Comedy Incarnate

Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping

Noël Carroll

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Dedicated to the memory of my father, Hugh Felix Carroll II, who taught me how to laugh

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Introduction:
The Phenomenological Background

The book that follows is an edited version of my doctoral dissertation on Buster Keaton's 1926 film *The General*. That thesis was originally submitted in 1976 to the Cinema Studies Department of New York University. Annette Michelson directed the project; William K. Everson, Jay Leyda, Brooks McNamara, and William Simon composed the remainder of my examining committee. Revisiting this document after almost 30 years is unquestionably a curious affair. Perhaps the aspect of this project that has struck me as the strangest of all is its unacknowledged relation to phenomenology, particularly that of Merleau-Ponty.[1] This is the primary theme that I would like to explore in this introduction, not only because I still need to pay these intellectual debts, but also because it may help to illuminate the historical record with respect to a certain style of film criticism that was influential in New York City in the early seventies, especially with regard to avant-garde film.

Though parts of this book have appeared in print, the argument in its entirety has not. Specifically, my effort to situate the iconography of Keaton's sight gags in relation to his distinctive visual style within the work culture of what can be called the steam, steel, and railroad society of his youth has not been previously aired. In the late seventies, I made several attempts to place the book with distinguished academic publishers, who, at the time, were eagerly pursuing acquisitions in cinema studies, but to no avail. The referees' reports consistently rejected my manuscript on the grounds that it was not "sufficiently theoretical" – code, in those days, for "is not informed by the 'Althusserian-Lacanian' paradigm." Whether those reviewers thought the book was just intolerably naive theoretically or that, sensing its implicit phenomenological leanings, they disdained it as a specimen of what they understood (or misunderstood) to be idealism is something I will never know.[2] But, in any

event, now that the "theory wars" have ended, or at least abated, alternative approaches to film like mine can be discussed openly.

One feature of the approach herein which wears its provenance on its sleeve is its commitment to analyze Keaton's masterpiece primarily in terms of its visual elements – the iconography of Keaton's gags and his use of filmic devices, namely, his composition and editing. Puzzled, some readers may pause and ask " 'visual elements' as opposed to what?" The short answer is *narrative*.

A great deal of what passed for film analysis in the seventies was what we might label "the allegorical interpretation of narrative." This form of exegesis was and is deeply entrenched in literary studies and, insofar as it could be identified as "literary," the young cinephile I once was wanted no part of it. "Literary analysis" was the nemesis and this book was written in reaction to it.

The allegorical interpretation of narrative proceeds by retelling the story or plotline of a film abstractly enough so that the film can be cast as an illustration of some theme or thesis readily paraphrased by a verbal formula. This exercise can be called literary, since no accommodation need be made to the fact that the story is being conveyed visually. One could distill the allegory from a plot description as a literary critic typically does in the course of deciphering the theme of a novel. A real-time viewing experience of the film in question, in other words, appeared not actually to be required.

For example, on the basis of retelling the plots of several of Fritz Lang's films, one might go on to hypothesize that Lang is preoccupied with the theme of paranoia. Or remarking upon the recurring way in which the protagonist in Keaton's silent feature films undergoes a final transformation – metamorphosing from a clumsy clod to one of the most graceful and athletic of screen heroes – when his beloved is endangered, one might claim that what Keaton's films are "about" is the transcendent power of love – its capacity to quite literally overcome every obstacle and to conquer all. But neither of these analyses demands that one take account of how the relevant films look; one could infer the preceding themes on the basis of respectable paraphrases.

This sort of analysis is literary in two senses: it is the kind of allegorical plot analysis in which literary critics specialize *and* it seems that one does not actually need to see the film at issue in order to carry off this type of hermeneutics. The plotline – as a verbal artifact – is the real object of scrutiny. Or so it appeared to me and my generational cohort at NYU in the early seventies. In contrast, we thought that what was called for was a method that took heed of the experience of film viewing and of that which occupies the eyes and mind of the film viewer as the spectacle unfolds visually in time.[3]

For me, it seemed obvious that with respect to a Keaton film such as *The General*, our experience is primarily engaged by the imagery and action of his gags and by the strategies of composition and editing that he mobilized in order to present those routines. Perhaps one could excavate the theme of transcendent love from the plot, but the plot was really little more than a pretext for Keaton's gags which, along with their manner of representation, are what absorb the audience's attention. That is the primary object of our experience, not whatever flimsy moral one could decoct from the well-crafted but unexceptionable plot structure of the film. This book, then, was avowedly written under the sway of the slogan, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."[4] I associated the allegorical interpretation of plot with literary hermeneutics and heard the call for erotics as involving an appeal to treat film as a visual *experience* – a matter of seeing construed as a physical act – specifically with reference to *The General*, a matter of seeing a certain range of recurring sight gags represented by means of a distinctive cinematic style. The isolation and elucidation of these features of *The General*, consequently, became the major foci of my analysis. That is, since it is the sight gags as configured by certain cinematic techniques that comprise the viewer's fundamental experience of the motion picture – since this is what she spends her time watching – it seemed to me virtually self-evident that anything worthy of being called a *cinematic* analysis of *The General* would attend predominantly to these elements. If erotics privileges the experience of the work over its narrative or semantic meaning, an erotics of cinema would have to find a way of discussing its visual address.

The frequent repetition of the mantra of "experience" above should, of course, belie the indebtedness of this project to phenomenology. Though not explicitly alluded to in the text, phenomenology informed my approach in several different respects. This should probably come as no surprise, since my advisor, Annette Michelson, is well known as a commentator on the French theoretical scene, notable already in the sixties as a translator of Sartre and the author of an early appreciation of Lévi-Strauss. Indeed, her own pioneering articles in the early seventies represent some of the best phenomenological film criticism ever written. Maybe the only mystery in this vicinity is why neither she nor I felt any pressure to make my connection to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty more transparent in the thesis.

Because of our conviction that the *experience* (always pronounced as if italicized) of film was not adequately respected by literary approaches devoted almost exclusively to plot, many of us students at NYU explored phenomenology for suggestions about how to overcome this lacuna.

Though Michelson did not lecture on phenomenology outright, her own example and her recommendations for independent reading encouraged us to develop our own homemade, amateur brand of phenomenology, tailored for our purposes.[5] Roughly speaking, I think it is fair to say that we understood phenomenology to involve an interrogation or investigation of the experience of viewing film. This suggested to us that a phenomenological account of a film would involve a characterization of the ways in which various visual strategies orchestrated or conditioned our perception of and attention to cinematic images – both one at a time and in succession.[6] Many at NYU understood this task to be a matter of description, though I am prone to regard it as an affair of explanation.[7]

Due to our conception of the task of the phenomenology of film as a commitment to unearthing the conditions of film viewing, a number of students at NYU – again, inspired by Professor Michelson – developed a lively interest in avant-garde film. This connection with the avant-garde appeared natural for two reasons: first, because in subverting expectations, avant-garde films made our viewing habits and the conditions that afforded them stand out in stark relief; and second, because many of the avant-garde films of the period themselves appeared to be intentionally designed to invite the apperceptive examination of film viewing to which we aspired in our somewhat untutored stabs at phenomenology.[8]

Because of the fit between our phenomenological leanings and certain tendencies in avant-garde film – notably what is sometimes called Structural Film[9] – an association between NYU-type criticism and the New American Cinema took hold. And though there is no gainsaying the depth of this affiliation, it would be a mistake to imagine that the avant-garde was the only species of film that attracted us. The narrative commercial cinema was also part of our beat. Indeed, one of the most important applications of the phenomenological sensibility to cinema takes a narrative film as its object – namely, Annette Michelson's penetrating but now lamentably neglected article "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge," surely the most thoughtful examination of Stanley Kubrick's classic *2001*.[10] My own work on Keaton's *The General*, though far more pedestrian, was also an attempt to use the kind of film analysis that was developing at NYU to illuminate a masterpiece of the "mainstream" cinema.

One idea that I see in hindsight was a consequence of my exposure to phenomenology and which came to be at the center of my discussion of Keaton was the category of bodily intelligence.[11] Undoubtedly, I was alerted to the suggestiveness of this concept by Annette Michelson's treatment of *2001* which,

under the punning rubric of "carnal knowledge," focused on the issue of the way in which bodies move purposively in space – the unusual conditions of Kubrick's version of outer space subverting, defamiliarizing, and foregrounding for reflection the body's knowledge of how to walk, grasp, and orient oneself.[12] In *2001*, physical tasks, like landing a spacecraft, activate the viewer's sense of where the ship is, relative to its destination. Concrete physical operations comprise a large part of the subject of *2001* and what Kubrick discloses cinematically is that our bodies bring their own form of prereflective intelligence to discharging these tasks.

The body is not merely a mindless machine. It is mindful. It possesses a bodily intelligence – a carnal knowledge, as Michelson, taking a cue from Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary, would have it – which is behaviorally incarnated and manifested in action. Furthermore, it is possible to bring this aspect of what Heidegger would call *Dasein* to awareness through film. Michelson had shown that Kubrick did it in *2001*. I wanted to make a comparable case for Keaton's *The General*, a film that appeared clearly to invite such an approach, since it is engaged almost continuously in the representation of the performance of physical tasks, large and small: loading lumber, chopping wood, coupling and uncoupling engines, switching tracks, aiming cannons, and so forth. Moreover, *The General* is not only action-packed and full of interactions with objects. Given the nature of Keaton's comedy, it seems that the mechanics rather than the heroics of his physical encounters with things are precisely what *The General* is about.

Like Michelson, I had been impressed by Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily motor-intentionality.[13] According to Merleau-Ponty, the body has a kind of understanding which is engaged by the cultivation of habit.[14] Bodily behavior is purposive and intentionally directed, though not necessarily mediated by reflection. The body possesses an understanding – Michelson's carnal knowledge – of spatial qualities like distance and orientation in terms of its capacities to act, its dispositions, its projects and purposes. There is, in other words, a uniquely bodily species of understanding involved in the process of our dealings with physical objects – in our manipulation of things and other concrete operations. That is, certain bodily actions are shot through with prereflective intelligence and purposiveness.

The sort of bodily intelligence whose existence Merleau-Ponty sought to establish theoretically, it seemed to me, was the very subject of Keaton's humor, the largest portion of which revolved around the interplay between man and object. Keaton arguably endeavored to disclose the intelligence of concrete bodily operations by, on the one hand, staging gags in which the Keaton

character takes a tumble or otherwise fails to achieve his aims exactly because of his stupendous lack of bodily intelligence; or, on the other hand, by exhibiting feats of physical ingenuity that take the audience's breath away. Keaton underscores bodily intelligence as a human norm by subtracting it from those situations where his character fares badly in his attempts to influence the physical world and by superadding it on those occasions where the character has the material world do his bidding.

Perhaps recalling Heidegger's insight that the breakdown of a tool throws the entire system of equipment of which it is a part into the spotlight, Merleau-Ponty also looked to cases where breakdowns – in his case, bodily ones – occurred as a way of discerning how the system works in the normal course of events. Malfunctioning people, that is, make what is involved in normal functioning clearly manifest where it might otherwise remain invisible. Likewise, I believe that the physical disasters that beset the Keaton character in *The General* underline the standard of bodily intelligence by falling so far short of it. And, in addition, Keaton also limns what is involved in bodily intelligence on other occasions by displaying it to a surpassing degree.[15]

Of course, in saying that Keaton is preoccupied with the theme of bodily intelligence, I do not mean to suggest that this is precisely how he would have characterized what he was up to. Nevertheless, I do think that the link between my way of putting it and his can be made with little or no linguistic strain. For surely Keaton would have said his intent was to make people laugh and, I conjecture, he would not balk at admitting that most of that laughter was to be motivated by the *absentmindedness* or downright dumbness of his character in his attempts to execute various concrete operations. But that, I submit, is just a more colloquial way of saying that the theme of most of Keaton's gags is the absence of bodily intelligence. Keaton might find my way of expressing it off-puttingly academic, but I think he would have no problem recognizing what was being expressed as a characterization of what I call his recurring inattention gags. Moreover, the saliently evident lack of bodily intelligence in the sight gags in *The General*, its breakdown, so to speak, as developed consistently throughout the film serves to bring to mind an intimation of the qualities that genuine bodily intelligence calls for – notably adaptability and alertness – qualities, furthermore, emphasized in those scenes where the Keaton character excels in manipulating the physical world.

The first chapter of this book examines the iconography of Keaton's gags in *The General* – the events that fill the largest portion of our viewing experience. Given what I now recognize as my phenomenological predisposition, I regarded those gags as returning again and again to the theme of

bodily intelligence as illuminated through the performance, or, more often than not, the failed performance of a series of concrete operations. The theme of concrete intelligence is also thrown into relief by contrasting stunts in which a level of physical *savoir faire* that is superordinate is displayed. By means of less and more, failure and success, I argue, Keaton advances through overt activity the insight that the essence of bodily intelligence is adaptability.

This interpretation of the iconography of Keaton's gags corresponded as well to concerns of the New York art world of the seventies, of which I was a minor participant as a dance and performance reviewer for the magazine *Artforum*.[16] A pressing topic of what came to be called postmodern dance was the disclosure of the bodily intelligence involved in the execution of ordinary movements and concrete tasks. In Yvonne Rainer's *Room Service*, the performers move a mattress, providing viewers with the opportunity to scrutinize the finesse with which their bodies negotiate the movement of a large object automatically and prereflectively, but with undeniable mindfulness and care – thought in action. Rainer, a self-confessed fan of Keaton's, also choreographed a piece entitled *The Mind Is a Muscle*, whose very title alluded to the theme of embodiment – that the mind is incarnated in flesh and that our muscles possess a prereflective intelligence for navigating the physical world. The mind is a muscle and the muscles are mindful, so to speak. Rainer's affinity for Keaton thus struck me as not only a matter of sharing the same kind of dead-pan performance mask, but also as a matter[17] of a shared fascination with the physics of movement as managed by the body's intelligence (or, often in Keaton's case, of the mismanagement of things due to the lack of bodily intelligence).

By stressing the phenomenological theme of bodily intelligence in *The General*, it may appear that I have lost sight of the fact that the film is supposed to be funny. And, of course, it is. Much of my discussion in the first chapter attempts to account for Keaton's humor. And once one starts cataloguing the kinds of gags Keaton favors, one becomes increasingly impressed by the fact that the largest number and the most important comic routines in the film revolve around the performance of physical tasks and concrete operations whose success or failure depends upon whether they are discharged with prereflective bodily mindfulness or not. The kind of absent-mindedness the Keaton character displays in so many gags is the linchpin of most of the laughter the movie elicits. But what strikes us as funny about this absentmindedness is that it subverts our expectations about the standard awareness the human body has towards its surroundings. These gags, in other words, ride on failures of bodily intelligence. Thus, speaking of the theme

of bodily intelligence in *The General* does not neglect the humor of the film, but pinpoints the nature of that humor and what it implies.

If Merleau-Ponty helped me to construct a way conceptually to focus on the content of *The General*, he also suggested a framework for thinking about the style of the film. In his "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," Merleau-Ponty represents painting as the artist's way of "expressing his communication with the world."[18] That is, the visual artist's style is an incarnation of the way in which he inhabits the world perceptually – his way of seeing. For Merleau-Ponty, the vocation of the painter is to make his or her way of seeing visible.

Starting with this suggestion, then, I supposed my task to be that of finding a way of characterizing the unique way of seeing embodied in Keaton's distinctive cinematic style – the way he composed the images in *The General* and edited them together. By "way of seeing," moreover, I did not have a metaphorical usage in mind; I did not mean something like Keaton's worldview, ideologically speaking. Instead, I asked what style of literally perceiving the physical world was made manifest in the characteristic ways in which Keaton organized his images visually. This is the project of the second chapter of this book.

