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Carole Lombard as Silent Spectacle

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This paper examines Carole Lombard's performances in three silent slapstick comedies. In each of the films, Lombard attempts to maintain her own personal autonomy by performing gags and practical jokes against authority figures. The purpose of her rebellion is to draw attention to the rigidity of these authority figures, and to show that Lombard's heroines are not complacent, passive women. Although Lombard attempts to challenge authority, the films' aesthetic and technical elements contradict the purpose of her rebellion. By aesthetics, I am referring to the elements of spectacle in the films. Two of the films I have analyzed contain two-strip Technicolor sequences. These scenes are digressions from the narrative, and serve no other purpose than to entertain the audience. Finally, by technical I mean the fact that the films are silent. Unlike her screwball films where she can express herself in words and actions, in her silent comedies her voice is literally absent. For all that she may "act out" physically against authority, she is still suppressed due to her inability to talk. While Carole Lombard's physical comedy symbolizes a rebellion against authority, the films' visual spectacle and Lombard's inability to speak not only undercut the motive behind her comedy, but also objectify her for both the male and female spectator.