13. Yes, There Are No Bananas

Timotheus Vermeulen

A man strolls across the boardwalk. He is wearing an ill-fitting black suit and a thin tie. Bowler atop his head. Cane in one hand. In the other: a banana. He stops, peels the banana. Takes a bite. A second later, another mouthful, then carelessly drops the peel on the pavement. The man checks the sole of his left shoe and sets off to continue on his way. But as he takes his first step his right foot slips on the dropped peel, and in a single continuous motion he falls on his back.

This is a description of a scene from Charlie Chaplin's 1915 short *By the Sea*, but it might just as well have recounted a sequence from another Chaplin film, *The Circus*, or indeed, with some minor adjustments, instances from Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, a *Donald Duck* cartoon, the video game *Mario Kart*, any one of a hundred *American Funniest Home Videos*, the Adam Sandler comedy *Billy Madison*, the puppet show *Sesame Street*, or an early twentieth-century Billy Watson cabaret act. The "banana peel gag" is such a cultural commonplace that the moment we see a dropped banana peel on our screen, on stage, or on the pages of a comic book, we assume someone will slip on it—the vaudeville relative of Anton Chekhov's gun. Indeed, even at the time that Chaplin performed the gag it was already such a cliché that his contemporary Buster Keaton in *The High Sign* made a point of dropping a banana peel precisely so as not to slip on it.

In this essay I consider the role—and thus the ontology—of the banana in the banana peel gag and cultural narratives like it. For the banana is not just an inspiration to slapstick comedy. Few fruits seem to speak to our imagination as much as the banana. We invoke the banana to talk about ecological devastation ("Panama disease") and sexual potency ("is that a banana in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"); corporate capitalism ("banana barons") and civil disobedience (the Guatemalan coup of the 1950s, prompted by disagreement over crops); praise ("top banana") but also disdain ("banana republic"); peace, prosperity, and joy (Victorian postcards) as well as bad luck (the fisherman's tale about bananas on a fishing boat) and depression (the ironic use of the song "yes, we have no bananas" during the 1930s Outdoor Relief protests in Belfast); wars (the "banana wars"), violence (the pretense that the banana is a gun), racism (the racial slur "banana" for Asian-Americans; audiences at football games in Europe throwing bananas at

black players), exoticism (impressionist paintings using the banana as symbol of a pre-civilized existence), sexist representation (Josephine Baker's banana dress, Chiquita's caricature of Carmen Miranda as exotic, sexy Latina) and exploitation (the so-called Banana Bar in Amsterdam in the 1990s, a well-known sex club where women performed sexual acts with bananas) (for detailed accounts of many of the above, see Jenkins; Koeppel; Lovell; Piatti-Farnell; Wiley). The recently closed Washington Banana Museum in Auburn, WA, which I imagine the reader is as surprised to learn as I was existed at all, held over 6000 cultural representations of the banana (Lovell). The banana, writes cultural historian Lorna Piatti-Farnell, is an "omnipresent icon" (103). What I am interested in is the relation between this diverse cultural genealogy and the edible yellow, elongated, and curved berry from which it derives. How are these incomparable stories all afforded by the qualities, properties, and history of a single berry; and how in turn is that berry's unity of identity maintained across such diverse accounts? I consider these questions by looking at two versions of the same joke a hundred years apart: Chaplin's above skit, and Maurizio Cattelan's art installation *Comedian* from 2019.

In posing these questions, I'm inquiring after the relationship between "objects" and "things"—as well as, more generally, metaphor and materiality. Following, of course, the philosopher none of us ever really knows how to deal with, Martin Heidegger, and more recently theorists like Bill Brown and Tim Ingold, I take object as a material presence understood exclusively in relation to a subject, which is to say as use, or value, something "ready-at-hand": an actualization of one or some of its material affordances. The banana we buy at the grocer's is an object: we buy it to eat it, actualizing its affordances of sweetness, softness, edibility, nutrition, etc. In contrast, a thing is a material presence before, between and/or after it has a function, before one or some of its affordances are actualized as this or that at the expense of all the other possible uses. As Brown writes, a thing is what we encounter when an object stops "working for us: when the drill breaks, the car stalls, when the windows get filthy" (4). It is a relationality of the thing's material affordances to usages that is as of yet indeterminate, not delimited by this or that context of signification. A thing, thus, is not an essence as much as a contingency: a process and multiplicity; all that its material affords it to be. Objects are to things what crystals are to air in JD Ballard's novel *Crystal World*: they fixate what is in flux, reduce a multiplicity to a singularity, close in and off what was an opening onto. Brown writes that a thing is a suspended object (suspending the relation to a subject). But in this sense, an object is thus also a suspended thing (it forestalls becoming).

In our experience, the thing comes after the object: it is the object's limit, where the relationship between object and subject breaks down. Ontologically, however, it precedes it, too. The banana's objecthood is afforded by the banana's thingness, even if it is irreducible to it. Since the object is a relation between a thing and a subject, it crystallizes the thing and its affordances only insofar as it can be seen from

the subject's interests, angle, distance, embodied qualities, cultural context, etc. It is both more than the thing (since in its relation with the subject it extends beyond the thing), and less (since it is not all of the thing, not all of its material affordances).