In order to capture what distinguishes Keaton's visual style, I coined the concept of "visible intelligibility." This concept is meant to point to how Keaton's use of such strategies as highly determinate, deep-focus, medium-long shots, extremely directive camera angulation, diagonal composition, causal editing, long-shot field reversals, and editing-in-the-round add up to a concerted effort to make the interplay of the physical forces in motion in the film absolutely pellucid to the viewer. I would guess that no director in the history of cinema has been as committed to making the working of the physical world – including the physical interaction between objects and human bodies – as manifest as Keaton. In this I maintain that Keaton expresses his way of inhabiting the *Lebenswelt* which might be summed up by saying that he sees the world as an engineer. By this I do not mean the driver of a locomotive, but a civil engineer, a builder and mover of things.[19]

Keaton's visual style incarnates a way of seeing that is preoccupied with the physical dimensions of the world and with the motion and interaction of material things, including human bodies, as they enter networks of causal relations. Of course, these human bodies are engaged with the physical world in terms of projects and purposes – objects supply the equipment through which the characters must achieve their ends. In order to realize these ends, they must assimilate the demands of the material world with bodily

intelligence. What Keaton's camera work and editing make abundantly perspicuous are the ways in which the bodily actions of the characters, notably the protagonist, mesh with or overlook the pertinent variables in the physical environment, cognizance of which is necessary for their fortunes to flourish. For this reason, one could also describe Keaton's style of portraying material circumstances as expressing a pragmatic view of the world, one that pictures objects as potential equipment. We might say that Keaton's is a pragmatic or equipmental way of being in the world.

But not only does Keaton express his pragmatic, engineer's-eye-view of relating to the physical world by means of his visual style; he also makes this way of seeing available to the audience. Much of the second chapter of this book is spent applying a sort of rough-and-ready phenomenological method to Keaton's highly directive cinematic style – asking how the ways in which Keaton organizes and structures the visual environment shape and condition the viewer's experience of the world portrayed. Keaton, the director, does not merely see the world himself as an engineer; he enables the spectator to apprehend the material world that way as well – making salient the interplay of weight and balance, momentum and arrest, action, reaction, and traction, and stressing throughout the importance of orientational relations such as left/right, up/down, in front of/behind, and so forth.

Of course, there is a functional relationship between Keaton's visual style and the comic content of *The General*. Since his gags are about the presence and absence of bodily intelligence in the encounter between man and object, it is evidently in Keaton's interest for the audience to grasp the physical variables and their relations that are pivotal in each routine. In order to appreciate the pratfalls and other mishaps the Keaton character suffers, the spectator needs a handle on the physics of the situation. And that is what Keaton's commitment to visible intelligibility is all about. In contrast to contemporary films like *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that envision a world without weight and gravity which scarcely resembles the causal order of our own world, Keaton, an *auteur* whose *métier* could be said to be gravity, is a filmmaker who shows us with unparalleled precision how the actual world works physically.

He does so, in part, in order to help us to savor the lapses and feats of bodily intelligence demonstrated by the Johnnie Gray character. But the amount of attention and care that Keaton lavishes on rendering visually intelligible the mechanics of his comic routines, it seems to me, goes way beyond what he needs for the sake of getting a laugh. I try to substantiate this by contrasting Keaton's line of attack with that of other silent comedians like

Harold Lloyd. This leads me to contend that Keaton is not only committed to portraying physical variables to the extent that his gags become comprehensible; the clarity of his images is not simply motivated by our need to know; instead Keaton revels in displaying the physical intelligibility of his fictional world with singular transparency. Keaton is driven by the urge to show us with utter clarity how the world as a configuration of material forces operates – including how it operates in collision or in concert with human bodies in action.[20]

In addition to being impressed by Merleau-Ponty's work, I was also smitten by the phenomenological criticism of the so-called Geneva school,[21] most especially by the writing of Georges Poulet. For Poulet, an author, by means of his emphases and selections, presents his "intentionality" to the reader – the way in which his consciousness is directed toward the world. The task of analysis then is to identify these patterns of experience as they emerge in a text – to notice toward what the author's attention is drawn, and, as well, to characterize the manner in which that attention is articulated. Discussing Balzac, Poulet locates an experiential pattern of recurring physical thrusts forward which he thematizes in terms of a movement toward the future;[22] in Whitman, Poulet finds a mode of consciousness of the world that is marked by infinite receptivity as multitudes crowd into emptiness and things collect, meet up, and fill space.[23] Both authors offer the reader a model of their "intentional consciousness," their fashion of encountering the *Lebenswelt* through reference to very fundamental modalities of experience.

The notion of "authorial intentionality" is immensely suggestive when it is transposed from the literary author to the film director. For essential to the notion of intentionality is *directedness* toward the objects of consciousness and that, of course, is arguably what a director does with cinematic apparatuses – directs cameras towards objects and selects views and perspectives on situations through editing. Thus, cinematic technique can be a way in which a director may objectify, externalize, or incarnate his style of attending to or relating to the world – articulating the temper of his consciousness of things on celluloid, his intentionality or mind embodied, so to speak, in silver nitrate.[24] Though no allusion to Poulet's idea of authorial intentionality occurs overtly in the text – perhaps for fear of sounding too literary – this notion stood behind my analysis of Keaton's visual style, which I unequivocally thought of as rooted in his personal style – his way of inhabiting the world.

As already indicated, I maintain that the mind embodied in the visual style of *The General* is what I have tagged as the mind of an engineer, a pragmatic mentality that surveys the world as potential equipment that, when used

mindfully, abets success but, when treated absentmindedly, courts catastrophe. Keaton's camera takes the measure of its fictional world in a manner sensitive to its physical dimensions – its weights, angles, velocities, causes, masses, orientations, vectors, bodies, human and otherwise – as "thingly" presences that call for the application of concrete, operational, practical human intelligence if they are to be appropriated and managed.

The interpretation of Keaton's visual style in *The General* in light of his concern with delivering the physical intelligibility of the fictional world of the film with utmost clarity, of course, corresponds to or even parallels the preoccupation with bodily intelligence found in Keaton's comic behaviors and stunts. In both what might be thought of as the visual content of the film – the sight gags – and its visual form – the composition and the editing – a theme emerges of a mindful relation with material things with respect to: (1) the bodily intelligence of the protagonist, (2) the obsession with the understanding of the physics of quotidian work embodied in the camera work that Keaton, the director, deploys, and (3) the visual intelligence about material relations that Keaton's cinematic techniques bequeath virtually automatically to the audience. The kind of concrete intelligence with regard to things that the character so often lacks is given to viewers seamlessly by virtue of the engineer's-eye-viewpoint that informs Keaton's graceful mode of visual articulation. Keaton's "carnal knowledge" of the physical environs of his fictional world becomes ours, thereby rehearsing the behavioral theme of bodily intelligence embodied in the action of the film in the audience's own perceptual experience of *The General*.

As a student at NYU, I came to develop an abiding interest in Soviet film of the 1920s.[25] Perhaps, like the Soviet Constructivists, I too was drawn to *The General* due to its irrepressible celebration of machinery. But in any event, while studying the art and culture of the pre-Stalinist USSR, I became both acquainted with and enamored of Russian Formalism. Their conviction that the function of style or form was to enable the audience to perceive the world afresh – to shatter the glass armor through defamiliarization (*ostranenie*)[26] – summarized my enthusiasm for Keaton. Unlike most film directors who – in the critical language introduced in the second chapter – are content to show us merely *that* such and such happens, Keaton is dedicated to showing us *how* causal events unfold with the specific material forces in play set out perspicuously. In this, Keaton shows the audience the physical world in a new light, one rarely encountered in the history of cinema.

But, in addition, Keaton's representation of material processes in a way that vouchsafes their physical intelligibility is not only an uncustomary way

of seeing things on celluloid; it is also the case that in our daily commerce with things in our contemporary electronic culture, we are generally oblivious to how things operate concretely. We use so many devices without understanding how they work – from televisions to cars to so much else. We just press a button – and *voilà*! To most of us involved in service occupations or information industries, our grasp of the physical processes upon which we depend is scant. Much of our work calls for interaction with people, first and foremost, not things. Or if we do not deal primarily with people, we are probably handling data. How different an experience of the world we have from the factory worker, the farmer, or the mechanics who composed the largest part of the work force of Keaton's youth. Their experience relied far more upon the constant exercise of bodily intelligence in the execution of the tasks required by the sorts of mindful manual labor that their jobs presupposed.

Keaton's cinema, as exemplified by *The General*, I contend, bestows upon those of us who are alienated by the kind of work we do from any particularly intensive, mindful, bodily engagement with the causal/material dimension of things, a taste of what it is like to experience it through the eyes of a "mechanic." Keaton's style defamiliarizes the quotidian for professionals like me whose life is dominated by processing paper and/or people. For such viewers, to see things from this novel perspective is exhilarating, engendering pleasure by way of vicariously compensating for something human that is missing from everyday experience today.

Furthermore, I think that something like this compensatory pleasure contributed to the reevaluation in the seventies of Keaton's silent films. I know that the excitement stimulated by access to this, for me, unfamiliar encounter with the world of things was a major source of my enthusiasm for Keaton when first exposed to his *œuvre*. Suddenly I saw things in a new way. It was not that I saw something that I had never seen before, but rather that I had a fresh take on the familiar, perceiving it, sometimes literally, from an unaccustomed angle. The scales fell from my eyes; the experience was intoxicating. The material interconnections between things came alive under Keaton's lens.

I think that a similar feeling touched many others in my contemporary cohort of sedentary movie viewers – especially those of us especially inclined to forget about our bodies once we sat down in the film auditorium of the Museum of Modern Art. Though without prompting, few of them might anatomize their joy with Keaton in the way that I have here, I think that they would not deny that his films put us in contact again with the physical world in a way that was once common to most workers of a bygone era,

but which is vanishing from what we still refer to as the First World. Moreover, I conjecture that the compensatory pleasure available to us today and earlier, in the seventies, from viewing *The General* was also relevant to the success of Keaton's films with urban audiences in the twenties, inasmuch as the processes of the "dematerialization" of labor so evident today were already well underway in the work cultures of Keaton's first audiences, especially in the USA.[27]

Thus far, I have been recounting the argument of the first two chapters of the book, attempting to recontextualize it by adumbrating the critical influences from which my approach drew its energy. I have been especially concerned to explain the unstated phenomenological orientation of the project. There is in addition to the central argument, a third chapter in which Keaton's achievement is contrasted with the achievements of his peers – Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon. By locating Keaton's genius in the confrontation between man and object, it may appear that I have invoked a bland generalization that could be applied equally to any of the great silent clowns. All of them, it might be said, do battle with Murphy beds or some other mechanism of that ilk. In order to defend the specificity of the interpretation of Keaton staged in the first two chapters, it is incumbent upon me to show the ways in which Keaton's relationship to things – both as a comic intelligence and a cinematic stylist – diverges from the line of attack of his most distinguished comedic contemporaries. It is also the purpose of the third chapter to suggest at least how one might proceed to evolve systematic accounts of Chaplin, Langdon, and Lloyd.

After a brief summary of the body of the book, I have included an appendix which addresses a subject that was more or less banished from the earlier version of this project – namely narrative. As already mentioned, when this text was prepared originally, I avoided discussing the narrative of the film at any length because I wrongly associated narrative analysis with extracting an allegory from the plot – something I was loath to do. I now appreciate the limitations of this prejudice against narrative analysis and I have come to realize that the narrative of *The General* deserves more attention than I previously granted it. Therefore, in this new appendix I examine the plot structure of *The General* as an exemplary case of what I call erotetic narration, and, as well, I attempt to explain why the plot itself is comic.[28]

Of my methodology, attention to the spatial organization of the film is probably its most distinctive feature. I continued to pursue this interest in much of my subsequent film criticism, including articles on Orson Welles, G. W. Pabst, and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Throughout my career as a film

critic/interpreter I persisted in much of my work in plying the improvised variant of phenomenology found in this book – attempting to explain the ways in which modifications in the formal structure of the visual array meaningfully shapes our experiences of and responses to the cinematic stimuli. In this regard, my phenomenological focus has always concentrated upon the kinds of perceptual processes most naturally studied by cognitive-perceptual psychologists. Thus, when I eventually redirected my research in film from the realm of criticism to that of theory, it was probably predictable that I would gravitate toward cognitivism. So, at least from where I stand, I see a definite, if indirect, connection between this early work of my film interpretation and my current interests in the philosophy and theory of the moving image.

NOTES

1 I wanted to signal this connection by entitling this text *Embodied Mind: Comic Intelligence and Concrete Operations in Buster Keaton's The General*. But the publisher hated that title.
2 It has always struck me as immensely peculiar that Althusserian-Lacanians disparage phenomenology as rooted in the work of Merleau-Ponty – given his emphasis on the body – as a straightforward case of Idealism.
3 The emphasis on the visual here is not intended theoretically to privilege the visual as some sort of cinematic essence over the aural. Rather it merely acknowledges that *The General* is a silent film.
4 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966), p. 14.
5 In addition to independent reading in phenomenology as a graduate film student, I had also had several undergraduate tutorials in phenomenology with David Michael Levin at Hofstra University.
6 A stellar example of this form of analysis can be found in Annette Michelson's article "Toward Snow," *Artforum* (June 1971), in which Michelson explores the potential relationship between forward-moving zoom shots, on the one hand, and temporal anticipation verging on narrative on the other.
7 See the Introduction to my *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
8 Of course, it would be a mistake to think that this reflexive concern with the conditions of artistic experience – undertaken in the spirit of phenomenology – was restricted to avant-garde film. It was in evidence across the arts, including minimalist painting and sculpture (for example, in the work of Robert Morris) and in theater – most notably in the experiments of Richard Foreman, whose scenography itself as a device for guiding audience attention was often what his plays were about.
9 Though I think that it is true that the impact of phenomenology was greatest on the analysis of Structural (or, as I prefer to call it, minimalist) film, it was

also relevant to the discussion of other tendencies in American avant-garde film. For example, I think that the analysis of Stan Brakhage's project – understood as an attempt to acknowledge some kind of primitive, preperspectival, visual experience – benefited from the precedent of Merleau-Ponty's prior characterization of Cézanne as a painter bent upon recovering primordial perception. For example, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, tr. and ed. Michael Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 59–75.

10 Annette Michelson, "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge," in *Artforum*, Feb. 1969, pp. 54–63.

11 Hubert Dreyfus calls this "embodied coping," a wonderful phrase that I have adapted for the subtitle of this book. See: Hubert Dreyfus, "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 79(2) (Nov. 2005), pp. 47–65.

12 It is interesting to ponder the tantalizing resonances between Sontag's figurative notion of erotics and Michelson's of carnal knowledge.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 110.

14 Ibid., p. 144.

15 It should be emphasized that my dependence on phenomenology, here and elsewhere, is based upon its utility as a *critical* approach and not as an approach to film theory. Thus, my relation to phenomenology differs from that of: George Linden, *Reflections on the Screen* (San Francisco: Wadsworth, 1970); Alan Casebier, *Film and Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

16 See my *Living In An Artworld* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming).

17 Rainer, of course, was not the only choreographer concerned with the subject of bodily intelligence; there was an entire postmodern genre of task dances dedicated to this theme. See Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980) for a discussion of this trend.

18 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, tr. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 54.

19 In this regard, it is worth recalling that Keaton himself claimed that had he not been a comedian, he would have become an engineer. I want to propose that given his visual style as a film director, in a sense, he did become an engineer.

20 Here I do not mean to suggest that Keaton's "vision" correlates with the dimension of perception that most interested Merleau-Ponty. It would be wrong to associate the "vision" embodied in Keaton's camera work with primordial perception, for example. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's inspiration for me

with regard to Keaton's camera work was more in terms of the notion that a visual artist "incarnates" his visual style in his work.

21 See Robert Magliaola, *Phenomenology and Literature* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977), particularly the second chapter, for an account of the Geneva School.

22 Ibid., p. 52.

23 Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, tr. Elliott Coleman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 343–4.

