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**KEATON, Joseph Frank (“Buster”) (4 October 1895–1 February 1966)**

American filmmaker and comedian Joseph Frank (“Buster”) Keaton was born in Piqua, Kansas where his mother and father were touring as variety performers. Keaton joined their act at age 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. He 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 20s, Keaton signed with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, for whom he starred in the memorable *The Cameraman* (1928). His contract with MGM, however, signaled an end to the creative autonomy that he had enjoyed as an independent and—with the double blow of synchronized sound in the late 20s—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 decentering of human psychology and its foregrounding of the automatic behaviors 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 while at the same time appealing to members of the avant-garde suggests surprising connections between the cinema’s lowest and highest instances.

**Paratextual material:**

*Cops* (Keaton, 1922)

<https://archive.org/details/Cops1922>

*Film* (Beckett, 1965)

<http://vimeo.com/20059827> (excerpt)

“The Three Keatons”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Threekeatons.jpg>

Buster Keaton, full-length portrait (LoC)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c26201/>

**References and further reading:**

Carroll, N. (2009) *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping*, Oxford: Wiley and Sons. (An extended treatment of the visual style and structure of *The General*.)

Dardis, T. (1979) *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn’t Lie Down*, New York: Charles Scribner. (A concise and easy-to-read biography that traces Keaton’s life from his days as a child performer in his parent’s vaudeville routine through his late commercial work and participation in Samuel Beckett’s *Film*.)

Gunning, T. (1995) “Buster Keaton, or The Work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *Cineaste* 21 (3): 14-16. (A review of Keaton’s films on the occasion of their re-release on DVD with particular attention to Keaton’s depiction of the relationship between human beings and machines.)

Hansen, M. (1999) “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism”, *Modernism/modernity* 6 (2): 59-77. (An influential argument for the modernity of studio-era Hollywood cinema with emphasis on the reception of films of the lower genres among Soviet filmmakers.)

Knopf, R. (1990) *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. (An exhaustive account of Keaton’s work in terms of the theater, the classical Hollywood cinema, and its reception among the European surrealists.)

Lastra, J. (2009) “Bunuel, Bataille, and Buster, or the Surrealist Life of Things”, *Critical Quarterly* 51 (2): 16-38. (An account of Luis Bunuel’s interest in certain formal and thematic characteristics of Keaton’s work and the influence of these characteristics on *Un Chien Andalou*.)

North, Michael. (2008) *Machine-Age Comedy*, New York: Oxford University Press. (The first chapter of North’s book concerns the surprising formal similarities between Keaton’s *The Cameraman* and Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* and constitutes an interesting introduction to the relationship between Keaton’s work and more self-consciously modernist filmmaking.)