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Thomas Vaughn

This article reexamines the common perception that film comedian Buster Keaton failed to make the transition from the silent to the sound period.
Contrary to popular belief, he enjoyed a four year period during which some of his most successful films were made. The reason for his disappearance from public view at the height of his popularity is linked to the comedians inability to make the artistic transition into the sound era. While his early sound films are successful, he casts himself as an anachronistic image, thus immobilizing his traditional protagonist.

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In 1958 Charlie Chaplin released the film *Limelight* marking the first time that he performed with fellow silent film comedian, Buster Keaton. In this cameo role Keaton, looking tired and somewhat bored, plays an antiquated vaudevillian piano player who accompanies the clown Calvero's (Chaplin's protagonist) final performance, a bathos laden scene that concludes with Chaplin tripping from the stage and into the orchestra pit—meeting his end trapped within a large base drum in one final yet fatal gag. The irony of this scene is that Chaplin, a comedian that had been highly critical of sound pictures would still be making movies while Keaton, a contemporary who had embraced this new technology, only lasted four years into the sound period. The canonization of Keaton's silent film career began in the late 1960s as film critics excavated dozens of short classics and a series of feature films. One of the great questions that continues to occupy both critics and fan clubs (it is often difficult to distinguish the two) is why Keaton, who was equally popular to and more productive than Chaplin, did not survive the advent of sound.

This inability to translate across the sound barrier has been explained in a number of ways, usually returning to MGM's failure to recognize his artistic genius as well as the comedian's personal struggle with alcoholism and his growing marital problems (Gehring, 1988). Other critics attribute this to Keaton's unique and special relationship with the genre of silent film. One fansite follows this chain of reasoning by borrowing from Keaton historian and critic Walter Kerr:

> "I have called Keaton the most silent of silent film comedians without quite explaining why. The silence was related to another deeply rooted quality—that immobility, that sense of alert repose, we have so often seen in him… his pictures are motion pictures. Yet, though there is a hurricane eternally raging around him, and though he is often caught up in it, Keaton's constant drift is toward the quiet of the hurricane's eye" http.www.cinepad.com/busterk.htm

It is true that his unique artistic relationship with the aesthetics of silent film and his ability to wed himself to matter set him apart from other filmmakers, but this only tells part of the story. What these critics, fans, and historians often overlook is that this failure to translate was not the result of institutional or personal failure, but was instead driven by his inability to adapt his artistic expression to this new technology.

Keaton's film career would end for all practical purposes in 1933 after the release of the sound film *What? No Beer!*. This film was the last in a trio of films done with the rising star Jimmy Durante, a fast-talking ethnic stereotype known for his disproportionate facial features. While the accepted historical version of Keaton's fall into obscurity holds that his sound movies were artistic failures promoted by the philistines at MGM, this film constituted is greatest commercial success. Given that substance abuse and personal problems had plagued his career since the early 1920s, why now, after more than a decade, would he suddenly disappear from the mass-culture at a time when his career seemed to be on the upswing? To understand this conundrum one must look to his unique relationship with technology. Trahair (2002) suggests that Keaton's films often

functioned as allegories on technology and the developing technology of cinema itself. Throughout the silent period, in films such as *Steamboat Bill Jr.* and *The General,* he interacted with machines in very creative ways and, more importantly, pushed the boundaries of cinematic technology itself with jumpcuts and unique framing devices. With the advent of sound, Keaton once again embraced the new technology and viewed it as an opportunity to push the cinematic envelope. Kline (1983) correctly notes that Keaton felt that sound should not be used as a gimmick, but that it should be integrated into the narrative of the film and used to progress the story. His quick recognition that sound was more than special effect and could be used to drive both gags and storylines put him once again at the forefront of cinematic development.

Thus the original question once again reemerges. Why did Keaton slip into obscurity after a brief period of success? The answer lies in the expressive changes that sound film initiated and creating shifts that would have a profound impact on the social morals through which cinematic narratives were articulated. Keaton's naïve romantic hero, a character that had so endeared him to a generation of silent film audiences, became a silly anachronism in this new technological geography. Rather than adapting this character, Keaton recognized the value in maintaining it. Only in this new universe the energy that had once driven the narrative gag structure of his films reduced him to the role of straight man. In his analysis of Renaissance comic culture, Bakhtin (1984) suggests that all objects and phenomena of Rabelais' world are subjected to both praise and abuse, and in this way become participants in the carnival drama of the simultaneous rejection of the old world and the embrace of the new. Even has he reached new heights of popular consumption, he was, in effect, portraying his traditional hero as anachronistic. In short, Keaton laid the groundwork for the rejection of his own filmic personae by locating his films' comic energy in the alienation of his protagonist, reducing himself to a comic dupe that remained out-of-step with the new age of social realism and moral self-awareness ushered in by the sound period.