24 I do not want to give the impression that authorial intentionality only pertains to an artist's way of relating to the world perceptually. Throughout his work, Sam Fuller clearly expresses his way, as Merleau-Ponty might put it, of communicating with the world. The diction he favors is an aggressive, slangy, journalistic argot. Its accusatory, sarcastic tone, and "grab-you-by-the-lapels" urgency signal, one suspects, for Fuller a kind of special purchase on the truth. Its rough, "mince-no-words" assertiveness connotes a kind of no-nonsense frankness and honesty – a "tell-it-like-it-is" veracity. This is a not-uncommon image of journalism in film. It appears to be underwritten by the conviction that confrontation is the privileged means of both finding and speaking the truth. Moreover, one finds that the notion of a "confrontational style" also suits Fuller's cinematic approach. His highly assertive visual style – think of the opening of the *Naked Kiss* where the prostitute beats the camera – grabs the audience formally, cinematically hammering at us visually in a manner that recalls the combative verbal style of his journalists. One suspects that for Fuller this deployment of confrontational film techniques stands for his conviction that authenticity is blunt and that confrontation is necessary for getting a handle on the truth. Through his language, and the mentality it reveals, and through his cinematic forms, Fuller projects a personal style that incarnates the way in which he communicates with the world, though, unlike Keaton, the realm that concerns Fuller most involves relations between people rather than between people and things.

25 Another debt that I owe to Annette Michelson.

26 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," *Russian Formalist Criticism*, eds. Lee Lemon and Marion Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3–24.

27 Undoubtedly advancing this thesis will open me to charges that I am a sentimental socialist with a nostalgia for artisanal labor.

28 This appendix is somewhat technical. Readers uninterested in the finer points of narrative theory may prefer to skip it.

1

Themes of *The General*

The purpose of this chapter is to isolate the central themes of *The General*. To do this, it is important, first, to determine where to look for Keaton's themes. The question of locating a theme is somewhat vague, but, for now, can be operationally clarified by thinking of the problem as the question of determining the crucial thematic level of organization in *The General*. Here, "level of organization" is a technical expression used to designate the intuitive distinction customarily drawn between the dramatic and iconographic structures of a film. So the question before us is whether it is the dramatic or the iconographic level of articulation that primarily expresses the theme of *The General*.

Dramatic Analysis

In attempting to hypothesize the themes of *The General*, I shall not adopt what I believe is the standard operating procedure in these matters: namely, isolating themes in a narrative film by focusing on a dramatic conflict in the story. This dramatic conflict, between two or more specifiable characters or groups of characters, is typically generalized into a schema of opposing values or forces, e.g., good versus evil, or city versus country. Here the generalization of a character into an abstract value or symbol is crucial since the final statement of the theme is rather a surmise of the moral of the story. The fictional event is treated like a parable. The vicissitudes of the conflict between characters are retold in a higher key in terms of the vacillating destinies of the values that the conflicting characters represent.

In order to get a clearer picture of the form of analysis sketched above, consider this abbreviated example. In *Straw Dogs*, a mild-mannered

mathematician is insulted and assaulted by a tribe of local bullies. Eventually, the mathematician successfully retaliates. The story seems to be nothing less than a spectacular rehearsal of a sort of grade school fantasy involving the smartest yet puniest kid in the class avenging himself on the class toughs who have humiliated him. The way the standard dramatic analysis would proceed with this example of thinly veiled wish-fulfillment might be to assign the mathematician the value of civilization, while the bullies are construed as savages. In this light the story would be read as a gradually escalating struggle between barbarism and civility. Finally, a point is reached where the mathematician adopts a series of sadistic measures fully on a par with the practices of the cruelest headhunters. The dramatic conflict resolves itself as the representative of civilization sheds every restraint on violence and brutality. Retold in this abstract, generalized mode of discourse, the theme emerges, indeed virtually "drops out" – civilization must indulge in savagery to survive. Irony upon irony, to maintain civilization, which, from one perspective, is to transcend savagery, one must, at times, become savage, i.e. the cost of maintaining a society, where violence is restrained, is sometimes unrestrained violence.

Limitation of the Dramatic Approach

The type of analysis sketched above can abort in a number of ways. Obviously, there is quite a lot of room for error in the move from a character to the value that he or she is taken to instantiate. Moreover, even where the conflicting values are acceptably identified, the resolution of the conflict, in terms of the attitude or perspective it is said to evince, may be open to varying interpretations. For instance, with *Straw Dogs*, someone might argue that the theme that emerges from the mathematician's rampage is that a civilized man is actually the most destructive and savage beast because, in him, calculation and ingenuity are driven by the fiercest energy, that is, that which has hitherto been repressed. The point here, of course, is that since the data may support many interpretations, there is a high possibility of error and inconclusiveness in this form of analysis.

Though the limitations discussed in the preceding paragraph are quite real, my reasons for avoiding a dramatic approach to *The General* are otherwise. Any interpretative venture, not merely the dramatic analysis of themes, runs the risk of error or of inconclusiveness. Abandoning dramatic analysis because of this would be dubious unless the alternative approach to be

adopted lacked these limitations. Yet, what interpretative approach can claim such advantages?

I abandoned the dramatic approach to *The General* because it is inappropriate rather than inconclusive. Simply stated, I think the dramatic conflicts of *The General*, including both the social and romantic conflicts, are thematically insignificant. Hence, looking to the dramatic structure of the film for thematic clues is misleading.

I do not mean to insinuate that dramatic analysis is not without applicability, but only that it provides little appreciable insight. Certainly, for a film like *Sunrise*, a dramatic approach makes perfect sense. Here, the reason is quite clear. In *Sunrise*, the dramatic approach, as an analytic tool for isolating themes, is matched by a similar creative procedure on the part of the filmmakers. Murnau and Mayer elaborate their subject via a system of conflictive structures including country versus city, light versus dark, night versus day, pure versus fetid, natural versus artificial, and marriage versus debauchery. The dramatic approach works with *Sunrise* because a complementary creative sensibility, one with a taste for dramatic oppositions, structures the film. The dramatic approach is not without efficacy, but it is not a reliable form of criticism for every film. Films are susceptible to it to different degrees, and some films are barely susceptible to it at all. My question is: to what degree, if any, is *The General* fruitfully considered in light of dramatic conflicts?

To my knowledge, no one has ever claimed that the theme of *The General* has anything to do with the War Between the States or, more abstractly, with some contest of values that the North and the South are said to represent. That is, one level of dramatic conflict is social, namely, the Civil War. Yet the film is careful to avoid differentiating the combatants ideologically. The war simply provides a context for and motivates the types of activities that compose the film. The dramatic opposition in *The General* only functions to organize the various narrative events; however, it does not express a social viewpoint. Although the drama is based on an antagonism, that antagonism is not connected to a more general theme or even to an attitude towards the war.

In short, the dramatic conflict involving the war is thematically irrelevant. Imagine a film, almost exactly like *The General*, except that, in that film, Johnnie Gray is a Northerner hot in pursuit of a train stolen by Southerners. What difference would this alteration make to the film? Would it change the humorous effects of the gags? Would the major character behave differently? A negative answer seems appropriate to the last two questions. Does anyone suspect that a switch in Johnnie Gray's allegiance would affect the

deeper themes of *The General*? It is true that Keaton changed the viewpoint of the original story upon which the film is based.[1] There, the protagonists were the Northerners. Nonetheless, it is difficult to understand what thematic consequences this change of viewpoint suggests. The insignificance of a speculated reversal of the allegiances of the central character in the film indicates that Keaton's film is literally neutral *vis-à-vis* the actual issues between the North and the South in the War Between the States. Keaton only uses that conflict as a pretext and a context for other concerns. He does not use the dramatic conflict to reflect an abiding moral vision of the opposition of certain social values.

Of course, one might agree with the above argument and yet maintain that a dramatic analysis is still viable. Rather than deriving a political theme from the social conflicts in *The General*, it would focus on the romantic conflict in the film, that is, on Johnnie Gray's heroic quest for Annabelle Lee and the implicit valorization of romantic love.

Turning to Keaton's other films, I would observe that Keaton usually employs the marriage convention, that is, a plot that ends with a marriage or the promise thereof, as his basic narrative device. There are exceptions to this, such as *My Wife's Relations* and *Go West*, but such exceptions are a decided minority. In films, such as *College*, the Keaton character often remains quite inept until a critical moment in the film when his beloved is somehow endangered. At that moment, the character seems to be endowed with a superhuman burst of energy and ingenuity. In *College*, his love phones him at the boat house. At that moment, after reels of incompetence, the Keaton character, Ronald, darts across town, a virtual steeplechase of obstacles, ending his run in a fourteen foot pole vault through a second-floor window, after which he attacks his girlfriend's assailant with a barrage of clocks, boxes, and lamps, thrown respectively as baseballs, discuses, and javelins. In such scenes, it seems that love is represented as an enabling force capable of imbuing the lover with virtually limitless energy and dexterity. Such an interpretation of *College* and many other Keaton films might lead a dramatic critic to claim that there is a theme of the transcendent power of love in Keaton's films which is incarnated in the metamorphosis of the Keaton character from a weak and awkward bumbler to an acrobatic avenger. Here, the conflict involves a man overcoming social and natural obstacles to his love. The theme is that love can be the very source he can use to empower his conquest. Within the context of Keaton films, the dramatic analyst may propose a similar analysis of *The General*, citing Johnnie Gray as yet another mild-mannered sop transformed into a hero for the sake of love.[2]

Many sorts of considerations bode badly for the critic who seeks to analyze Keaton's themes in light of the romantic conflicts that structure Keaton's works. One immediate problem is the extreme generality of such a claim. The type of marriage convention discussed above is a perennial format of comedy, not merely of film comedy, but of comedy in general. If one is committed to isolating Keaton's themes, it seems ill-advised to search for them at exactly that point where Keaton's devices seem to overlap with those of so many other people's. Indeed, how would the preceding argument for a theme of the transcendent power of love in Keaton differ from the exactly congruent cases that could be made for Chaplin and Lloyd? This problem betrays a lack of specificity in the dramatic analysis of the romantic conflict in *The General*.

Of course, such a critic might insist on a hard-line position by claiming that the theme of the transcendent power of love is as specific as you can get with Keaton. This boils down to saying that, thematically, Keaton is just not that original. However, this position will then only be as strong as its ability to refute other analyses of Keaton that do isolate original specific themes in Keaton's works. In a way, this hard-line position becomes a negative position in that the only way it can compensate for its own generality is to deny thematic originality to the work it defends. Thus, any competing theory of Keaton's work that offers a plausible account of original themes will be automatically superior to this position. In later portions of this chapter, I intend to present just such a countervailing theory.

Another disadvantage of the dramatic analysis of romantic conflict in Keaton is that it flies in the face of his own pronouncements about his work. Speaking of his two-reelers, for instance, Keaton said, "There were usually but three principals – the villain, myself and the girl, and she was never important. She was there so the villain and I would have something to fight about."[3] There doesn't seem to be any reason to think that Keaton modified this functional view of his female leads in the feature films. Moreover, that functional viewpoint seems borne out in terms of the films themselves. Very little emphasis is placed in Keaton's shooting and editing on the romantic aspects of the story. In order to include such emphasis, Keaton would undoubtedly have employed more close-ups of the romantic couple and would have edited close-ups of the boy's gaze with point-of-view shots of the girl. Consider Chaplin's typical format for representing erotic desire. The hungry, in more ways than one, tramp gazes transfixed; cut to an enormous close-up of Edna or Georgia. But those types of shots are rare in Keaton. The dramatic analysis of romantic conflict not only fails to square with Keaton's

conception of his own work, it also fails to address the texture of the films themselves where devices, such as those Chaplin used to generate a felt sense of erotic longing and desire in the audience, are strikingly absent. One would have expected the presence of commensurate devices if Keaton were indeed focusing on romantic love as a major theme. But they are not there.

One need only compare the ending of Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* to that of *The General* to appreciate how little Keaton is concerned with themes of romance. *The Gold Rush* ends with a scene of Georgia and Charlie being photographed. As they stand next to each other they draw closer and closer together. Successively closer shots represent their laughter turning gradually to desire. Their smiles, lips parted, become increasingly inviting and desirous, until they join in an erotically charged kiss. Here, the romantic quest of the film ends on an appropriately erotic note.

The General ends with Johnnie Gray facing screen-left and Annabelle Lee facing screen-right sitting on the driverod of The General. They attempt to kiss, yet, each time they embrace, a soldier walks by from the left, and Johnnie is forced to salute the trooper. Each embrace is interrupted because Johnnie's right arm, his saluting hand, grasps Annabelle's waist in the space between Annabelle and the train. Each time a soldier walks by their love-making is completely interrupted. Finally, Johnnie realizes that, if he sits on the other side of Annabelle, then he can hold her waist with his left hand while quite comfortably saluting passersby without withdrawing from his embrace (see figures 1.1–1.5).

In contrast to Chaplin, Keaton does not end his film with an erotic interlude, but rather with a gag whose subject is an erotic motif, but whose theme is problem-solving. This emphasis on problem-solving is in accord with the entire subject of *The General*. The conclusion, therefore, is an apt one. It uses

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3

Figure 1.4

Figure 1.5

the romantic situation as a pretext to exemplify an insightful application of concrete intelligence, i.e. a manipulation of left–right relations. If the theme of the film did emanate from the romantic conflict, you would expect the last scene to underscore the romantic dimension of the situation the way the end of *The Gold Rush* does. Instead, Keaton turns the situation into another problem of physical manipulation to be solved.[4]

The shooting in this scene in *The General* is primarily based in medium-shots which are transformed into ever-widening long-shots. Hence, the desirability of each of the sexual partners is held off from the view of the audience. That is, the erotic dimension of the interlude is not part of the audience's felt experience of the scene given the way the scene is shot. To emphasize the romantic dimension, one would expect close-shots rather than long-shots. What the long-shot does nicely here is present a clear picture of how Johnnie Gray's problem arises. Even more important, the last long-shot efficiently records the scale of Johnnie's achievement since it is far enough back to show that Johnnie's change in position is effective enough to allow his lovemaking to continue despite the presence of an entire parade of passing soldiers. Keaton uses the lovemaking motif to invent yet another situation where concrete problem-solving is called for. If Keaton had been primarily interested in romance, one feels he would have used the last scene

as Chaplin does, reserving this privileged position in the narrative for the resolution of the romantic quest. Both in his narration and his editing-shooting style Keaton eschews this alternative at the end of *The General*. This hardly seems consistent with the hypothesis that Keaton's major theme is the valorization of romantic love.

Even if the dramatic approach to romantic conflict did apply to some Keaton films, it certainly would not apply to *The General*. Clearly, *The General* has no truck with sentimental romance. Johnnie Gray is only accidentally involved in rescuing Annabelle Lee. It is true that his various feats serve to vindicate him in her eyes and in the eyes of her family, but these feats are not undertaken for the sake of love.

Moreover, Johnnie's affection for Annabelle does have a rather realistic rather than sentimental flavor. On several occasions, he becomes quite aggravated with her: when she sweeps the cab, when she discards a piece of knotty pine, when she ties the evergreens, and twice when she offers tiny pieces of wood for fires. The aggravation on these occasions places the bond of affection between Johnnie and Annabelle on a somewhat earthly rather than transcendent plane. One would think that if Keaton were involved in glorifying romantic love, as Chaplin does, Keaton's depiction of the woman would verge on a comparable degree of idolatry, such as, the use of giant close-ups and luminous lighting, which would make the veritable religiosity, the very sanctification of love as a divine power, visually overpowering.

The difficulties sketched above for the dramatic conflict approach to themes in *The General* motivate us to turn away from the plot and towards the discrete imagery of the film, namely, to the gags and the actions, as the most likely level of thematic articulation in *The General*. This move is justified by a process of elimination. We begin by postulating, on the basis of past experiences of narrative artworks, that thematic articulation can occur either on the level of the overarching narrative or on the level of the discrete imagery or iconography. Of course, it may occur on both levels simultaneously, and it is also a theoretical possibility that it will occur on neither level, in which case there may be no theme.