In the banana peel gag the banana is less than a thing in that it relies on some but not all of the berry's qualities: the banana skin's divisibility (the skin can peel off and partition into separate shards), its durability (the skin takes time to disintegrate), and its slipperiness (the peel's insides turn gradually smoother and moister as they rot). Yet it is also more than a thing, since the reason these qualities historically have been recognized in the banana (and the orange) as opposed to, say, the apple, or blackberry, is related to the berry's complex relation to the societies in which the gag was developed. As the food journalist Dan Koeppel has shown, the banana peel's divisibility, durability, and slipperiness were turned into a comedic trope in response to the berry's mass import to and subsequent ubiquity in nineteenth-century America. Cultivated on an industrial scale, this non-native fruit was so popular that its skins soon littered the streets. Reports of people slipping on them and injuring themselves appeared in newspapers across the country. Rumor has it that people even died (Koeppel). The banana became a symbol thus not just of the successes but also the perceived excesses of modernity: a speeding up of time and a contraction of space, an emphasis on movement and exchange, mass production and crowded centralized consumer hubs—cities. "On almost every corner," one city newspaper supposedly lamented in 1870, "there is a fruit stand, around which the pavements are littered with these dangerous parings, and not a day passes that someone does not receive a fall from stepping on them" (qtd. in Stans). Many cities passed laws to forbid people from disposing of peels on the street, New York systematized its garbage disposal and initiated the country's first recycling project as a result of the problem (Koeppel). The banana peel gag historically objectifies the banana not just because the banana skin is divisible, but because this multiplication is perceived as a hazard; because its divisibility, that is, confirms a distinct cultural discourse: xenophobia. The fear of the proliferating exotic berry becomes a fear of the other. The banana in the banana peel gag is thus both more than the thing, since its nature, co-determined as it is by cultural discourses, is irreducible to the berry's material affordances, and less, since it actualizes but three of those affordances.

There is no point in Chaplin's rendition of the banana peel gag where the banana is not an object, is not at once more and less than a thing. The banana is so culturally overdetermined that it is always already an object or rather a series of objects; its thingness is forever forestalled even if it is in each objective iteration intimated. Whilst Chaplin eats the banana, it is an object of consumption, for him as much as for the viewers, actualizing the thing's affordances of edibility. The moment he drops the banana skin on the pavement, which is to say the moment the banana is discarded as an object of consumption, is however not a suspension of the banana's relation to the subject, but a form of recycling. As soon as the peel is dropped, it be-

comes a "peel" one might slip over: another object, initiating another relationship to a subject, deferring but drawing on other qualities of the thing: its divisibility, slipperiness, etc. The abovementioned history matters here, as do genre expectations, since this gag is more likely to take place in a slapstick comedy than in a Western—and in fact I would say that even as the banana is an object of consumption, it is also always already an object of comedy. But Chaplin's performance plays a part, too. The comedian does not just let the skin slip from his fingers. He shifts the object from one hand to the other (explicating its handholdable size, friendliness of touch, and lightness) whilst repositioning his body toward the camera, and throws it up in the air (signaling at once that the banana affords to be thrown, and that, as the pun goes, "time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana"). The set-up alerts us to and anticipates the banana's new role in this narrative, the changed context. The banana peel gag's banana suspends not the object but the thing, continually slipping from one object cycle to the next like a moebius loop, actualizing ever new affordances.

A hundred years on, Maurizio Cattelan's sculptural installation *Comedian* (2019) inverts Chaplin's joke. The artist taped a banana to a white wall at Miami Basel with silver duct tape. It came with a manual for the buyer which stipulated the banana should be replaced every ten days: bananas rot, after all, in the process changing color, form, and consistency, among other things. Here, as the work's title suggests, the object figures in a comedic context. It pits the thing's qualities, conventions, and history against the aesthetic and socio-economic context of this art fair: rot versus collecting, low culture versus high culture, wide availability versus exclusivity, bottom price versus high market value. Moreover, though the banana's material evidently affords taping it to a wall for a maximum of ten days, one cannot but wonder whether the tape affords loosening and refastening repeatedly. The banana is explicitly the object over which the whole of this exclusive and self-important scene for the very rich might slip—and which it might be argued to have achieved, since the installation sold for 150.000 USD. Yet before two days had passed, another artist tore the banana off the wall and ate it. The banana, in other words, in a single move had slipped, or, more accurately, had been grabbed, from one context to another—it had become another object, actualizing another material affordance.

What my concise discussion of the banana's recursive objectification in the banana peel gags of Chaplin and Cattelan shows is that the banana may well never be a thing. Even where it "stops working," "stalls," or "breaks," this is not so much an ontological disintegration (a change of planes, if you will) as a reconfiguration (a change on the same plane): we are not confronted with the banana as contingency or multiplicity, for all that its qualities might afford it to be in as of yet to be determined relationships, but as the actualization of one or some of its material affordances in a specific interaction. Of course, further study is required to test this hypothesis, of other cases and cultural tropes objectifying and de-objectifying alternative material affordances. But if the well-known song "Yes, there are no bananas" is anything to

go by, we might have a hard time finding anywhere a banana is not always already a "banana." Indeed, as a new banana disease spreads across the continents, ruining crop after crop, there might soon be no bananas left at all.

Works Cited

Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–22.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing." *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by A. Hofstadter, Harper and Row, 2001, pp. 161–84.

Ingold, Tim. "Materials against Materiality." *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1–16.

Jenkins, Victoria Scott. *Bananas: An American History*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.

Koeppel, Dan. *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit That Changed the World*. Penguin, 2008.

Lovell, Ann Mitchell, curator. *The Washington Banana Museum: An Online Museum*, http://www.bananamuseum.com.

Piatti-Farnell, Lorna. *Banana: A Global History*. Reaktion, 2016.

Stans, Lea. "The History of Those Darn Banana Peels." *Silent-ology*, 1 April 2015, https://silentology.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/the-history-of-those-darn-banana-peels/

Wiley, James. *The Banana: Empires, Trade Wars and Globalization*. U of Nebraska P, 2008.