A Few Notes on Auditory Reality

Before engaging in an analysis of this dynamic tension between the new and the anachronistic, a few comments upon the transition between silent and sound technologies are in order. Early sound pictures would appropriate the dying tradition of Vaudeville in and interesting blend of nostalgia and technological progress. Films such as *Hollywood Revue of 1929* and *Free and Easy* (1930) would feature Keaton doing old stage routines. This was common during the transitional period where sound was simply reproduced for the sake of itself and many audiences were afforded an opportunity to hear Hollywood icons speak or sing for the first time. When Hollywood returned to the business of traditional narrative cinema, little development was seen over the silent period. For Keaton the gag, often revolving around his interaction with technology, drove the narrative. In perhaps his best known film *The General* (1927), the narrative revolves around a series of gags that center around his seamless interaction with a locomotive. In one scene, Keaton has been rejected by an idealized love-interest and sits dejected upon the drive-bar of his train which gradually begins moving. He sits unmoving and unflinching, almost indistinguishable from the machine itself. Walter Kerr (1985) writes that Keaton made a fetish of his very adaptability given that he was wed to matter and

would trace the outlines of this mechnistic reality with his own highly stylized movements. Daniel Moews (1977) concurs by suggesting that Key both humanized the machines that surround him, even as the hero himself appears to move in harmony with them. In this kinetic universe Keaton is at home and seems in no way displaced as he imitates the natural motions that frame him. The aesthetic that emerges in the silent era is thus one of pure motion where human and machine work in seamless harmony to obtain a pure, idealized female heroine who herself exists as an object of apotheosis. Undaunted, Keaton and machine work together to obtain a common goal. This was to settle the comic universe by romantic closure or getting the girl.

As one moves into the sound era, the relationship of the gag to the narrative changes. In an analysis of his short films, Trahair (2002) notes that Keaton's narratives represent a "restricted economy" where the gags are defined as an expenditure without return that leads to the destruction of meaning and the waste of resources. The equation of the gag to a waste-expenditure dynamic is incorrect when one carefully examines films from the silent period, particularly with regard to the features. Often it is the gag that will productively redirect the narrative in new and unexpected directions. Yet Trahair's analysis might seem more relevant to Keaton's sound films. Take for example the classic gag routine of putting the drunk woman-to-bed in *Speak Easily* (1933) where he adapts a common stage routine where one person attempts to manipulate the flaccid body of another with one mishap after another. While these types of gags routinely drove the narratives of his silent films, in the context of a screwball comedy that is based around witty dialogue, sexual innuendo, and interpersonal exchange, a routine such as this one appears to be a distraction or a derailing of the narrative for a gag spectacle. It is here that one begins to see Keaton made immobile, becoming an object of derision rather than identification.

The disabling of Keaton's gag aesthetic can be directly traced to this key shift in technology. The father of modern film criticism, Bazin (1971), argues that the goal of modern cinematic art is to create a tension between fantasy and reality, a manufacturing of an aesthetic that aims at crafting an illusion of reality within this fictive realm. Film historians have noted that the addition of the voice to the visual medium creates a profound focus around image, vocalization, and most importantly, veracity (Lastra, 2000). Even early in the development of the filmic medium, many innovators such as Thomas Edison long viewed sound/picture synchronizing as the ultimate goal because it fulfilled the promise of complete fidelity (Morton, 2000). This obsession with verisimilitude would have far-reaching effects for the cinema not only for its unwritten contract to reproduce reality faithfully, but in its ability to record the norms and values of the time. In some ways the silent medium lent itself to the transportation of the audience into a completely foreign or idealized moral universe. When the heroes and villains began to speak, a new set of ethical standards emerged. In this context, the Keaton gag became a narrative detour or a moment of immobility that froze the narrative in place the same way that an engine might seize if deprived of oil.