Since the dramatic conflict approach to the overarching narrative seems useless, we eliminate the relevant possibilities and turn to the prospect that the discrete imagery, the gags and actions of the film, may provide the major thematic vehicle. Embracing an analysis of the gags and actions of the film is motivated by pragmatic considerations since the dramatic-narrative approach doesn't seem viable. Maintaining this approach will also hinge on a continuing pragmatic check of how plausible an account of the film

concentrating on discrete imagery yields, because it is possible that this imagistic approach may also be fruitless.

The Significance of the Dramatic Conflicts

So far, we have only questioned the thematic significance of the overarching narrative-dramatic conflicts. To deny significance to these is not to deny their functional importance to a number of aesthetic effects that are central to *The General*. That is, the structure of the narrative of *The General* does not supply a moral perspective, but it does function to promote significant aesthetic delights.

The first aesthetic function of the narrative that should be noted has to do with the extreme symmetry of the story. In many ways, when the Union general and the spy examine the map in the beginning of the film, they are surveying a diagram of much of the action of the narrative. In the chase scenes, there is a doubling of action. First, the Union spies cut the telegraph wires, scatter debris on the tracks, and switch tracks. Then, it is Johnnie Gray's turn. This repetition sets up an extremely satisfying system of motifs with telling variations.

This highly structured approach to action is very important in Keaton. In *College*, the abortive attempts at track, pole vaulting, baseball, and the javelin are all repeated, albeit as successes, in the conclusion of the film. Similarly, the conclusion of *Steamboat Bill Jr.* includes a repetition of earlier encounters including the reversal of both Bill Jr.'s, the Keaton character, earlier awkwardness with the engine throttle of the steamboat and his stumbling descent down the tiers of the ship. Such examples could be amplified by many others. In general, one finds in Keaton a tendency towards the aesthetic elaboration of comparisons and contrasts of action which heighten one's experience of a narrative event by embedding such events in systems of repetitions. Recognition of the narrative event in such circumstances is accompanied by a memory of an earlier event which concerned the same motif. One is engaged in an enriched perception of action that prompts both recognition and recall, where the operation of recall also provokes a comparison of differences between the two similar events.

Throughout *The General*, one confronts variations on basic motifs, supplying the film with a high degree of unity. However, the repeated motifs are never exactly the same. For instance, the Union spies cut the telegraph wires, whereas Johnnie pulls down the telegraph pole with the train. Within the extreme

unity of action there is also diversity which promotes processes of memory and contrast, thereby deepening the viewer's experience of each action.

A second function of repetition in the narrative structure of *The General* is to familiarize the viewer with the recurring activities and terrain of the chase. For instance, we see the pins removed from the linkages between cars in trains at least four times. The repetition of this sensitizes us to a mechanical aspect of railroading. The narrative structure, which repeats many of the physical tasks essayed, serves to elicit from the audience a stronger sense of exactly what is going on. This is a simple function of repetition, which allows the audience to assimilate the second instance of a motif into a context derived from the knowledge of the first instance. In this way, the system of narrative repetitions in *The General* contributes to the powerful overall sense of clarity concerning physical processes that Keaton's film engenders. Though the narrative of the film is not the source of the themes in *The General*, it nevertheless does function to structure a comprehension of discrete actions and gags in a way that is related to what we will later identify as Keaton's actual themes. The narrative, while affording the sort of aesthetic-cognitive play of contrast and comparison alluded to previously, also fosters a general sense of felt lucidity about ongoing physical processes. That lucidity is Keaton's particular cinematic perspective on events. That lucidity is Keaton's theme.

Imagistic Analysis: Problems with Structural Analysis

In order to isolate the themes in *The General* through its imagery, we must first consider how we will deal with the gags and actions by determining what sort of conceptual framework to use. Approaching the gags first, we might attempt to analyze them from a comprehensive structural viewpoint. Such an approach would attempt to analyze the recurrent structures in Keaton's gags with little attention to iconography. The ultimate analysis of the gag would be reductive, plumbing deeper and deeper to find the abstract comic organization that makes the gags effective as gags. An attempt in this direction has been made by G. A. Wead. His approach is predicated on an attempt to evolve a comprehensive structural account of the gags from the perspective of how the audience's reception of information is modulated. The basic model Wead employs in this analysis derives from an informal and suggestive use of information theory.

Wead analyzes Keaton's gags as a play between familiarity – what the audience expects – and surprise – the unexpected.[5] Referring to information theory, Wead dubs the element of familiarity as redundancy and the element of surprise as entropy. Employing these concepts, he is able to analyze a large number of Keaton's gags. For instance, Wead explains the humor in the morbid ending of *Cops* as based in the subversion of the audience's expectations,[6] that the hero never dies. Applied to *The General*, Wead analyzes the humor of Johnnie's relation with Annabelle as a subversion of the audience's normal expectations of the relation between screen lovers.[7] Wead also thinks that Keaton's penchant for parody throughout his works can be explicated on the entropy model.[8] For instance, he reads *Go West* as a parody on the upsurge of pathos in silent comedy.[9] In *The General* Wead considers the scene where the Northern general surrenders as a parody on representations of Lee's surrender at Appomattox.[10] Another example of the parody of heroic stances occurs when Johnnie, seizing the flag from a fallen comrade, leaps onto a boulder which unexpectedly turns out to be an officer's back.[11] Wead, of course, can extend this brand of structural analysis to cinematic elements as well. For instance, there is a scene in which the pursuing Union train hooks onto a boxcar which is being towed by The General. One expects that this is the end for Johnnie. However, the camera pulls slightly ahead of the Union soldiers revealing that Johnnie has removed the pin linking The General to the boxcar at virtually the exact moment the Union spies snag the boxcar.

A number of points need to be made about Wead's analysis. First, it should be clear that his use of information theory jargon is somewhat extraneous. In fact, Wead is maintaining a very standard approach to comedy, one that might be called a surprise theory. Freud's theory of laughter is another such theory because Freud finds laughter evoked at exactly the moment when the censoring mechanisms of the mind are circumvented by the misleading devices of the joke. Surprise is a notion that many comic theorists have emphasized. To rename surprise as "entropy" does not really provide any theoretical advance.

Realizing that Wead's analysis is but a reformulation of a general theory of comedy applied to Keaton enables us to see the real weakness in Wead's approach, namely, generality. On Wead's account, the analysis of a Keaton gag amounts to establishing it as yet another instance of the standard comic effect – surprise. Admittedly Wead recognizes that the play between familiarity and surprise is not a unique characteristic of Keaton's.

Wead must think that somehow an analysis along the redundancy/entropy opposition will be especially rewarding for an understanding of Keaton; however, he never gives us reason to believe this. I find special difficulty

believing this on Wead's own premises. Wead believes that his redundancy/entropy model is adequate for all comedy. For instance, he argues that the humor of *commedia dell'arte* resides in the tension between the personal touch of the actor and the highly conventionalized character the actor plays. Wead believes that this tension between *lazzi* and genre is yet another example of entropy versus redundancy.[12] However, if entropy and redundancy are at work throughout all comedy, in what respect can they serve to distinguish what is specifically Keatonesque? A mode of analysis this general should be avoided if the aim of one's analysis is to discover what is distinctive about a film such as *The General*.

A lesson can be learned from Wead's errors. He employs a theory for Keaton that basically is a theory broad enough to constitute a general theory of comedy. Analysis of a Keaton gag then just amounts to reducing the gag down to its fundamental structure, that is, to abstracting the content of the gag until it appears as an example of the foundation formula of all comedy. Such an approach cannot ever even have an outside chance of zeroing in on the unique elements of a gag simply because the unique elements of a gag have to be stripped away by such an analysis in the process of abstraction that finds the essential structure of comedy lurking behind the details of each gag, and this tendency of extreme generality will beset any purely structural analysis of gags, Keaton's or anyone else's.

Iconic Analysis

An alternative approach to the gags involves initially laying primary emphasis on the content rather than on the form of the gags. In this way, I hope to achieve specificity in my analysis and avoid the vagueness and generality that confront pure structural analyses such as Wead's. I won't ignore structural considerations in the analysis of gags in *The General*; rather, I will use the content of the gags to clarify their relevant, Keatonesque structural variations. A consideration of content will enable us to avoid undue abstraction even when discussing structural matters. In an effort to achieve specificity I am opting for the iconographic approach to the gags in *The General*.

The General can easily be divided into five parts. The first part is a prelude which includes Johnnie's courtship with Annabelle, the coming of the war, Johnnie's attempt to enlist, his estrangement from Annabelle, and the Union plot to capture The General. This prelude lays the premises for the ensuing action. Part two is Johnnie's pursuit of The General. Part three finds him in

enemy territory. Part four involves the Union pursuit of The General while the fifth part includes the battle as well as the resolution of the conflicts of the first part, when Johnnie is commissioned and his courtship is resumed.

In order to begin an iconographic analysis of *The General*, let us turn to the first part of the film to analyze several examples of its salient gags. I am especially interested in the initial gags in any film because those gags prime the audience to a special sensitivity to certain features of the psychology of the major character; they generally set the tone for what follows. Consequently, we shall look closely at a number of the gags that set *The General* in motion, and I will use those gags as a spotlight to pick out continuing gag motifs that recur throughout the film. Admittedly, this gives a certain pride of place to the initial section of the film. However, this does seem to accord not only with conventional forms of criticism, but also to conventions of *poesis*, which treat the openings of works of art as introductions to the themes that follow.

The first gag proper in *The General* occurs when Johnnie walks to Annabelle's home to pay a visit.[13] The gag is composed of a string of six shots (see figures 1.6–1.11). First, there is a medium close-shot of Annabelle, apparently borrowing a book. She turns to walk towards a gate, her back to the camera. Then, there is a medium long-shot of Johnnie, followed by the local town boys, walking on the outside of a hedge. When he doffs his hat to a female passerby, the boys do likewise. When Johnnie takes off his hat entirely, again they mimic him. They march in step behind him and function as pint-sized mirrors, the humor of their actions being based on the parrot-like nature of their movements and the incongruity of such serious social civilities with their age. The third shot is a medium-shot which places Annabelle, book in hand, at the end of a pathway that cuts through a hedge.

Figure 1.6

Figure 1.7

Figure 1.8

Figure 1.9

Figure 1.10

Figure 1.11

Shot four establishes that the hedge in the previous shot is the one that Johnnie is passing. This shot places Annabelle in the background and Johnnie and his entourage in the middle ground. Since Annabelle is just back from the hedges Johnnie is walking along, Johnnie doesn't see her. He walks right by; Annabelle, seeing him, however, falls into step behind his entourage. Shot five is a long-shot that shows this whole parade turning into Annabelle's front yard. The last shot places the group at Annabelle's door. Johnnie adjusts his coat and cleans his shoes on the mat before taking off his hat and slicking down his hair. Of course, Annabelle is watching this entire procedure. Thus, if Johnnie's last minute touch-ups are meant to suggest to Annabelle that he is always so precisely presentable, his vanities are exposed, since Annabelle, unbeknownst to him, witnesses his entire ritual. Finally, Johnnie uses the knocker on the door. He stands back and sideways, adopting a composed, dignified *contra-posto* stance. At that moment, he is virtually face-to-face with Annabelle. He looks momentarily ruffled, bemused – she's on the wrong side

of the door. Perhaps he's annoyed – his attempts to present himself to her as a perfect picture have been destroyed since she witnessed the staging of that particular illusion. In any case, his expectations about the situation are completely overturned.

The above gag is certainly at the expense of Johnnie Gray. What is humorous is a fact about his character. As he walks along the street he seems to have no peripheral vision whatsoever. Likewise, when he turns the corner into Annabelle's front yard, he is oblivious to lateral presences. What is being represented is a character with extreme fixity of attention, real tunnel vision. His orientation is relentlessly frontal. Moreover, it seems that one can supply some of the reasons for this manner. The character has an idea that Annabelle is at home and that he will visit her. His determination in this leads him to adopt a mode of travel that has him block out normal perceptual habits, namely, he ceases to respond to glimpses on the periphery of his visual field. The character thereby overvalues his idea of the way things are and simultaneously undervalues new input. As a result, he functions almost completely in terms of his idea of the situation without bothering to modify that idea in the presence of new data. This kind of fixity of attention, based on the failure to adjust ideas to the changing factors of a situation, provokes our laughter. It is laughter at a kind of paradigmatic carelessness that fails to heed what is almost literally before the subject's very eyes.

The theme of the dominance of an invariant idea of a situation over the actual variables of the situation continues in the very next gag in the film. Here, Johnnie sits in Annabelle's living room. The two local boys have followed him into Annabelle's house. Obviously, Johnnie is somewhat disgruntled at the prospect of carrying out his courtship in front of these kids. He hatches a plan. Realizing that they imitate him slavishly, he stands up and puts on his hat. On cue, they follow suit. Johnnie reaches for the doorknob, pacing in place at the same time. This sets the parade in motion and when he opens the door the boys march out. What is at issue is an opposition of expectation with reality. One has the feeling that the real punch line to this joke is that the boys may continue marching interminably. After all, Johnnie, their mentor, never looked behind himself. Thus, as perfect mimics, how will they ever know when he has stopped following them? They march out the door and never return exactly because their idea of the situation is dominant. They do not reevaluate the situation; instead they are like automatons. They behave as if programmed by an idea and they are insensitive to feedback. Again, fixity of attention due to overvaluation of one's idea of the situation leads the subjects to ignore the concrete situation. As in the first gag examined,

the themes that emerge here appear to cluster around a certain rigidity or inflexibility of behavior premised on characters' inattention to alterations in the environment. The characters seem laughable to the degree that they appear to be automatons.[14]

The pratfall that Johnnie takes off Annabelle's doorstep as he waves goodbye before attempting to enlist is another example of humor that derives from the variance between the subject's mental map of a state of affairs and the way the world is. But a more interesting case of this motif occurs as the line for enlistment forms. Johnnie, walking down the street behind Annabelle's father and brother, realizes that the normal route to the induction center is not the most direct. Instead, Johnnie shoots down an alleyway and, as a result, he is the first person to queue up outside the enlistment center. When the door of the center opens, Johnnie follows the clerk who opens the door. The general store in which the enlistment center is housed is shot via an oblique, overhead angle. This shot helps emphasize a table, loaded with goods, that divides the room in half. The clerk who ushers the men into the enlistment area walks to the screen-left side of the table. Johnnie, caught up in the momentum of his own martial stride, follows the clerk. From behind Johnnie, however, we see the post office window where the men will sign up. It is on screen-right. The line of men behind Johnnie branches away from him at the table. Johnnie continues on the wrong side of the table until the clerk turns around and forcefully points him to the enlistment window on the other side of the room. Johnnie has to run across the top of the table in order to regain his place at the head of the line.

Automatism

Though the scene described above is complex, it is clear that a significant aspect of the gag is involved in the motif of automatism. As in the opening gag, the character is notably inattentive: he only looks directly in front of himself at the aproned store clerk. He doesn't look far ahead, nor does he seem very sensitive to what is behind or across from him. As a result, he requires the clerk to tell him that he is on the wrong track. Johnnie does not respond to the noise the men behind him are making on the other side of the room. He is so preoccupied with his conception of the situation that he ignores all of the available information that diverges from his fixed idea.[15]

Undoubtedly, the most famous gag of the first part of *The General* falls into the inattention motif that we have identified so far. This gag involves two

shots: (1) Annabelle, in a medium-shot, turns away from Johnnie, rejecting him until he joins the army. Dejectedly, Johnnie slumps back onto the driverod of his engine, completely absorbed in his misfortune. (2) The camera cuts back to a long-shot. We see an engineer enter the cab and stoke up the engine. Johnnie sits forlornly on the driverod. We see that he is out of the engineer's field of vision and that he is ignorant of the engineer's activities. Johnnie's glance is faced away from the cab and down at the ground. Suddenly, the engine starts. The wheels turn several times before Johnnie, just before he enters a tunnel, realizes that he is balanced precariously on the driverod of a moving train (see figures 1.12–1.15).

