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Buster Keaton's Comedic Innovations

Buster Keaton was a pioneer in the rapidly evolving art of cinema comedy in the 1920's, and his far reaching influence in the genre is still being realized to this day. In a time when slapstick comedy was making way for more serious narratives, Keaton was able to masterfully wed the two through his innovative gags and respect for dramatic narrative. Today his influence is felt most prominently in the films of Wes Anderson, whose films are thematically and stylistically on par with Keaton's.

By the time Keaton found his way into the film industry, the gag had already been firmly established within the slapstick genre. So, although Keaton was not responsible for the invention of the gag, he was able to take this already prominent feature of early slapstick and transform it into a device more suitable for dramatic works. David A. Cook describes Keaton's invention – the trajectory gag – as a device “...in which the perfect timing of acting, directing, and editing propels the Keaton character through an extended series of dramatically connected sight gags ending in the denouement of a sequence or an entire film” (219). Instances of the trajectory gag can be observed in its remedial form as early as 1920, with the release of *One Week*. However, by the time *The General* was released seven years later Keaton had mastered the technique, allowing him to combine comedy with dramatic narrative in a more fluid manner.

In *One Week*, directed by Keaton and Edward F. Cline, the use of the trajectory gag is worth examining (although it is present as only a shadow of what Keaton would later accomplish).

The short itself is the story of a newlywed couple who face a series of challenges as they attempt to settle into their new lives. One such challenge, and the first clear instance of trajectory gag within the film, comes when Keaton attempts to install a chimney on their recently constructed (albeit poorly) house. Outside the house, Keaton struggles to carry the awkwardly shaped item up a ladder. Inside the house, Keaton's wife takes a bath. "The crosscutting between two separate spaces establishes the components of the gag that will eventually intersect in the gag's penultimate moment", or denouement (Trahair 307). After a fruitless effort to walk up the ladder with the chimney over his head, Keaton finally balances it on top of his head and successfully scales the ladder. Inside, Keaton's wife drops her soap outside of the bathtub. She makes to reach for it, but stops short as she acknowledges the camera. A hand (presumably the cameraman's) then places itself over the lens long enough for her to reach the soap and retreat safely back to the cover of the bath. On the roof now, Keaton sizes up the hole where the chimney needs to be installed and decides to place it around his waist. As he tries to make his way slowly down to the chimney opening he slips dramatically and slides down the roof. Fortunately the chimney slides down and fits directly into the correct opening. Unfortunately Keaton now finds himself inside the chimney, struggling to hang on lest he fall into the house below. Soon enough he slips and falls through the chimney directly into the tub where his wife was bathing. Having inexplicably transferred herself to the shower, she now scolds him for his intrusion, causing Buster to scramble for the exit only to find that the door leads to nothing. The trajectory gag (and consequentially the scene) concludes with Buster falling out of the door and plummeting to the ground below in signature Keaton fashion.

Clearly this scene fits the description of a trajectory gag, as Keaton has just been led through a series of sight gags (climbing the ladder with the chimney, slipping on the roof,

landing in the bathtub, falling out of the door) that ultimately lead to the conclusion of the scene. Furthermore, as Trahair notes, “This extended gag contributes to the development of the film’s narrative to the extent that Keaton has successfully completed the task of inserting the chimney in its appropriate place...” (307). Even in Keaton’s early films he was already using gags to progress his films narratively.

While *One Week* finds Keaton experimenting with a burgeoning knowledge of advancing his narrative using trajectory gag, *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) finds him displaying his mastery of the technique. In fact, the trajectory gags employed in *Sherlock Jr.* are so paramount to the narrative itself that there would quite literally be no movie without them.

The story of a down on his luck projectionist who dreams himself into a film, *Sherlock Jr.* features a breathtaking trajectory gag in the final act that “...moves with unflinching speed and unfaltering rhythm from gag to gag” (Robinson 103).