In her fascinating analysis of the sexual spectacles such as Rudolph Valentino and male boxing competitions, Hansen (1991) provides insight into the ways that sexuality

often found its way into the silent cinema. These images aside, as motion pictures evolved into the 1930s so did its stars and narratives in the brief period just prior to the age of government censorship. The most compelling Hollywood stars such as Douglass Fairbanks and Mary Pickford would soon venture down the road to maturity during the sound era, shattering the "all-American boy, and the "girl-next-door" image that they each possessed respectively. In a description of Pickford's first speaking role, Walker (1979) suggests that her transition from the silent to the sound period was marked by a type of sexual maturation as well. As the early 1930s came into full swing, stars such as Mae West, with her bawdy, sexually suggestive humor, began to take center-stage. As never before local organizations called for greater moral restraint in a Hollywood that was learning that sex sells, causing the cinema to become a battleground for the hearts and loins of average Americans. Forsythe (1973) equated West and her explicit humor with the lewdness of the middle-class having a moment of sin before the censors took over. What critics and historians may have overlooked is the direct connection between these technological shifts and the emergence of mature content, penis jokes, and the sexually aware, even aggressive heroines.

The reason that sound links verisimilitude with a moral shift from childlike, romanticized narratives to those dealing with adult relationships may be intrinsic to the technology itself, thus linking morals and the machine in a profound way. In his treatise on the social implication of oral and visual cultures, Walter Ong (1991) argues that the voice enjoys a more direct link with human consciousness by creating a truly interiorized subject. The subjectivity constituted through sound thus has greater ability to forge permanent social bonds, as it is only through interiorization that self is fully realized. The alienation inherent in visual media bred a sense of estrangement between those individuals that use them as a means to experience community. This identity can only be realized in the presence of others. While the sound cinema cannot be equated with oral religious culture, the addition of the voice to visual technology brings with it a sense of social connectivity, that the character on the screen does not inhabit some alien universe, but the social and political reality shared by the audience. Out of this sense of connection emerged literary forms such as social realism, an artistic form that relies upon the interpenetration of the fictional and non-fictional universes.

The following section will explore the way that Keaton's sound films adapted brilliantly to this new set of expectations, but did so in a way that ultimately reduced his own personae to a relic. Much like Marcuse (1991) argues that the modern mass culture renders the modernist ego a "verbalized ghost," Keaton's immobile hero demonstrates the hollowness of his own motivation, will, and inability to enact his desires. Basically, sound forced Keaton from the role of comic genius to straight man, a cultural dupe who exists to absorb, reflect, and misunderstand the gag. While his films were being consumed by increasing numbers of viewers, what these audiences were laughing at was not his ability to manipulate his universe in new and stunning ways, but his own systematic incapacity to understand where and who he was. While audiences came to the cinema with clear reference points for coding Keaton, the dynamic shifted to one that mandated his symbolic imprisonment, ensnared and incapacitated as he was by the new technology. This is not to say that he was either silenced or erased, but that his vocal

immobility contrasted so drastically with the laws of gag-motion established over the past decade-and-a-half, that these films constituted a transition from one aesthetic form to the next. Much as Bakhtin envisioned, Keaton played his gag to the end, offering himself up upon the alter of technological truth, ensuring that he would be cast-off into the refuse pile of aesthetic history.

The Aesthetics of Immobility

At the same time that Keaton was engaged in his comic self-imprisonment, Huxley was authoring the science fiction classic *Brave New World* (1932). In this text, Huxley creates an allegorical critique of his milieu suggesting that the social and ethical progress from traditional values to self-aware cynicism was itself a form of social control. Thus postwar cynicism was driven by an automated intellect where the "rolling of the eyes" sarcasm, and the suspicion toward traditional values was reduced to a trained response, a form of social maintenance that used the romantic tendencies of the savage as a template against which to posit the illusion of self-awareness. In some ways Keaton's personae functions much like the savage newly released from his nature preserve, struggling desperately to maintain his focus upon the idealized visions of the past in a world where he was largely alienated. The only real difference is that Keaton's annihilation was not and ironic allegory, but constituted that first brief victory of the "automatic snicker" in American culture, the illusion of moral and ethical superiority to the romantic visions so carefully cultivated during the silent period. For example, Keaton's professor in *Speak Easily* is so maladroit that his single-minded chivalry becomes the primary mode for the humorous conflict in the film, affording Durante many opportunities to marvel at his co-star's constant inability to grasp social reality. This is most dramatically evidenced on those occasions when he would turn to the audience itself, eyes wide with disbelief, leading them into mutual identification with his character rather than with Keaton. The spectator becomes, in essence, a confederate with Durante who must constantly steer Keaton through a complex moral universe that he is completely incapable of understanding. The conflict and subsequent resolution that is so important to a successful comic text is constituted through Keaton's inability to operate within this new universe rather than his surprising adaptability to unforeseen circumstances.