The kind of reaction this scene elicits is complex. One reaction, of course, is simply fear. The average viewer realizes immediately that the gag is extremely dangerous. If for some reason the wheels were to lose traction, the wheels would spin at a terrific rate, spilling the actor beneath the train.

Figure 1.12

Figure 1.13

Figure 1.14

Figure 1.15

But, aside from the fear dimension of the scene, we can also see the basis of this gag as an instance of two simultaneous acts of inattention; on the one hand, the engineer carries on oblivious to what is on the tracks in front of him, let alone to what is on the wheels of his locomotive. He relies on his own conception of things, not on paying attention to the actual situation. On the other hand, Johnnie Gray raises the level of inattention by a virtual quantum leap. Initially unaware that the train is moving, he is so preoccupied that he not only fails to respond to the sound of the train, but even fails to respond to his own bodily sensations which would provoke a feeling of rising and falling. This is an example of Keaton's "slow-burn" – the character's coming to awareness of a state of affairs over an inordinately long time interval. Here, the "slow-burn" is used to bring the theme of the scene to a crescendo by compounding the engineer's initial act of inattention with a spectacular, almost inconceivable, act of preoccupation on Johnnie's part. Thus, the "slow-burn" is used to enhance the theme of inattention.

The gags we have considered so far are not the only gags and humorous effects in the first part of *The General*. Some of the remaining gags, such as Johnnie's theft of another man's induction slip, do involve the theme of inattention. Others, however, do not, such as Johnnie's feeble admonition that, "If you lose this war, don't blame me." Nevertheless, the gags we have so far spent the most time analyzing seem to constitute an identifiable regularity within the diachronic phenomena of the film. They fit quite easily into a category or cluster of themes that can be organized around the idea of automatism involving a certain rigidity or inflexibility of behavior patterns premised on a character's inattention to changes in the environment.

A question immediately arises as to whether or not the theme of automatism, which appears to be the major recurrent theme of the first part of the film, continues to be significant through the rest of the work. Here, by significant we mean more than that it be the most recurrent theme, but also that it be the theme which seems to dominate one's experience of the film. Obviously, this idea is rather difficult to cash in on. What we are driving at is the claim that certain themes are central to those moments in the film that are the focus and *raison d'être* of the audience's attention. One goes to musicals for the production numbers. In Busby Berkeley, for example, the major theme behind such numbers is freedom from necessity, both spatial and temporal, but also freedom from scarcity as another mode of necessity. In silent comedy, the gags are focal. What we are asking is whether or not automatism is the theme that governs most of the more elaborate and memorable gags in *The General*.

Scanning the film from beginning to end, we note that automatism gags occur throughout. When The General is first hijacked, Johnnie, who had been washing up, beckons bystanders, and lights out on foot after the train. The chase begins, recorded by an overhead long-shot. Johnnie and four volunteers run towards the camera. Then, the camera cuts to a reverse-field position with Johnnie running away from the camera. The audience then observes that the four volunteers have stopped following Johnnie. He runs onward, chasing the train all by himself. At this point, the story shifts away from Johnnie to describe the initial activities of the Union spies and the Southerners' abortive attempt to wire ahead to their forward positions in order to stop the hijacked train. It isn't until seven shots later that we return to Johnnie. He looks around and suddenly realizes that he is alone. In the time he takes to realize this, the Union spies have been able to subdue his girlfriend and sever the Southern telegraph lines. Indeed, one feels that Johnnie never would have turned around were it not for the fact that he stopped at a handcar shack which he thought he and his cohorts could use to chase the hijacked train. Again, we see an extreme tendency in the character for a highly rigid and fixed viewpoint. His perceptual field is limited to a narrow swath directly in front of him. His plan, presumably, is to run to the handcar; this occupies him to the extent that he fails to attend to what is going on immediately behind him.

A similar gag occurs when Johnnie, at the throttle of The Texas, fails to remember to check whether or not the flatcar, loaded with Southern troops, is connected to the rest of the train. With the camera on Johnnie's side of the action, this sequence begins with a long-shot that is aimed diagonally at the action. He looks outside the cab to check to see that the flatcar is loaded with troops. The camera reverses field. As the train pulls out, the flatcar remains stationary. The troops on the flatcar begin to shout and wave their hands. Some troopers even leap off the flatcar and chase Johnnie on foot. But Johnnie continues, thoroughly unaware that his army has abandoned him. Johnnie is so occupied by the chase that he doesn't turn around. This is established by a shot with Johnnie's back to the camera. Since there is only one intervening shot of the cab of the Union engine and the shot wherein Johnnie realizes that he is alone, one cannot be sure of how long it actually takes Johnnie to learn that he has left the troops behind.

One can hypothesize, however, that Johnnie must be a considerable distance from the troop depot. For if he were close, wouldn't he simply back up and pick up the soldiers? The shot where Johnnie realizes he is alone involves a medium-shot, facing the front of Johnnie's side of the locomotive cab. The

shot is in deep focus. Since the locomotive is on a curving section of track, we are able to see directly behind the train as it turns the track. Perhaps, due to the curve, this is the first time since the depot that Johnnie can look behind the train. First, he bends out of the side window slightly. Then, he pokes his body far out. Finally, he realizes he is alone. Again, the character's presuppositions about a situation have caused him to fail to attend to the world. Johnnie evinces an almost static conception of the environment, one which fails to acknowledge the possibility of deviation from his mental picture of things.

Undoubtedly, the most elaborate example of Johnnie's tendency toward maintaining a single track of behavior, despite changes in the environment, is his entry into Northern territory. The scene begins with the title, "The Southern army facing Chattanooga is ordered to retreat." There is a shot of Southern cavalry troops waving a retreat signal followed by a shot of the Union spies showing them crouching in the cab of The General. Finally, in an overhead shot over the timbercar, we see Johnnie cutting wood. Keaton then cuts to a shot of the retreating Southerners. Initially, it is a long-shot. Then, all of a sudden, the front of The Texas pulls into the foreground from screen-left. The Texas drives past the camera revealing that Johnnie is still chopping wood with his back to the battle. This is quite an ingenious shot, not only in terms of its use of foreground and background in order to set out the significant facts of the situation but also because of the way Keaton channels the relevant facts to the audience sequentially – effectively adding detailed selectivity like editing to the realism of the single shot.

The battle ensues behind Johnnie's back. The Southerners retreat entirely and the Union troops triumphantly spill onto the field behind Johnnie. All the while, he continues to chop. At one point he breaks his ax handle, but even at this rupture in his work pattern, he remains unaware that he is completely surrounded by Union troops. In all, it takes 12 shots before Johnnie realizes his predicament. He is so absolutely engrossed in his chopping that he never once glances outside his narrow workspace.

In many ways, the railroad is an appropriate central image in *The General*, since railroad imagery supplies a source of metaphors in ordinary language for the type of automatism that is so characteristic of Johnnie. We speak of people as having a "one-track mind" in order to underscore the fixity of their ideas. The notion of a track in this metaphor emphasizes the rigidity with which single-minded persons maintain their preconceived ideas. In this light, Johnnie's conceptions of things can be analogized to a track. The imagery of the film prompts this analogy, indeed, virtually demands it. Johnnie, himself, might be thought of as a locomotive: he travels along his track

oblivious to what the changing environment has placed in his way. Within this context, the recurring derailments and track-switchings in *The General* become a kind of objective correlative to the way Johnnie's "one-track mind" constantly derails his schemes and sends him barreling in the wrong direction.

Further examples of automatism can be found throughout *The General*. Consider these from the second half of the film. First, Johnnie and Annabelle plan to burn the Rock River Bridge in order to halt the Union advance. They build a pile of timber on the bridge. Johnnie takes the kerosene headlamp from the front of The General and sprinkles fuel on the fire, carefully dousing every part of the pile. There is a burning torch on top of the tender. Annabelle is up there tossing wood down to Johnnie. Johnnie wends his way around the pile that is opposite the train; Annabelle inadvertently jostles the burning log, knocking it onto the pile, setting it aflame. The burning lumber separates Johnnie from the train. Unaware of her accidental arson, Annabelle runs to the cab, presumably to back the train closer to Johnnie. Unfortunately, she starts the engine moving away from Johnnie. Trapped on the Union side of the bridge, Johnnie prepares to make a standing leap. Since there are several railroad beams missing on the other side of the burning pile, Johnnie's only hope is to catch on to the back of the train. He pulls back, ready to jump, but, at exactly that moment, Annabelle starts the train moving in the wrong direction. Johnnie is in flight, but the train is pulling away from him, letting him plummet through the opening in the roadbed left by the missing beams. Johnnie just committed the classic error of not looking before leaping. In many ways, one can see this maxim as a major theme of the film.

Johnnie again shows his proclivity for inattention during the battle between the North and the South. A comrade bravely flourishes the Southern flag. He is shot, but struggles to keep the banner from touching the ground. Johnnie rushes to him, seizing the staff like a relay runner. Johnnie continues running forward and jumps on top of a heavy boulder in order to hold the flag proudly, high in the air. But, just as Johnnie strikes his heroic pose, he is overturned. It's not a rock that he's standing on; it's the back of a Southern officer. Again, Johnnie is too self-absorbed to watch where he is going. The mental image of saving the flag seems to dominate his behavior so intensely that he is thoroughly inattentive to the very ground he is standing on.

I hope that the preceding discussion of the automatism gags establishes that there is a theme of rigidity or inflexibility of behavior patterns premised on Johnnie's and others' inattention to changes in the environment. Inattention, in and of itself, is hardly a theme specific to Keaton. It can be found in

many other varieties of comedy. However, within the class of automatism gags, we can make even finer distinctions and isolate what appears to be a core group of these gags. This, in turn, should supply us with a clear, precise idea of the specifically Keatonesque inflection of the automatism gag, at least in *The General*. The automatism gags that we especially have in mind are those concerning physical tasks involved with the manipulation of the natural and industrial environments.

A perfect example of this kind of gag can be found in the first short Keaton released for distribution. In *One Week*, the Keaton character marries. The newlyweds are given a prefabricated house which Keaton must assemble. A jealous former suitor of Keaton's wife hatches a plan to avenge himself on the newlyweds. He changes the numbers on the crates that contain parts of the prefabricated house. The instructions for assembling the house are based on the numbers on these crates. Keaton, following the directions for building the house, attempts to assemble it according to the instructions despite the fact that the numbers on the crates lead to absolutely outlandish results. A bizarre construction emerges featuring second-floor doors opening into thin air and a roof with a valley in the middle. Obviously, the Keaton character has willfully followed the instructions, never once looking at his results. He does not deviate from the directions, never reacting to the obvious incongruity that following them entails.[16] Here an abstract, preconceived idea, represented by the plans, completely governs the character's mediation of the environment. Seemingly, he has somehow blocked out all the potentially unsettling evidence that the environment has to offer. The madcap house is a literal monument to the character's one-track-mindedness.

Turning to *The General*, we see that a number of the automatism/inattention gags are involved with the manipulation of the natural and industrial environment, though unlike *One Week*, these gags center around physical tasks of railroading rather than building. Some of the gags already cited are of this sort, such as the gag involving The Texas pulling out of the depot without the troops. Another example involves Johnnie's use of the handcar to chase the hijacked General. We see that Johnnie is alone. In a medium-shot, he pulls a handcar from a shack on the side of the track. With the greatest effort, he throws his whole body on the lever of the car. At first, the car moves backwards, but finally it begins slowly to push forward. The next shot shows the Union spies removing a rail from the tracks. Then, we have a shot of Johnnie in pursuit, followed by a long-shot of The General pulling through the depot where The Texas is kept. These two shots are ordinary instances of parallel editing. Finally, we see a low angle-shot of Johnnie plugging along on his

handcar. Because the shot is low, the railroad tracks appear as the largest and most striking compositional element. Johnnie and the handcar are quite small in the background. As we look at the tracks, on screen-left, we notice that a rail is missing on one side of the track. This, one assumes, is the rail that the Union spies removed. We wonder whether or not Johnnie sees the gap in the roadbed. His constant pumping of the lever of the handcar indicates that he is too involved with his work to notice the track in front of him. His mental picture assumes that the track is continuous. So he works away, furiously and unheedingly, until he finally reaches the fatal point on the track and he derails.

Another example of Johnnie's inattentiveness involving the performance of a physical task is Johnnie's attempt to move a boxcar onto a siding. The Union spies disconnect one of the boxcars of The General, hoping that it will roll back and impede the motion of The Texas. Johnnie, when seeing the obstacle, has the idea of pushing the boxcar onto a siding and thus removing it from in front of him. He stops his locomotive, leaps from the cab, and rushes to pull a device that switches tracks, thereby sending the heavy boxcar onto a siding. Next, in an overhead shot, we see Johnnie in the foreground in the cab of The Texas and, in the background, we see the boxcar in the rear, top, screen-left corner of the image. The boxcar is rolling freely on a spur parallel to Johnnie's. In the background, unbeknownst to Johnnie, the spur the boxcar is on reunites with his spur. While Johnnie rushes around the cab, the boxcar slips in ahead of him again. Obviously, if he had been attentive, he would have seen that the tracks converged and he would have raced his engine ahead so that he would have been far past the point of connection by the time the boxcar slid back on his track. Preoccupation and concomitant inattention have again resulted in a surprise for Johnnie. In a close-shot, following the shot in which we see the boxcar in the lead, we see Johnnie framed by the window of the cab. His mouth drops open; he sees the boxcar in front of him. He closes his eyes as if to envision the world as he pictured it. Then he turns around – that is where his mental map places the boxcar. Finally, he looks forlorn, as if the entire transaction is incomprehensible, perhaps magical (see figures 1.16–1.26).

This first gag with the boxcar is immediately followed by another. Keaton cuts from the close-shot described above to a shot inside the remaining boxcar in the Union train. The spies are hurling debris onto the track between themselves and The Texas. From this shot Keaton cuts to a shot inside the cab of The Texas. A steam valve has burst, filling it with scalding steam. Johnnie covers his eyes. Meanwhile, Keaton cuts to an angle-shot outside. The boxcar, from the preceding gag, is still in front of The Texas. The low angle-shot

Figure 1.16

Figure 1.17

Figure 1.18

Figure 1.19

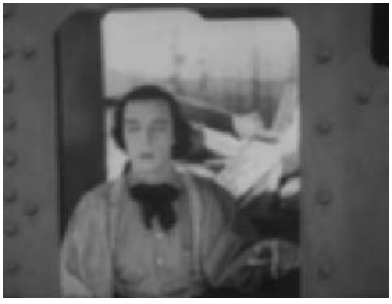

Figure 1.20

Figure 1.21

Figure 1.22

Figure 1.23

Figure 1.24

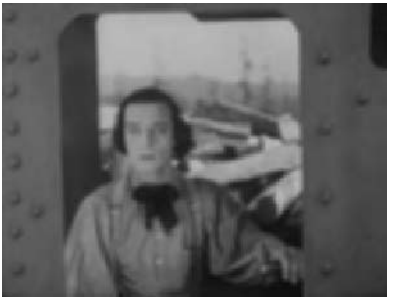

Figure 1.25

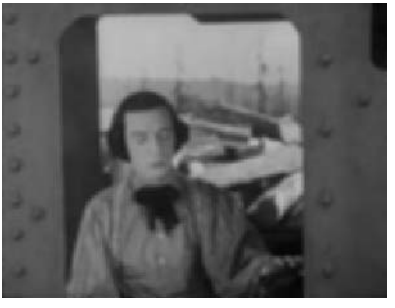

Figure 1.26

singles out a piece of debris strewn on the track. The wayward boxcar strikes the debris and derails, piling the boxcar to one side of the track. Keaton then cuts back to the cab. Johnnie has managed to choke the steaming valve. Keaton cuts back to the medium close-shot of Johnnie looking out of the cab. Again, that forlorn look overcomes him. He closes his eyes and, then shocked, he again looks behind himself, but all he sees is the lumber piled high on the tender of The Texas. In this gag, Johnnie's inattention is certainly more excusable than in many of the other automatism gags in that this gag finds

Johnnie preoccupied by a real emergency. However, the end of the gag, where Johnnie closes his eyes as if to recapture his mental image of affairs again evokes the general theme of preconception versus change.

