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| Keaton, Joseph Frank (‘Buster’) (1895-1966) |
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| American filmmaker and comedian Joseph Frank (‘Buster’) Keaton was born in Piqua, Kansas, while his mother and father were touring as variety performers. Keaton joined their act at the age of four, serving as the primary recipient of his father’s stage violence. In 1917, Keaton forfeited the luxurious salary of $250 a week on the stage in order to work in film with the comedian Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle. Keaton struck out on his own in 1920, and proceeded to direct and star in a series of short and feature-length films, many of which constitute major achievements of the silent era.  When his distributor experienced financial troubles in the late 1920s, Keaton signed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), for whom he starred in the memorable *The Cameraman* (1928). His contract with MGM, however, signalled an end to the creative autonomy that he had enjoyed as an independent and — with the rise of synchronised sound in the late 1920s — Keaton’s career took a serious tumble. For MGM, he would write gags for the Marx Brothers and star in a series of features with Jimmy Durante, but he never again produced the beautiful pantomimic films for which he is justly remembered. |
| American filmmaker and comedian Joseph Frank (‘Buster’) Keaton was born in Piqua, Kansas, while his mother and father were touring as variety performers. Keaton joined their act at the age of four, serving as the primary recipient of his father’s stage violence. In 1917, Keaton forfeited the luxurious salary of $250 a week on the stage in order to work in film with the comedian Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle. Keaton struck out on his own in 1920, and proceeded to direct and star in a series of short and feature-length films, many of which constitute major achievements of the silent era.  When his distributor experienced financial troubles in the late 1920s, Keaton signed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), for whom he starred in the memorable *The Cameraman* (1928). His contract with MGM, however, signalled an end to the creative autonomy that he had enjoyed as an independent and — with the rise of synchronised sound in the late 1920s — Keaton’s career took a serious tumble. For MGM, he would write gags for the Marx Brothers and star in a series of features with Jimmy Durante, but he never again produced the beautiful pantomimic films for which he is justly remembered.  Keaton’s independently produced films are notable for their interest in the relationship between human beings and the built environment. He structured many of his feature films by means of an extended conflict between Buster and a single machine, such as an ocean liner (*The Navigator*, 1924), a locomotive (*The General*, 1926), or a riverboat (*Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, 1928). Keaton’s interest in machines extended to the film apparatus itself, the subject of both the truncated feature *Sherlock Jr.* (1925) and *The Cameraman*. In this sense, Keaton’s work can be understood in terms of Miriam Hansen’s concept of vernacular modernism: the idea that Hollywood films of the studio era constituted an aesthetic form that engaged with new modes of sensory perception, new experiences of time and feeling, and a changed relationship to the world of objects.  Keaton’s work was of interest to various members of the European avant-garde, including Salvador Dali, Federico Garcia Lorca, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, and Luis Buñuel. For Buñuel, Keaton’s work was exemplary in its decentring of human psychology and its foregrounding of the automatic behaviours of both persons and objects. In a review of *College* (1927), for instance, Buñuel wrote that Keaton was ‘the great specialist in fighting sentimental infections of all kinds,’ explaining that his ‘expressions are as modest as, for example, a bottle’s; the dance floor of his pupils is round and clear, but there his aseptic spirit does pirouettes.’ Pronouncements like Buñuel’s hint at the complex reception of Keaton’s work. That a single filmmaker’s work might be located firmly within the tradition of the classical Hollywood cinema and at the same time appeal to members of the avant-garde represents significant success in its bridging of high and popular culture.  Link: *Cops* (Keaton, 1922)  <https://archive.org/details/Cops1922>  Link 3: ‘The Three Keatons’  <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Threekeatons.jpg>  Link 4: Buster Keaton, full-length portrait (LoC)  <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c26201/> |
| Further reading:  (Carroll)  (Dardis)  (Gunning)  (Hansen)  (Knopf)  (Lastra)  (North) |