It is not surprising to see a profound shift in the Keaton character as early as *Spite Marriage* (1928), a film that was released both as a silent and a synchronized sound film. In this film one sees sexually suggestive innuendo and settings that explore the drunken, speakeasy culture. Perhaps the most famous scene from the film, where Keaton is putting the drunken woman to bed, illustrates this profound shift in the representations of morality. There is serious evidence to suggest that sound played a pivotal role in this transition. The film depicts Keaton pursuing his romantic interest Trilby Drew (Dorothy Sebastian) while performing his usual physical stunts. Yet explicit references to his wife's alcoholism and her overtly sexual nature placed Keaton's character (Elmer T. Butz) in a much different universe than before. Where early features present a certain continuity between Keaton and his moral universe, the sound films present him as sexually naïve and perplexed, rendering his physical talents increasingly moot in the face of this moral maturity. In short, we get the jokes that he does not. Once the teaming with

Durante, which was mandated by MGM, had been negotiated, the moral arcs of his narratives were permanently altered and his character rendered immobile. It is not so simple as to argue, as some critics have, that Durante upstaged him. Keaton played his role perfectly. He became the mechanized anachronism that continued to following the moral trajectories of the past. Only alongside Durante these stories became a type of sideshow.

Savedoff (1997) has suggested that many critics have underestimated the Keaton heroines by describing them in passive terms where they exist as the idealized love interest rendered meaningful only as an object to be obtained. While the truth may lie somewhere in the middle during the silent period, the sound period, with it more sexually aggressive female characters, created a completely new comic dynamic. Take for example a scene from *Parlor, Bedroom and Bath* (1931) where Keaton plays a sexually naïve young man who is forced to become a gigolo in an attempt to woo a woman who is bored with "nice" men. Angelica (Dorothy Christie) cannot seem to find a man who can make her jealous enough for him to seem attractive and as long as she stays unmarried so will her younger sister who does not want people to think Angelica an old maid. The younger sister's fiancée predictably thrusts the ill-equipped Keaton into the unlikely role of Don Juan. In this universe of sophisticated carnality, Keaton begins to look out of place, evolving into the role of the straight man who becomes the butt of the joke rather than its driving force. At the beginning of the film Angelica is walking by a pool where one of her effeminate fiancées is just climbing out. She stops and informs him that she is terminating the relationship because he just "doesn't measure up." When, in his indignant embarrassment, he replies that you cannot judge a man while he is wearing his swimming trunks, she replies, "No, but you can get a pretty good idea." It goes without saying that a penis-length joke would have been completely unheard of in the early stages of Keaton's career. This new type of heroine would not lend herself easily to the apotheosis of his silent narratives and often these characters would use his moral naiveté against him.

This new ethical dilemma can be evidence in *Speak Easily* (1932) where Keaton plays a milquetoast professor who, after receiving a large inheritance, ends up financing a bawdy Broadway musical featuring Jimmy Durante. One of the women in the show, Eleanor (Thelma Todd), decides that she is going to marry him for his money, and to this end, constantly throws herself at him sexually. These scenes climax with the bewildered professor being invited up to her room where both of them get extremely drunk. After passing-out Keaton awakes to a hysterical Eleanor who complains of her compromised reputation after having convinced the asexual Keaton that he must have slept with her. Of course Eleanor is worried about anything but her reputation and knows exactly what she is doing. Keaton is eventually rescued by the streetwise Durante and a somewhat tamer young dance girl named Miss Pansy (Ruth Selwyn). Even though Miss Pansy does not stoop to deception in her eventual winning of the professor's heart, she is both scantily clad and sexually aware. These characters become Keaton's caretakers that must continually mediate his sense of chivalry as if it was a type of physical or psychological disability.

Cinematic technology exists at the uneasy junction between verisimilitude and entertainment. R.D.V. Glasgow (1995) argues that the mimetic factor which plays down the artificiality of the performance coexists within the fields of stage and cinema, creating a dynamic tension in which the anti-illusionistic impulse manifests itself as a form of play. The first of the Durante films was a complete failure entitled *The Passionate Plumber* in which Keaton plays a plumber who, while working on some pipes the house of socialite Patricia Alden (Irene Purcell), is mistaken as her lover, a situation which infuriates her caddish boyfriend Tony Lagorce (Gilbert Roland). This film is filled with frenetic scenes where the principles dash about smashing each other over the head with vases while proclaiming their love. One of the central problems here is that this type of acting is unbecoming to the understated Keaton whose silent humor was based on movement, not speech. Kline describes these scenes as having a "vein popping hysteria, and because the actions of the principals are all contrived and passionless, there is nothing remotely appealing about any of the characters in the story" (p. 143). Often these stories have Keaton imitating the actions of others in order to overcome the boundaries created by his own alienation. While this technique was used during the silent era to draw attention to the ludicrous nature of a variety of social conventions, here the social conventions are reinforced by Keaton's complete inability to perform them.