Parenthetically, it pays to note the degree to which the last two gags depend on Keaton's facial expressions. He is not a great stone face, except with respect to not smiling. Otherwise, his face is quite communicative.

A particularly excellent example of Keaton's automatism gags occurs when The Texas, sidetracked by the Union spies, nearly runs off an abruptly ending spur. Johnnie manages to stop the train at the last moment and then attempts to reverse the engine in order to get back on the main track. However, without traction, the wheels spin impotently on the rails. Johnnie leaps from the engine and begins to shovel piles of sand on the track in an effort to give the wheels something to engage. At one point, Johnnie turns his back to the engine. He tries to kick loose a clump of grass so that more dirt will be free to be shoveled onto the track. While his back is turned, however, the wheels catch on to the sand that Johnnie previously put on the track. The train begins to pull away, but Johnnie is too preoccupied to realize that his train has just left him behind.

A further example of automatism in relation to physical tasks occurs when Johnnie is the pursued rather than the pursuer. At the throttle of his beloved General, Johnnie and Annabelle need fuel if they hope to elude the Union army successfully. To this end, Johnnie pulls The General to a halt next to a wooden fence that is composed of long beams piled carefully on top of each other. Johnnie rushes from the train, grabbing the long, unwieldy pieces of fence, and strenuously hurls them on top of the tender. Johnnie is so utterly immersed in his work that he fails to notice that he is throwing these heavy fence railings clear over the timbercar. All his effort succeeds in achieving is piling the lumber on the opposite side of the train. At one point in this gag, Johnnie's behavior is almost robotic. He carries on his work in a preprogrammed manner that takes no account of the actual results of his own actions.

What the above examples are meant to suggest is that a core group of Keaton's automatism/inattention gags in *The General* center around the performance of physical tasks. Sometimes these gags hinge on the character's mastery of concrete operations, for example, the boxcar gag presupposes facility with left–right manipulations. In the main, the physical task gags concern the character's responsiveness to the environment. In this regard, the character reveals himself to be especially rigid and inflexible. He tends to fixate on a mental map of how affairs stand. He then behaves in accordance with this mental map. The gag most often emerges in the discrepancy between

the character's mental map and the actual situation. Generally, in these gags the audience is privy to two viewpoints on the action – the actual state of affairs and the character's presuppositions about the nature of the situation as revealed in the character's behavior. Humor seems to derive from the character's absolute heedlessness. At times, Johnnie seems to elevate carelessness into a mode of being.

The types of automatism and inattention that Johnnie evidences can be readily stigmatized as a sort of stupidity. Rigidity of thought, the incapacity to reevaluate the situation and to modify behavior accordingly, is clearly a form of dimwittedness. The gags we have analyzed in detail point to an abiding concern of Keaton's, namely, an artistic examination of rigidity and slowness of thought in regard to the performance of physical tasks. Slowness of thought seems to be the general theme of automatism. The importance of the subject matter of physical tasks indicates that Keaton's particular interest in the automatism/inattention format involves a consideration of the way that rigidity of thought, preoccupation, and inattention disrupt work behavior.

Work, it seems, is pictured, by Keaton, as having a crucial dimension of intelligence. Johnnie's lack of success, in turn, illuminates what is lacking in his performance. That missing ingredient is the propensity to reevaluate the environment and to modify subsequent behavior in accordance with noticed changes in the situation. Intelligent work is contrary to Johnnie's dimwitted efforts. Thus, in a negative way, Keaton, through Johnnie's errors in carrying out physical tasks, explores the relation of intelligence to work. By means of this *via negativa*, Keaton clearly outlines his concept of intelligence through staging automatism gags that exemplify the effects that a lack of intelligent responsiveness to the environment entails. To confirm the claim that Keaton is involved with a theme of intelligence, one should consult one's own experience of the automatism/inattention gags. These gags presuppose alertness on the part of the viewer versus some character's rigidity, the perceptive response versus the virtually blind response. What the audience must do to appreciate the gags is make up the difference between the character's almost rote behavior and an intelligent comprehension of the situation.

It is important to acknowledge that not all the humor in *The General* is located in gags with disastrous physical consequences. So far we have mainly analyzed gags in which not attending to actual physical situations has physical repercussions. However, throughout *The General* there is a related though less strenuous sort of humor that is based on a recurring look of surprise on Johnnie's face when he finally realizes that the environment, which he has conceived being one way, has changed.

In the class of humorous effects that do not involve physical repercussions, there are instances when Johnnie, through inattention, does not fully understand an alteration of the environment, and, as a result, postulates a wrong hypothesis to account for it. Examples include his putting his hand out to test for rain after The Texas runs under the spout of the water tower that the Union spies have left open. Another example is Johnnie's peering into the muzzle of the mortar when the explosive that he had previously rolled off the train explodes several hundred yards behind the train.

In the first case, we see the cab of The Texas in an overhead shot from the rear. In the upper, right-hand corner of the screen, we see the water tower pouring out water. In the foreground we see Johnnie bending over, looking at a gauge in the cab. We can also see the relevant open window of the cab, thus appreciating what Johnnie ignores. Johnnie straightens up, only to be splashed by a cascade of water. He immediately puts his hand out to see if it is raining, thus postulating a rather improbable physical process to account for the actual process that he failed to notice. The humor here is largely based on the rigidity of Johnnie's thinking. The volume of water that drenches the cab is far too great to be part of any but the most catastrophic natural process, a flood or a hurricane, for instance. Johnnie's rain hypothesis is quite absurd. Furthermore, he only looks skyward to account for the wetness, showing a rigid correlation between sky, water, and rain. Johnnie never looks backward. As a result, he is virtually forced into a ridiculous alternative.

The case of the explosion behind the train is similar. As he is working on the mortar, there is a powerful explosion behind him. Johnnie is somewhat underneath the mortar. He cannot see the explosion, but apparently hears it. His first response is to look into the barrel of the mortar. Like a child, he cannot divorce the world from his current center of attention. Then he looks skyward; perhaps the sound was thunder. In both cases, it is as though the character has thoroughly erased from his memory the fact that only minutes earlier, he had cast a bomb from the cab of the train. Again, we see that inattention originates in automatism and leads to dimwitted behavior on the part of the character. Only here, the dumb behavior is not an action that miscarries with physical repercussions but rather with a dubious hypothesis. Once more, we see that the humorous effect is based on the distance between an intelligent comprehension of the physical transactions in question and the character's rigid conception of things. The character is comical precisely because he lacks concrete intelligence with regard to physical processes due to his colossal inattentiveness to the changing world around him.

Keaton and Bergson

The notions of fixation, rigidity, inflexibility, inattention, and automatism that we have relied on so heavily thus far are derived from the comic theory of Henri Bergson. While not totally subscribing to Bergson's theory of comedy, we follow him in holding that the appeal made by such themes is an appeal to intelligence. We are interested in Bergson's approach because there is a close correspondence between his theory of comedy and Keaton's practice of comedy in *The General*. Though Bergson's theory may not be convincing as a comprehensive philosophy of comedy, it is useful critically for discussing Keaton's automatism gags.

While we are not suggesting any awareness on Keaton's part of Bergson's theory, the latter can illuminate Keaton's work since in both the theoretical work of Bergson and the applied, artistic approach of Keaton there is an especially high premium placed on responsiveness to the environment. Thus, the two appear to be in agreement on the relevance for comedy of the themes of adjustability and adaptability.

In Bergson, comedy performs a utilitarian function. Laughter is a social corrective. It draws people away from undesirable modes of behavior. For Bergson, the most undesirable form of behavior is that which is rote, habituated, or routinized, that is, *mechanical* in the most negative sense. Laughter is meant to humiliate those who do not meet certain standards of intelligence. The absent-minded, the inflexible, the unobservant are all to be chastised by comedy and thereby driven to "wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being."[17] For Bergson, terms such as inelasticity, inflexibility, and rigidity carry special deprecation. Bergson stigmatized any tendency of human life that relaxed a willingness to apprehend each situation in its novelty. Intelligence, in this framework, becomes the ability to grapple with and adjust to each new situation.

Bergson's theory of comedy, like his theorizing in general, is heavily influenced by his conception of evolution. Indeed, Bergson writes of comedy's role in society in terms of the way it fosters survival by conditioning people away from complacent, absent-minded, inattentive, rigid, inflexible, inelastic, mechanical, and automatic thinking. For Bergson, laughter becomes a device that enables the human race to survive insofar as it excoriates risky or dangerous habits of thought. Clearly, Bergson's interests in evolution also color his idea of intelligence, because intelligence is identified with all that

thought should be and not be. Intelligence, thus, is implicitly characterized as adaptability and adjustability, rather than, say, knowledgeability.[18] Bergson's grand scheme does have flaws in it. After all, comic ridicule may serve the most conservative and rigid viewpoints. Bergson does not consider such objections to his theory. But such objections are irrelevant to our use of Bergson, since we are only interested in the correspondence between Bergson and Keaton, and not in whether Bergson's approach affords a complete overview of the nature of comedy.

Though Keaton has nothing to contribute on the score of laughter's function in society, he does appear to share with Bergson a conception of intelligence as adaptability. In *The General*, the bulk of gags involving inattention and automatism all seem to presuppose a picture of the mental operations of characters like Johnnie as fixated on an idea of a situation and as heedless of the need to constantly enrich that map with fresh details from the environment. Johnnie, in the automatism and inattention gags, seems incredibly absent-minded and one-track-minded. His stupidities illuminate what would be the contrary state of affairs, namely, one in which the character is intelligent. The content of that conception of intelligence is embodied in the audience's recognition of how the character ought to be behaving and adapting. The content of that conception of intelligence in Keaton's *The General* is coincident with adaptability.

Given that Keaton was unaware of Bergson's theory, we may wonder about the significance of the correlation between Bergson's theory and Keaton's practice. Both take intelligence as their subject of comedy. Both characterize intelligence as adaptability. Bergson's *Laughter* was published in 1900. Between 1900 and 1926, the year *The General* was made, Bergson's ideas did become well-known. However, it does not seem necessary to argue that Keaton knew of Bergson's theory in order to understand the convergence of their conceptions of intelligence. Rather something in the cultural surround pointed them both, independently, toward the same conception. Both Keaton and Bergson came to adaptability as the major feature of intelligence as a result of the prevailing application of evolutionary metaphors to every aspect of life.

In Bergson's case this influence is explicit; in Keaton's case it is more indirect and has to do with the saturation of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century talk with evolutionary metaphors. In order to support this, we must depart on a short excursus in American intellectual history. Bergson's avowal of evolution is self-professed. In Keaton's case the matter is more delicate. I know of no recorded opinion of his on the matter. However, it is also true that he grew to maturity and prospered in a culture

that derived many of its key metaphors from evolution, metaphors that it applied to many different aspects of life. In America, this tendency was rampant in the 1870s, a mere 11 years after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

> The "universal drenching" of belles-lettres and journalism with natural selection amused an editor of the *Galaxy*. "Journalism is dyed so deep with it," he remarked, "that the favorite logic of the leading articles is survival of the fittest," and the favorite jest is "sexual selection." He noticed that a Washington reporter for the *Herald* had recently done a sketch of the Senate in which members were portrayed in Darwinian terms as bulls, lions, foxes and rats. At the latest New Orleans Mardi Gras the Missing Link had been used as a costume motif.[19]

Evolutionary theory became quite well-publicized in the United States. Debates about it appeared in popular newspapers while discussions of Darwin and Spencer were often sources for theological discussions and even sermons. Moreover, this clerical publicity was not always unfavorable. Henry Ward Beecher, for a time the most popular preacher in the United States, supported evolution.

Herbert Spencer was especially celebrated in the United States. He was particularly attractive to the self-made and self-taught individual. Self-educated types like Dreiser, London, Darrow, and Hamlin Garland were all influenced by Spencer.[20] The interest in Spencer was quite extensive and extended into the backwaters of America. Consider this section from "Myself" by John Commons about his father.

> He and his cronies talked politics and science. Every one of them in that Eastern section of Indiana was a Republican, living on battle cries of the Civil War, and every one was a follower of Herbert Spencer who was then the shining light of evolution and individualism.[21]

Spencer was celebrated in the upper reaches of society as well as in the boondocks. In 1882, he was given a banquet at Delmonico's that was attended by many social notables.[22]

The point of mentioning these facts is to suggest the widespread nature of ideas of evolution. Often, ideas from the theory were employed in popular arguments. For instance, James J. Hill wrote that "the fortunes of the railroad companies are determined by the law of the survival of the fittest."[23] Most often, nineteenth-century invocations of Darwinian metaphors were likely, in America, to favor the status quo. Thus, William Graham Sumner, the famous

Social Darwinist, would argue against social reformism because he believed that tampering with the natural forces of evolution would result in causing the detrimental survival of the unfit. But, even when Social Darwinism as a doctrine was overthrown, evolutionary metaphors still predominated. Indeed, American pragmatists, the successors of the Social Darwinists, were also evolutionary in outlook. This is especially true of the most popular of the pragmatists, William James and John Dewey. Under their aegis the dominance of evolutionary metaphors continued. For example, in discussing knowledge, Dewey wrote that it

> may be termed pragmatic. Its essential feature is to maintain continuity of knowing with an activity which purposively modifies the environment. It holds that knowledge in its strict sense of something possessed consists of our intellectual resources – of all the habits that render our action intelligent. Only that which has been organized into our dispositions so as to enable us to adapt the environment to our needs, and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live is really knowledge.[24]

The above passage explicitly links intelligence and adaptability. That linkage was a natural one in a milieu which relied as heavily as the American scene did on metaphors derived from evolution. Thus, it seems completely reasonable to believe that Keaton came to the theme of adaptability as the characteristic feature of intelligence, and as a possible topic of his comedy, through a process of osmosis facilitated by the broad publicity of evolutionary notions and idioms in American society.

Adaptability in Keaton's Other Films

One way to establish that we are onto something central to Keaton in *The General* is to see if it is also applicable to other key Keaton works. One famous Keaton gag that the theme of adaptability seems to explain quite well is the famous projection sequence in *Sherlock Jr.* Here, the Keaton character, Sherlock Jr., walks into a scene being projected on a motion picture screen, thus entering a film within the larger film. As Sherlock Jr. goes up to a door of a house in the film within the film, the scene shifts. What is odd about this cut, however, is that the character remains in the exact same screen position as he previously occupied. From the shot of the character before the door, we cut to a garden.

Sherlock begins to sit on a bench in the garden. There is another cut, this time to a city street. Sherlock's position and movement remain constant even though the locales of the shots change. He falls backwards into a busy street. Then, he stands up and begins to walk down the street. All of a sudden there is a cut and Sherlock nearly falls off a cliff. He looks over the cliff, sticking his neck out. There is another cut; he's in a cage, his head precariously stuck in a lion's maw. He backs away from the lion. Cut – he's in a desert. A train just misses him. When he sits down, the location changes to a rock surrounded by water. He dives off the rock, but a devilishly placed cut lands him head-first in a snow bank. Standing upright, he reaches out to lean against a tree. In another cut, he's back in the original garden, falling on his head because the tree he thought was next to him is gone.