Having just learned of his love’s imprisonment at an old farm house, Keaton makes a mad dash to thwart her captor’s sinister plans. The trajectory gag begins as Keaton sprints down the street and comes across a mustached motor biker (his partner in disguise) who beckons for Keaton to sit on his handlebars. All seems to be going well until they ride through a shallow, water-filled pothole, the jolt of which knocks Keaton’s partner from the bike. Keaton, oblivious to the driver’s absence, continues to ride the bike’s handlebars through several traffic-heavy intersections, barely avoiding a collision each time. Meanwhile, the antagonists (riding in a car) tear down a dirt road. Back to Keaton, who continually gestures for the driver to slow down as he is pelted with shovelfuls of dirt, gets caught on a tug of war rope, and finally crashes through a picnic before coming to the most dangerous stunt in the trajectory: An unfinished bridge. Fortunately he is saved in the nick of time by two passing trucks, which line up perfectly under

the bridge's gaps and allow Keaton safe passage to the other side. However, the bridge seems to end prematurely, and just as it appears Keaton may ride straight over the edge the bridge collapses conveniently to the ground and the motor bike continues down the road. The next obstacle Keaton approaches is a fallen log that blocks the road. Two road workers (who we have just seen place dynamite under the log) wave their arms wildly at Keaton to warn him of the danger, but the motor bike continues on a collision course with the fallen tree. At the last minute the dynamite explodes, clearing the tree and parting the way for Keaton.

As Trahair aptly notes, "Comedy usually arises when the audience has a wider perspective on the events being presented than the characters themselves have" (313), which is certainly true of Keaton's ignorance regarding the bike's driver. But sometimes the opposite is also true. Such is the case as Buster and a large wagon ride towards each other, events that would seem to precipitate a crash. At the last minute it is revealed the wagon is hollow underneath with a tunnel-like opening that allows Keaton to pass beneath the carriage unharmed. The irony of this outcome provides both a humorous moment as well as relief from the dramatic tension it has just built up.

Back on the road Keaton relaxes on the handlebars of the moving bike, awarded a brief moment of down time after the last series of perils. His comfort is short lived, however, as he barely escapes being flattened by a train and another automobile. On top of that he is now fully conscious of his partner's disappearance. At the farmhouse, the butler who is holding Keaton's love interest captive loosens his bow tie suggestively. The girl shakes her head desperately as he reaches for her across the table. Now at the farmhouse's driveway, Keaton rides the bike head on into a pile of wood near the house's window, sending him flying through the window and feet first into the butler. At the same moment, the antagonist's car arrives and parks next to the

broken window. They all pile out and rush into the house as Keaton and the girl climb through the window and into the antagonist's car. The villains, realizing this, get into the butler's car and a high speed chase ensues that ends when Buster throws a pool ball into their engine. The trajectory, however, ends when Keaton attempts to break too quickly, sending the car (sans wheels) into a river.

Sherlock Jr. was written and directed solely by Keaton, and effectively displayed "...every facet of the skills which had now reached the peak of their development" (Robinson 102). Not only is this trajectory gag longer and more complex than the one observed in *One Week*, it also has more bearing on the narrative. Furthermore it is difficult to determine when gag ends and when narrative begins, indicative of Keaton's progressive fusion of the two.

This fusion would be complete by the time Keaton released *The General*, a film "...in form and method...like no other comedy, not even another Keaton picture. Here, uniquely, the dramatic action and the comic business are one and interdependent. You never feel that the story is simply an excuse for the comedy, or that the gags are a decoration planted on the story" (Robinson 148). For *The General* Keaton's trajectory gags would become more transparent, meaning that to identify an isolated gag is far more difficult. Much of the comedy and drama flows together to create a new type of film, almost completely independent of its slapstick roots.

Using the American Civil War as its backdrop, *The General* follows a lone Southern railroad engineer into enemy lines as he desperately attempts to rescue his two greatest loves; his train and his would be girlfriend (both the former and the latter have been stolen by the union army).