The most popular and lucrative film to emerge from the comic duo of Keaton and Durante was *What? No Beer!*. In this film Keaton starts off as a teetotaler who is convinced by his friend, Durante, to go into the illegal liquor business. As the two friends listen to the radio reporting on the city-wide vote that indicates a desire to end prohibition, Durante perceives an opportunity to make some quick money with his reticent friend. Borrowing ten thousand dollars from Keaton, who ironically plays a taxidermist (a person to preserves dead things), Durante opens up a distillery which begins competing with the mob for the liquor market. Keaton is of course reluctant because his character is slavishly devoted to following laws and regulations, no matter how ill-conceived or ludicrous they might be. The only reason he agree to cooperate is because he develops a crush on the mob boss's girlfriend Hortense (Phyllis Barry) who once gain portrays the stereotypical gold digger from whom he must be rescued. What is driven home time and again in the narrative is Keaton's inability to grasp the new social realities of his world, that he becomes a counterforce to the aesthetics of social realism where idealized romanticism is replaced moral and social complexity. His devotion to law and order is not empowering, but reduces his traditional performance to an obstacle that must be overcome so that the antiquated rules that he represents can be bypassed and subverted.

In a fascinating analysis of Aupuleius' classical allegory *Metamorphoses*, Lateiner (2001) creates the anti-hero Lucius, a figure that moves through Roman society and whose failure to apprehend the social realities around him drive a narrative dynamic of inertia. Here the hero becomes "entrapped in many macabre cul-de-sac. At the same time he welcomes sexual and religious imitations without full—or any—awareness of their dangerous consequences. Immobility of body and mind is thus both a narrative end-game pattern and a pessimistic theme" (p. 218). Lateiner notes that because his imitations are compelled through ignorance, Lucius is rendered visible through "inert,

self-protective stupefaction" and represents "immobility and death like stillness" in relationship to the communities through which he moves (p. 218). Buster Keaton manifests a similar type of social allegory that would eventually mark his complete imprisonment/immobilization even at the height of his popularity. In one scene from *What? No Beer!*, Keaton had been attending pro-prohibition rally where, rather than listening to the speeches, he secretly gawks at Hortense. At the point in the speech where the speaker asks the audience "do you want liquor back in this country?" Keaton draws his own mechanistic alienation into fine relief. When Hortense drops her hanky Keaton retrieves and smells it, causing ejaculate "yes!" at the top of his lungs in his exaltation. He is subsequently beaten by those in attendance and thrown from the assembly hall. Here the physical humor that so thrilled audiences in his past films is used to demonstrate his mechanistic alienation from the new order. Rather than projecting himself through his universe as a self-possessed willful object that is in tune with matter, he continues to imitate a set of social mannerisms that are, much like the heroes of the age, anachronistic, meaningless enactments that simply exist to mark the gaps through which society has tread.

Conclusion

The relationship between sound technology, morals, and artistic expressions is a complicated one. Williams (1992) likens the advent of sound to Plato's metaphor of reality, arguing that the wall of the cave limits and reduces the larger space behind the prisoners to precisely the shape of the screen where upon they see shadows, casting illusions that must mock reality in order to maintain the gaze of those so transfixed. In many ways the silent universe lent itself to the creation of a space where ethical ideals could be portrayed in their purest and most abstract form. When the voice accompanied the picture, the values shifted as well, creating a conflict between those images that had so compelled audiences before this transition. While Keaton's comedy remained effective, the manner in which he adapted to this narrowing focus led to his ultimate immobilization and thus rendered him anathema to the new age. The audiences were not celebrating his life-enhancing physicality, but his gradual rejection as an immobile, inarticulate subject.

In some ways, he sacrificed his aesthetic upon the alter of this new technology. Herein lies the double-edged sword of laughter as both an affirming and a critical force. Keaton's role was necessary. Someone needed to perform it. It is from this imprisonment that the basis for social and political change is constituted, as old images fade in face of new more resonant forms. Keaton played the role of the old form, placing himself in the technological breech between form and subjectivity. Even as he demonstrated the power that film has to create shifts in consciousness, he was himself a victim of this inevitable process. Only in this case he probably could not have foreseen that the laughter he would provoke would ultimately imprison the heroic character that he had created over the past decade, rendering it a quaint anachronism in the scrapheap of history.

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