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12 February 2023

Buster Keaton Through the Eyes of Carroll

In his analysis of "The General" by Buster Keaton, Noel Carroll prefaces his evaluation by stating that he would avoid ambiguity by emphasizing the content of Keaton's gags rather than the gag's structures to explain Keaton's humorous tactics. To do this, Carroll employs several examples to focus on the underlying themes of automatism and inattention. The protagonist, Johnnie, is portrayed as someone who lacks attention and often misses "what is...before the subject's...eyes." After separating the film into five parts, Carroll focuses on "the most famous gag of the first part" and paints the scene where Johnnie "slumps back onto the driverod" shortly before the engineer begins moving the train. The fact that Johnnie, in a rejective state from Annabelle, fails to realize that he's sitting on the moving driverod of a train elicits a type of humor that the audience sees as a sense of carelessness. Carroll then proceeds to address the question if automatism becomes a major recurrent theme throughout and film, and through other examples, he exemplifies this reality. For example, Carroll highlights a scene where Johnnie is completely unaware of Union spies surrounding him and essentially taking control of the situation. Small examples like these help exemplify Carroll's analysis of how automatism and inattention play central roles in eliciting laughter from the audience. To add on the idea of automatism/inattention, Carroll mentions how the concept of a railroad acts as a central theme in the movie due to Johnnie's "one-track mind." He explains this connection by claiming that Johnnie represents a train that "travels...oblivious to...the changing environment

[is].” Carroll expands on this concept by adding that inattention leads to physical consequences, often depicting a discrepancy between a character’s “mental map and the actual situation,” and continues to expand on the theme of automatism and inattention.