An excellent example of Keaton's aptitude for seamlessly blending comedy and dramatic narrative comes less than a third of the way into the film. Keaton, having commandeered a train

engine and cannon, rides in hot pursuit of his hijacked General. The Northern men aboard the General have Buster outnumbered, but they choose not to fight believing (falsely) he is accompanied by a great Southern army. Preparing for a fight, Keaton meticulously loads his cannon, lights the fuse, and then runs back to the safety of the engine car. At the same time, the Northerners are climbing towards the back of their train to face Keaton with pistols drawn. A moment of silence precedes the blast as the camera lingers on the cannon. Without warning it erupts, but there is only enough gunpowder in the weapon to propel the steel ball gently onto the floor of Keaton's engine car. He looks at it in surprise and then rushes back to his cannon as a cannonball fired by the Northerners lands perilously close. Once again Keaton loads the cannon, but this time he forgoes careful measurement of the gunpowder, instead opting to put the entire canister in. With the fuse lit Buster scrambles to get back to the engine car, but in doing so he accidentally disconnects the cannon car with his foot. He struggles to keep the car attached, but is unsuccessful. To make matters worse the detached cannon has slipped down from its 45 degree angle to point directly at Keaton, who frantically tries to get away. In the climax of this sequence the northerners reach the back of the General and prepare to fire upon Buster (who is now clinging to the uppermost part of his train in an attempt to escape his own cannonball). At this moment two things seem apparent; Keaton is a sitting duck for the Northerners bullets, and he is about to be derailed by his own cannonball. Just as it seems all hope is lost, the combination of perfect timing and a bend in the railroad tracks causes the cannonball to narrowly miss Buster. Instead it lands dangerously close to the Northerners and temporarily thwarts their plans.

Although Keaton's difficulty with his cannon is largely played for laughs (at one point he throws a piece of wood in a futile effort to repel it), the stakes for Keaton have never been higher. This moment is far removed from the goofy comedy of *One Week*, or even the dream

induced comedy of *Sherlock Jr.* The worlds inhabited by Keaton in those films are tailored to him, and despite a decided flirtation with danger he never really seems to be in serious trouble. *The General*, however, places Keaton in a foreign world and uses the gag in a more subtle, dramatic way.

As far as *The General's* use of the trajectory gag, it could be argued that from the point where Keaton's General is stolen up until the point where he reaches the Northern encampment is one complete trajectory gag. Keaton is certainly propelled through dramatically connected gags and obstacles that lead to his climactic rescue mission at the Northern camp. However, it is hard to say what is gag and what is drama (note the above scene) as Keaton works his way deeper into enemy lines.

Keaton's masterful blending of comedy into the dramatic narrative of *The General* makes for a nice segue way into another reason for Keaton's ability to wed the two: his respect for dramatic narrative.

Prior to Keaton's appearance in the filmmaking world, Mack Sennett represented the status quo for slapstick comedy at the time. Simply put, "...Sennett's Keystone comedies posited a surreal and anarchic universe where the logic of narrative and character was subordinated to purely visual humor of a violent but fantastically harmless nature" (Cook 210). At the time, a large number of film's greatest stars had begun their careers working on Sennett's production lots, including Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Fatty Arbuckle (Benayoun, Conrad 78).

Keaton, on the other hand, began his career working with Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle in 1917, shortly after the latter had defected from Mack Sennett's Keystone Films (Benayoun, Conrad 78). From the start of his career Keaton was a step ahead of the slapstick genre norms, and it didn't hurt that he had a natural predilection for cinema. Even before he was making films

of his own Keaton was already demonstrating an advanced understanding of films capabilities. Furthermore, he was taken by the new possibilities of the medium. As Keaton himself states in his autobiography, "...the greatest thing to me about picturemaking was the way it automatically did away with the physical limitations of the theater...if you wanted cities, deserts, the Atlantic Ocean, Persia, or the Rocky Mountains for your scenery or background, you merely took your camera to them" (Keaton, Samuels 93).

Influenced in part by the new ground being broken by dramatic filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith just years prior, Keaton gained a vast interest in dramatic cinema (Keaton, Samuels 95). Furthermore, Keaton's entrance into the film industry coincided with a demand for more feature length films (as opposed to the two reel slapstick comedies Sennett had become known for). Audiences were starting to see films as more than a cheap form of entertainment, and Keaton realized this (Trahair 308).

Perhaps the most important belief held by Keaton (in regards to film) was the idea that "...comedy must be funny without being ridiculous" (Cook 217). While Sennett believed narrative to be subservient to comedy, Keaton thought the opposite. It was this belief that would later shape his Magnum Opus, *The General*, into an expert mixture of comedy and narrative.

