is tied to your personal philosophy, which is inherently subjective and mobile. For a seemingly involuntary biological action, laughter is also heavily socialized. We laugh in uncomfortable situations to conceal our feelings from others. We laugh with a group of friends to feel like we belong. Satire is thus not intrinsic, but social: hence the masks.

Where do the Minions fit in this complex scheme of laughter and obligation? Have they taken the role of ritual clown for twenty-first-century audiences, subtly reinforcing traditional societal structures and hierarchies? Or do they aim for a more complex artistry like Chaplin's, who in poking fun at Hitler surely didn't intend to prop up the dictator's regime? In the Minions' all too recognizable world, evil has been institutionalized: there is a "Bank of Evil" where villains take out loans and a "Villain-Con" where villains can pass out business cards, listen to keynote speakers, and be

recruited by henchman talent agents. With their blue-collar overalls, generic names, and vocabulary of lazzi, the Minions clownishly subvert institutional evil from below. They defy not only societal goals of the greater good, but also societal rules for how to perform evil, which we can read as conformity to a familiar corporate structure. And we can see The Minions' slapstick incompetence telling us to be competent or we will be laughed at, no matter which kind of master we serve.

I got curious about the meaning of Minions when NBCUniversal, Illumination's parent company, used their image to advertise a job posting on LinkedIn. Maybe the company was just showcasing their successful creation of the most iconic characters of the century, but at the time, I thought that Minions subliminally represented the potential hires who NBCUniversal expected to serve without question. If my initial belief was correct, then the Minion's slapstick undermines that message, reminding us to challenge our boss and think independently or else we will just be another bumbling Minion. Or it could reinforce that message, reminding us to conform to their corporate structure. Or their slapstick could be doing both simultaneously, giving us potential hires an illusion of independence within an ultimately restrictive hierarchy. Perhaps their symbolism depends on your own positionality and subjective philosophy within society, and I am overanalyzing them as a college student anxious about the future of the workplace.

But if the Minions' slapstick is even the slightest bit corrective and we are plastering their image across valentines, memes, backpacks, hats, and whatever else you can think of, then we must be concerned that their evil antics and incompetent nature are dangerous not only in the world of the films, but in our world as well.

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