The above sequence seems a virtual testimony to the theme of automatism and maladaptation. Perhaps, the most often invoked example of poor adaptability in the whole evolutionary bestiary is the dinosaur. That dimwitted beast, though perfectly suited to tropical climates, could not survive the rigors of the ice age. The environment changed on him when he wasn't looking. The environment changing is also the key to the automatism/inattention gags. There is hardly a more radical series of environmental changes in all of Keaton than one finds in this sequence of *Sherlock Jr*. Via incredibly precisioned technique, Keaton is able to draw an image of a character maintaining a set of behaviors appropriate to one place into another place without modifying that behavior. In some ways, this sequence in *Sherlock Jr.* is the most abstract and symbolic device in all of Keaton, summarizing, as it does, in almost allegorical fashion, Keaton's whole concern with unadaptability by setting out the changes in the environment in the most hyperbolic way imaginable. We might also add that the sequence could as well be considered a paradigm of a major stylistic concern of Keaton's, that is, the matched movement. In this light, the sequence appears as a moment of special clarity in Keaton's work, accomplishing upper limits of achievement both in Keaton's expression of thematic concerns, and in the perfection of his style.

Competing explanations of the *Sherlock Jr.* sequence are not as persuasive as the preceding one. A critic might propose that the scene is meant to be reflexive in the mode of something like *Man with a Movie Camera*. This seems to be a rather extreme hypothesis in that it does not appear to be comprehensible as a concern in any other part of Keaton's *oeuvre*, including any other part of *Sherlock Jr.* No other part of Keaton's work even suggests an epistemological thrust.

Another hypothesis might see the *Sherlock Jr.* sequence as a reversal of the standard trick ciné-comic gag in which the character disappears and the landscape remains. In *Sherlock Jr.* the landscape disappears and the character remains. This account appears to be descriptively adequate. However, it fails to even suggest why Keaton would want to reverse the standard ciné-comic format. An explanation for this is called for specifically because it is not generally the case that the reverse of a gag is still a gag. It just so happens that the reversal in this sequence works as a gag. But why is reversal felt to be relevant? The analysis in terms of unadaptability at least relates the sequence to the structure of automatism and inattention gags. This relation suggests why the sequence is workable as a gag.

Another famous scene involving the theme of unadaptability can be found in *The Navigator* when the Keaton character, Rollo Treadway, and the girl attempt to eat breakfast with the outsized utensils of the ship's galley. And a further outstanding inattention gag is the sparring sequence in *Battling Butler*. Here, Keaton, as Alfred Butler, tries his hand at boxing. A professional trainer instructs Butler to watch him. He will make the appropriate countermoves to the thrusts of Butler's opponent. Butler need only imitate the trainer in order to protect himself and win. The hitch in this plan, however, is the time lag between the opponent's punch, the trainer's reaction, and finally Butler's reaction. By the time Butler reacts, his opponent's deadly jabs have already found their mark. The result is a kind of bizarre dance – Butler's opponent throws a punch, the trainer raises his arm in a blocking motion, the punch lands, and Butler, reeling, raises his arm to block the phantom punch that has already come and gone. This rhythm is repeated again and again until Butler is staggering. As we have found so often in *The General*, this is based on the character's failure to attend to the situation he is actually in. His glance, directed at the trainer, is really a sort of deferred attention. He is out of synchronization with his environment. This notion is the real basis for the grouping of inattention and automatism. That is, synchronization between plan and action on the one hand and environment on the other is the very essence of adaptability.

Successful Adaptation Gags

Examples of unadaptability in Keaton can be multiplied. The fact that we can extend our analysis of gags in *The General* to other Keaton films should be encouraging. Since we expect the important themes of an artist to extend

across his works, the expandability of the inattention hypothesis supplies some evidence that we have identified a prominent theme in *The General*. In our iconographic analysis of Keaton's imagery in *The General*, we have argued that automatism and inattention gags supply an important source of Keaton's themes. However, we have not yet considered another significant aspect of Keaton's imagery, namely, the actions of the character that are not part of gags. Here it becomes apparent that automatism alone does not represent a full picture of Keaton's portrayal of adaptability in *The General* because a large part of Johnnie's activities in the film show not ineptitude but a high degree of physical agility.

Johnnie often proves to be extremely well-coordinated in performing actions. For instance, when he brains the Union troops in the cab of The General, as he recaptures the train, he swings the board over his shoulder with terrific power, knocking the Union general cold; then, in a continuous forward motion, he pushes a staff officer from the engine; and, then, he kicks up backwards, sending a soldier hurling out the screen-right side of the engine.

Johnnie's catching and reversing of The General just prior to the near collision of the three trains involves a similar degree of deftness. As Johnnie labors to escape from his Union pursuers in order to warn the Southerners of the impending attack, his actions become more and more accomplished. He succeeds, virtually single-handedly, in carrying out the full gambit of delaying techniques that required an entire crew of Union spies to execute against him – and this while running the train almost without help. An astute learner, Johnnie pushes the back of a boxcar on the track to block the Union pursuit and, later, he releases a boxcar to block the Union advance. But this is really primarily imitation. He also does the Union pranksters one better when performing his own variation of the track-switching routine; Johnnie bends the tracks into their switched position by pulling the track with his engine, thus jamming the track in the wrong direction so that repairing the damage and getting on the right track again become quite challenging.

The speed, flexibility, and savvy of the kinds of actions described above contrast strongly with Keaton's automatism gags. Whereas those gags involved an insensitivity and lack of responsiveness to the environment, these actions seem to show a high degree of awareness of the character's surroundings. These incidents also seem to correspond to a class of gags that we have not yet spoken of, namely, gags that involve the character's canny manipulation of the available environment. Such gags represent successful instances of adaptation whereas the automatism gags imply maladaptation.

An early example of a successful adaptation gag occurs at the induction center when Johnnie lowers his hat over his face so that he can attempt to enlist a second time. Keaton nicely shoots this gag from the induction officer's point of view so that the viewer can literally see how the angle of the hat and the manner in which Johnnie holds his head succeed in obscuring his identity. This ruse does, in fact, not entirely succeed because a Southern general eventually sees through Johnnie's ploy; yet the ploy is successful with its initial mark.

Later examples of these successful adaptations tend to be involved with physical tasks. A famous instance of this occurs when Johnnie sees a railroad tie strewn on the tracks in front of him. The Union spies have thrown it there hoping to derail him. Johnnie slows The Texas down and runs along the side of the engine. Carefully, he slides down the cowcatcher of his engine, runs to the tie, and with much difficulty, pulls it off the track. Unfortunately, he has not worked fast enough. The Texas has inched up behind him while he struggled with the tie. By the time he lifts it, The Texas crowds up behind him, sweeps him off his feet, and he falls on top of the cowcatcher. The beam he has removed from the track is so heavy that it pins him to the front of his engine. Suddenly, he sees there is another tie on the track less than ten feet ahead of him. The locomotive will derail with him on the front of it. Yet, Johnnie sees an avenue of escape. He realizes that the tie on the track is straddling one of the rails. If he can hit the overhanging end of the tie on the track, he can catapult it out of the way of the oncoming train. He lifts the tie on his chest overhead, and bangs it down on the beam on the track, thus casting two worries aside with a single blow.

The presuppositions of the preceding gag are quite different from those of the automatism gags. Whereas the automatism gags seem to presuppose a character whose concept of a state of affairs is rigid, this type of successful adaptation involves a character who can rethink a situation and arrive at insights and inventions. Johnnie, pinned to the cowcatcher, is able to break out of a single picture of the situation, and think of those threatening railroad ties, not as mere beams, but as a lever and a weight. He is able mentally to reorganize the elements of the visual field in a new way, significantly, a new way that will save his life. A monkey, given two separate sticks, has an insight when he realizes that he can combine those two sticks into one in order to reach outside his cage and hook onto a bunch of bananas. Similarly, Johnnie has an insight when he thinks of the ties not as ties, but as the elements of a catapult. His state of mind is one that reorganizes his picture of the state of affairs. This stands in striking contrast to Johnnie's state

of mind during the automatism gags, where his mental map of the situation is irremediably frozen.

The sequence of the railroad ties in *The General* is structurally reminiscent of the scene in *Our Hospitality* in which the Keaton character, John McKay, struggles to free himself from a rope that binds him to a log which overhangs a waterfall. This rope originally attached McKay to one of the Canfields. For a long section of the film, it has been the bane of McKay's existence, Finally, it binds him to a log which may at any moment loosen and go shooting over the falls, dragging McKay with it. As he tugs on the rope, hoping to free himself, he sees his girlfriend being borne to the edge of the waterfall by a swift current. Suddenly, he rethinks his situation. Instead of conceiving of the log and the rope on the model of a ball and chain, he thinks of it as a crossbeam with an attached rope. Seen this way, he can use the former detriment as a device to save his girlfriend. As she crosses the edge of the falls, he swings over and catches her, just before she is about to plummet to the bottom of the falls. Again, the character's behavior is predicated on an ability to reorganize his way of seeing and understanding the situation. In contrast to automatism gags, inflexibility of thought gives way to flexibility.

Another successful adaptation gag in *The General* occurs when Johnnie is chopping wood. As The Texas is passing into Union territory, Johnnie breaks his ax handle. He desperately needs wood for his engine. He looks forlornly at the broken handle, but only for a second, because, all of a sudden, he realizes that the handle is wood, the very thing he needs to stoke his engine. He dutifully carries this newly discovered piece of kindling to the furnace. Here, as before, the character must shed a characteristic way of thinking. He must switch from thinking of the handle-as-handle to thinking of it as wood. A process of discovery, a new way of seeing is called for. Johnnie must decenter his concentration on the functional properties of the object *qua* ax handle, and shift to thinking about the object in terms of its material properties. This involves both cognition and perception. Refocusing the center of attention from functional properties to material properties involves a mental reorganization of Johnnie's visual field. It involves a substitution of mental maps. The moment of recognition of the possibility of such a shift is the moment of insight.

Another example of a gag involving insight has already been discussed. This is the incident at the end of the film when Johnnie recognizes that if he switches positions with Annabelle, he will be able to salute and kiss simultaneously. Like many of the gags in *The General* this gag concerns the manipulation of right/left operations. In this gag, mastery of this basic physical

category is exploited. Johnnie must reenvision himself opposite his actual position. He must be able to recognize that in such a position, his right arm will be able to freely negotiate his salutes. What is required of Johnnie is an insight which is based on a mental reorganizing of the constituents of his visual field.

The last groups of gags discussed all presuppose insight on the part of the character. Here we see a systematic dichotomy in Keaton's gags in *The General* involving a contrast of insight versus fixation as cognitive modes that Keaton evokes in order to elaborate his characterization of intelligence by means of failures of adaptation versus successes in adaptation. Ineptitude versus facility and insight versus fixation serve as basic antipodes between various gags and actions in *The General*. These contrasts, in turn, supply a systematic structure for articulating Keaton's theme of adaptability.

The presence of the successful adaptation gags in T*he General* forces one away from total acceptance of Bergson's method of analyzing comedy. Bergson is aligned to that brand of comic theory which correlates comedy with stupidity, the nonrational, the irrational, or the absurd. There is a major problem with this attitude toward comedy, however; it cannot deal with all the data that comedy provides. Specifically, it cannot deal with the type of humor we find in Keaton's successful adaptation gags. These gags involve insight on the part of the character rather than stupidity. In terms of the audience, such gags involve a shift in our mode of organizing the situation. This shift, often abrupt, is surprising. Our expectations are brought up short when Johnnie comprehends a new way of employing his broken ax handle. Here, the Bergsonian idea, that laughter serves to humiliate the character in order to correct his behavior, is completely untenable because the character's thinking is far ahead of the audience's.

Rather the audience laughs at these adaptation gags with a variety of laughter akin to the laughter one indulges in when a particularly brilliant checkmate is executed or when a tricky mathematical puzzle is ingeniously solved. Sometimes we laugh at engines and at puzzle solutions. That is, there is a category of laughter that is evoked when things "fall into place." It is a kind of laughter prompted by the apparition of pure intelligibility. This is the kind of reaction that greets Keaton's successful adaptation gags. The basis for these gags cannot be given a Bergsonian formulation. For a theoretical framework, one must turn to the kind of configurational theory of comedy proposed by psychologists of the Gestalt tradition in the thirties. From that tradition of psychology, the following characterization is offered of the relevant mental processes of the humorous experience. Note how aptly it describes the Keaton gags of the successful adaptation variety.

> Wertheimer has shown that the meaning of elements depends on the configuration of which they are a part. When the configuration suddenly changes, the meaning of the elements suddenly changes as a consequence. . . . [D]irection is a determining factor underlying the formation of configuration. A problem is always looked at from a certain point of view and this point of view determines what one will do about it (i.e. what direction one's mind will take). A particular direction facilitates certain configurations and inhibits others. Thus, when we are presented with any facts we tend to organize them in a certain way. Usually past experience gives us the point of view; we organize the facts accordingly and consequently miss a new organization or interpretation. A humorous incident is told so as to encourage a certain point of view. Then in the end we are given a conclusion (an organization of the facts presented) which is very different from the one we anticipated. It is like the experience of insight except for certain differences.[25]

Keaton mixes gags that have apparently very different explanations. There are inattention/automatism gags that are based on the presupposition of the character's fixation on a certain mental map of a situation; and there are configurational gags that are based on the character's reorganization of his mental map of the situation. Neither the Bergsonian theory nor the Gestalt, configurational theory offers an account of all Keaton's gags. We must turn elsewhere for an understanding of Keaton's themes. The obvious place to look is not far off. The intersection of Gestalt theory with Bergsonian theory may provide the location of Keaton's particular subject. Both theories are concerned with thinking and intelligence, but each places different emphasis on the subject. The automatism gags involve failures of thinking while the configurational gags involve successful thinking. Both are concerned with thought, including embodied thought.

Fixation and Insight

Structurally, Keaton seems to counterpoint the ineptness of Johnnie's performance of some physical tasks with moments of resourcefulness and quickly calculated judgment that seem to establish new levels of precision human activity. Through the action of the character, humor of the inflexibility variety is balanced by humor of the configurational sort. Two contrary modes play against each other. Since a task is an amalgam of thought and action, the formal opposition of successfully executed tasks with failures presupposes an opposition of two different aspects of intellectual activity, namely,

fixation versus insight. Analysis of major Keaton gags in *The General* constantly leads one to postulate either fixation or insight of characters, Johnnie and others, as the predominant focal points of laughter. From this we can see that the locus or subject of Keaton's comedy is intelligence, of which insight and fixation represent positive and negative poles.

It may appear vacuous to describe Keaton's major theme as intelligence, even as intelligence in regard to performance of physical tasks. One might argue that intelligence is, in fact, the subject matter of all comedy, and that intelligence in concrete operations is the subject matter of all slapstick comedy. These objections, however, seem misplaced. Intelligence is not the only mental faculty that comedy appeals to. Some comedy may be understood under an emotive framework, appealing, as it does, to our affective processes. Comedy can appeal to our aggressive instincts and to our sexual drives especially as wish fulfillment. In silent comedy, much of the sadism is clearly addressed to the darker recesses of the mind rather than to our intelligence, let alone to our understanding of how things work.

To approach the argument about the generality of our analysis from another direction, I should point out that in the work of Charlie Chaplin a whole different mental faculty is addressed, namely that of the visual imagination. Like Keaton, Chaplin's gags have a great deal to do with objects. However, Chaplin does not use objects in the way Keaton does. He transforms them into other things. Chaplin's prowess is as a mime. He treats objects metaphorically. A famous example of this is the boot and the shoestrings in the Thanksgiving scene of *The Gold Rush*. Here the boot becomes a turkey, the nails become bones, and the leather laces become spaghetti through Chaplin's treatment of them. Chaplin's gestures provoke the audience's visual imagination, enabling us to apprehend other objects, like bones, in objects we readily identify otherwise, such as boots. The Oceana Roll sequence in *The Gold Rush* is another example of Chaplin's expressive power with objects. In this vein, one can go on adding examples. Perhaps the most famous of these is the mime with the clock in *The Pawnshop*. Successively, Chaplin evokes recognition of the clock as organic, as large machinery, and as a sardine can. Chaplin's vision is metaphoric; he can see everything reflected in everything else. His appeal to audiences is on the level of the fanciful imagination. For example, in *Modern Times*, he sees bolts everywhere. The tramp represents a character who sees the world differently from those who view things solely from a functional, utilitarian perspective. Chaplin is sensitive to the correlations between the look of objects when they are divorced from a context of use. In this way, he appeals to our faculty of fancy, gratifying the visual

imagination. Given this, it is clear that we can stop objections to our analysis of Keaton that claim that our position amounts to an account of the themes of all silent comedy. Intelligence, especially intelligence as an ingredient in the performance of physical tasks, is not the major theme of all silent comedy *vis-à-vis* the relation between the silent comic and objects. Chaplin, for instance, treats the imagination, rather than concrete intelligence, as the most significant mental faculty.