Keaton's knack for creating dramatically sound comedies set him apart from his peers and helped him to mold the slapstick genre into a medium more appropriate for the transition to feature length works. Even Chaplin, arguably Keaton's comedic equal, was not nearly as apt at creating fluid, feature length dramatic films. As Dwight Macdonald notices in his introduction to Keaton's autobiography, "Keaton's comedies were all of a piece while '*The Gold Rush*' is five or six disparate shorts" (5). While *The Gold Rush* (1925) is certainly an excellent film in its own right, the narrative does tend to shift between Chaplin's quest for gold, his love interest, and his

survival in the Klondike wilderness. Each segment of the film could have been its own two reel short. On the other hand, Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (which was released a year before *The Gold Rush*) maintains a constant narrative throughout that only occasionally digresses.

Furthermore, Chaplin was not of the opinion that comedy could not be absurd. For instance in a particularly bizarre scene from *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin awaits the arrival of his would be lover and her friends on New Year's Eve. He has decorated his cabin, set out gifts, and prepared a lovely meal. Just as he puts the finishing touches on his dinner, he hears something outside. Suspecting it to be his company he quickly fixes his hair in the mirror and opens the door eagerly. But instead of the gaggle of attractive women he was expecting it is a pony that forces its way into his cabin and starts to eat his decorations before being shooed away by a bewildered Chaplin. While this is undoubtedly a humorous moment, it makes no narrative sense and cements Chaplin's film as a direct Mack Sennett era descendent.

Although it would be incorrect to assume Keaton never used comedy in a preposterous or ridiculous manner. *Sherlock Jr.* is riddled with dramatically unlikely moments, but as David Robinson puts it, "Keaton permitted himself a certain licence in applying his principle that comedy must not be 'too ridiculous' by putting the film...into the framework of a dream" (96).

Today Keaton's influence has been felt in a wide variety of modern filmmaker's works, the most noteworthy of which is Wes Anderson. His films are not only thematically akin to Keaton's, but stylistically as well.

Like Keaton, Anderson is known for taking inherently dark subject matter and presenting it in a lighthearted way. For example both *The General* and Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (movies unanimously considered to be comedies) use war torn countries as the backdrops for their narratives. "...Keaton invents rare forms of comedy, making them work even when the

subject matter is tragic” (Benayoun, Conrad 21) Anderson’s *The Royal Tenenbaums* deals with estrangement, unhappiness, and dysfunctional families while still maintaining a comedic atmosphere. Similarly Keaton’s *One Week* deals with marital strife in a humorous way. This is apparent before the film even begins as a title card comes onto the screen that reads “[t]he wedding bells have such a sweet sound but such a sour echo.” Keaton’s films often involved protagonists overcoming a series of obstacles in order to be with the woman they love (*The General*, *Sherlock Jr.*, etc.). The same can be said of Anderson’s *Moonrise Kingdom*, a film in which a decidedly Keatonesque young boy and his love interest attempt to evade numerous characters that would see them separated.

Wes Anderson also draws from Keaton stylistically. For one thing, both filmmakers will dedicate full shots to still photographs or otherwise stationary items (calendars, books, etc.). In *The General*, the very first time we see Keaton’s love interest is through a close up of a small, framed photograph. The first time we see the protagonist Sam in *Moonrise Kingdom* is in essentially the same way. Towards the beginning of *The General* Keaton gives a framed photograph of himself as a gift. A close up shot of the picture reveals it to be Keaton, center frame, in front of his train. Shots such as that would directly influence Anderson’s work in films like *The Royal Tenenbaums*, where close ups of book covers (complete with stone faced characters in the center of the frame) are a pervasive visual motif. But photographs are not the only inanimate objects displayed in this fashion. Even an early Keaton film such as *One Week* made use of this type of shot (the film opens on a close up of a calendar).

Keaton’s influence on filmmakers today is undoubtedly as great as it is because of the innovation he introduced to slapstick comedy. He entered the world of filmmaking at a critical

moment in comedy's evolution, and in many ways was a pioneer of the modern comedies we enjoy today.

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