The model for Keaton's success and failure gags seems applicable to other aspects of Keaton's imagery, especially his actions. Fixation versus insight marks the difference between success and failure in terms of adaptation. It is important to note that these attributes of thought in relation to Keaton apply to action. Insight and fixation are aspects of concrete activities in Keaton. They represent poles of achievement and failure, of openness and responsiveness to the environment and its possibilities versus closedness and obliviousness to the environment and its actualities. In this light, one can see certain of Keaton's actions as sitting on the responsive side of this polarity. His dexterity in accomplishing tasks evidences a high degree of intelligence, both in terms of his understanding of the relevant physical processes and in terms of an alertness to the progress of those processes. Successful performance of actions, such as Johnnie's bending of the switchtrack, presupposes skill and judgment. Skill is the fruit of understanding and judgment involves alertness. Johnnie's skill is shown by the air of confidence with which he undertakes his task. He knowingly hooks the chain from the train on to the cross rail and switches the track, locking the rail at the angle he wants. As the rail bends he studies it carefully, ascertaining that the damage wrought is the damage he planned. In each of these gestures, the character reveals not only understanding, but also a kind of alertness and attentiveness never found in the fixation gags. He is absolutely present in terms of what is going on. Intelligence involves a certain sensitivity to the environment. It is exactly sensitivity to the environment that leads us to group Johnnie's successful actions with the insight gags. In this light, the actions are seen as intelligent actions. Again what is intelligent correlates with what is most adaptable, where what is most adaptable is a function of awareness of the environment in terms of such mental processes as insight, skill, and judgment. These mental processes, moreover, are not abstract, ghostly operations, but rather are embodied in action.

Analyzing the imagery of *The General* has enabled us to discover the theme of concrete intelligence, characterized as adaptability, underlying the film's humor. This characterization of intelligence probably originates

in or, at least, is reinforced by the popularity of evolutionary metaphors in America. Moreover, this theme of concrete intelligence is approached by Keaton from two directions, one positive and one negative. By exemplification, he explores what is intelligence and what is not. Intelligence requires awareness of the environment. Activity devoid of intelligence is unaware of the environment: it is mired in fixation, inattention, and automatism. These different aspects of thought directly correlate with adaptability on the one hand and failure to adapt on the other.

Intelligence in Keaton's Other Films

This adaptive intelligence model also has explanatory efficacy for Keaton's films other than *The General*. For instance, it nicely accounts for the sequence in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* where Bill Jr. rescues his father. As a result of a flood, Bill's father is floating down the river, trapped in a jail. The longer the jail floats, the deeper it sinks. In danger of being drowned in the jail, Steamboat Bill Sr. floats by his steamboat and sees his son standing on the deck. Frantically, he beckons to Bill Jr. for help. Bill Jr. sees him, grabs a rope, and constructs a contraption so that one man can drive the steamboat alone. Ordinarily, one man operates the steering of the ship from the turret of the boat while another man, down in the engine room, operates the throttle. This arrangement is impossible, however, if one man is to operate the boat. Bill Jr. solves this problem by connecting ropes to the engine room throttle and by running them up to the command turret. In doing this, Bill Jr. puts to work nemeses from earlier parts of the film. At one point at the beginning of the film, Bill Jr. had harrowing encounters with the throttle of the ship. In a very embarrassing moment he had a rope pulled from beneath him, resulting in a pratfall. However, in the rescue scene Bill Jr. is able to put these troublesome elements to work for him through an insight into how they can be ingeniously combined to save his father. Skill and judgment also come into play in this sequence, for in ramming the jail in order to free his father, Bill Jr. must be careful to reverse the steamboat almost on impact with the jail lest he crush his father to death under the heavy prow of the steamboat. Here, insight and judgment unite in an act of supreme adaptability to the situation and its possibilities. Keaton valorizes concrete intelligence by embedding its achievements in a celebratory narrative of heroism.

Devices composed of previously troublesome elements figure in other Keaton films, such as *The Navigator*, in which the narrative itself is almost totally

concerned with adaptation. Rollo and his girlfriend must somehow adjust kitchen mechanisms meant to feed hundreds of people for use by two people. Rollo uses a crabtrap to hold eggs while he boils them in an enormous cauldron. He attaches a saw to the wheel of a grindstone to serve as a makeshift can-opener. Prior to these inventions, the size of the kitchen utensils thwarted every effort by the two lovers to eat.

In *Cops*, as well, one sees the insight at work when Keaton's character invents a signal arm from a boxing glove and a scissors lamp. Also, in *Cops* the Keaton character's ability to turn the teeter-tottering ladder that the police have him cornered on into a virtual catapult requires insight. With the eye of an engineer looking for new tools, in *One Week*, Keaton uses the front porch balustrade as a ladder, successfully putting an old object to new use. Similar insightful tinkering can be found in *The Blacksmith*, when Keaton uses an engine hoist as a means to offset an attack by Big Bill Roberts.

One can also group the skillful finale of *College* within the class of adaptability images. Here, Ronald, the Keaton character, must run across town to save Mary Haines. The town is studded with many obstacles, some human, others inanimate. Navigating across congested parks and landscapes covered with hedges demands acute athleticism. Ronald bolts across town at top speed, running around pedestrians like a football player, and leaping over shrubs without missing a stride. As he heads for Mary's second-floor window, he has a sudden insight. Without breaking pace, he grabs a pole that is holding a clothes line off the ground, pokes it in the ground ahead of him, and vaults into Mary's window. In this case, the character is able to smoothly redirect his thinking about the pole. He shifts from thinking of its present function to simply thinking of it in terms of its length, shape, and weight. Seeing the pole apart from its current function makes Ronald capable of putting it to new use as a tool to aid his jump. Here insight combines with action in a feat of adaptability as the character assimilates elements in the environment to fit his needs.

The preceding examples should confirm the importance of the theme of adaptability for Keaton and lend credibility to my analysis of the imagery in *The General*. I have emphasized the theme of concrete intelligence in *The General*. In order to ascertain whether this is something specific to Keaton's interests, I have gone on to examine other Keaton films. Finding this concern exemplified in other films supports the conjecture that this is something we can plausibly designate as a concern of Keaton's, based of the standard critical assumption that there is some constancy of theme from one work to the next in an artist's *oeuvre*. My selection of supporting examples of adaptability images

has not just been a conveniently chosen sample that battens on insignificant moments in Keaton in order to serve my case. To be sure, the sequences from *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, *The Navigator*, and *College* that we have explicated are among the most important sequences in those works.

Emboldened by our successes so far we might hazard speculation on an overall model for dealing thematically with much of Keaton. We can note that both in the case of *Steamboat Bill Jr.* and *College* the character's moments of insight and adaptability occur at moments of narrative heroism. We may interpret this conjunction as a celebration by Keaton of human adaptability. One might further note that this valorization of skill and judgment often reaches extremes in Keaton, that is, characters often perform extraordinary adaptations. Within the category of feats of superadaptability, we find what David Robinson has called Keaton's trajectories,[26] that is, runs such as those that end the Roman sequence in *Three Ages*, *Seven Chances*, and *College*. In these sequences match-cutting facilitates the production of a cinematic image of astounding speed, judgment, and dexterity. Because shot segments of movements are being joined together, the composite picture is of sustained continuous movement. It is as if Keaton runs for miles without breaking stride whereas, of course, he is actually only running for several hundred feet at a time. The appearance is of virtually superhuman alertness and adaptability capable of assimilating every obstacle of the environment into breathtaking, unbroken vectors of movement across awesome steeplechases.

From the above, we see that adaptability can even provide an explication of Keaton's famous dashes. This suggests that the model we have developed for analyzing *The General* may supply the basis for an overall model of Keaton's work. We do not take it that we have demonstrated the viability of this model for all of Keaton's work. However, I believe that the fact that our iconographic analysis of images of *The General* points to a possible, overall thematic model for Keaton, is a good sign that our model has managed to isolate something important in Keaton. One expects that the themes that are important in *The General* should appear in other works as well.

Concrete Intelligence in *The General*

The proposed model for explaining the imagery in *The General* considers it as basically concerned with the subject matter of concrete intelligence characterized as adaptability. Keaton approaches this material from two directions, one positive and one negative. His character is always involved in

a process of adaptation, sometimes successfully and other times disastrously. Intelligence is the crucial determinant. Where the character is dimwitted, he fails. Modes of dimwittedness include fixation, inattention, and automatism. All these involve a rigid and unresponsive attitude to the environment. The contrary of this is intelligence, which involves insight, skill, and judgment. All these involve an alert and attentive attitude toward the environment. *The General* seems to be an artistic meditation, through exemplification, of the ramifications of these mental aptitudes for adaptation. In some Keaton films, like *College* and *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, the unsuccessful and successful adaptability actions are organized by the narrative structure according to a maturation process: after reels of ineptitude the character finally superadapts. Here, adaptation coincides with a heroic moment in the film, thereby ennobling adaptability. *The General* has something of this progression, but it is not as clear-cut. Johnnie has successes and failures throughout the film; the progression, though in evidence, is much more mixed. The film does end on a physical insight image of Johnnie saluting and kissing simultaneously. This seems to give the privileged position of the film, namely, the conclusion, to the theme of concrete intelligence. Though somewhat less demonstrative than either *College* or *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, *The General* seems to applaud the ability to adapt to the environment intelligently as the primary accomplishment of the character.

One inadequacy in the approach is that we have not dealt with every gag in the film. Seemingly we cannot handle the gags involving Johnnie's relation with Annabelle. Of course, this is not completely true since we can explain many of these gags as automatism on Annabelle's part. Annabelle employs concepts more applicable to household chores to the locomotive. She discards a piece of wood with a hole in it as if it were spoiled. Even though we can explain aspects of the feminine gags, we cannot, on our model, account for the "battle of the sexes" humor that is so apparent. There are other gags that do not fit our model. For instance, the mimic effect Johnnie achieves at the end of the film when he strikes a daguerreotype pose when he realizes he is wearing an officer's uniform, is outside our model. The question arises as to how acceptable our model is, given the fact that it does not fit every gag in the film into a single system of analysis.

To answer this question, we must be clear on what we expect from an acceptable analysis. In this regard, we must note that the account of *The General* that employed a single hypothesis to deal with every gag in the film would be hopelessly general. Not all comedy is homogeneous, as we noted by considering the problems with Bergsonian and Gestalt theories of comedy.

Not all the humor in *The General* is of the same variety. Humor derived from stereotypes of women, from mimicry, and from absent-mindedness are categorically discrete. We do not expect to find one hypothesis that will explicate all of the varieties. Rather we hope to find one hypothesis that will organize the greatest group of them into a coherent system. One would expect to find the central themes embedded in the largest constellation of related imagery. And that is what I have attempted to do.

I believe we have zeroed in on the imagery in the film that is the most pertinent to the particular accomplishments of *The General*. In most of the commentary that one reads on the film, the common consensus is that the most important thematic aspect of the film concerns the relation between man and his environment. I have clarified that general statement more than previous commentaries by arguing that the theme of the film involves the relation of man and his environment in terms of the very specific way particular cognitive perspectives on the environment either facilitate or impede adaptation. In terms of standard criticism of *The General*, my formulation is superior, especially in contrast to what might be thought of as the contest model of Keaton explication. This model designates the relation between Keaton and the environment as a kind of struggle between man and nature in which man must bring order to nature. An example of this is the following:

> If things won't willingly cooperate in our service, they must be trapped and controlled by ingenuity. Give them the most minute degree of freedom, it appears, and they revert to their surly savage state; a harshly colonialistic policy is our only hope in dealing with the monsters. Keaton's galley [in *The Navigator*] proclaims the bizarre results of human cunning and the need to resort to cunning in the first place; what we see is a fantastic dream born of the Nightmare of Things.[27]

In a similar vein, the following quote dubs the universe an "abyss."

> Closer to Shelley or to the Shakespeare of the late romances than to any other filmmaker, Keaton insists in his great period that the will cannot be destroyed, cannot be daunted, even by the abyss itself.[28]

The contest between man and environment model of understanding Keaton seems the most popular approach. It has the strength of addressing what seems to be the most crucial relation in Keaton's films, namely the relation between man and the environment. It frames this relation in terms of an

adversarial relationship, but the data of the film gives us no reason to postulate such a conflict. The contest theorists write as if the only relation possible between man and the environment is conflictive. This betrays a lack of imagination.

The environment is not chaotic; it is rule-bound and law-like in Keaton. If it were not, his successes would be impossible. He can adapt just because the environment is ordered. His failures at adaptation result because characters like Johnnie Gray employ defective cognitive habits. Admittedly, the character's assimilation of the environment is always a special moment in Keaton films. It is premised on the character's adaptation which, in turn, relies on the character's intuiting the lawfulness of the environment. The environment is neutral; it is neither an "abyss" nor a "nightmare." The same laws apply both when a character like Johnnie Gray adapts and when he fails to adapt. Johnnie's successes do not involve his conquest of things or of the abyss; they involve his alert and skillful activity in accordance with the laws of nature. Johnnie changes; it is not the case that nature changes fundamentally. It is an error to see Keaton characters like Johnnie Gray as opposed to nature and bringing order to chaotic things. Rather, Johnnie discovers and adjusts to order. Postulating a conflict relation between Keaton and the environment is unintelligible given the nature of Johnnie's successful adaptations of the environment. Keaton is not a Romantic. Such an interpretation does not square with the data of the films. A better picture than that of a contest between the environment and the character is that the point of tangency between the two is at the issue of adaptability; this may be successful or unsuccessful depending on whether the character exercises concrete intelligence or not. In this way, in *The General*, Keaton examines the conditions of adaptability, celebrating concrete intelligence as the most positive virtue in the world of that film. This theory, rather than the conflict theory, accords most accurately with the film.

Concrete Intelligence and Skilled Labor

The postulation of the theme of concrete intelligence as adaptability enables us to organize many of the gags in *The General* into a coherent system. It also opens avenues for future research on Keaton. It suggests, as well, very direct and plausible origins for these themes in the historical setting of Keaton's work by situating his perspective on intelligence within the popular evolutionary idiom of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.

We shall now try to demonstrate that the hypothesis of Keaton's major theme of concrete intelligence may play an important role in accounting for the popularity of Keaton films like *The General* both with his contemporary audiences and with those of our own time.

To see what may be especially gratifying to an audience about *The General*, it is important to remember that the central character of the film is a worker, significantly a skilled worker, an engineer. In fact, a substantial portion of the film is given over to imagery of skilled labor, which is sometimes executed successfully and more often botched. Given this kind of concentration in the film, we should immediately ask ourselves about the way in which the film relates to the kind of work its audiences perform. That is, a likely area of appeal in a film so dominated by images of work would be the ways those images relate to the work done in the cultures that appreciate the film. Here the most likely sorts of relation between the film's work images and the work in the cultural milieu are: (1) a reflection of the generic values of work in the relevant cultures; or, (2) an aesthetic compensation for something missing from the kind of work done in the broader culture.

In looking at *The General* in relation to the work in the broader culture of the twenties – especially the urban, movie-consuming culture – it is important to consider the contrast between the two. This is even more pronounced by the time we consider our own contemporary work culture. *The General* centers around the performance of a craftsman, an engineer. It may sound somewhat odd to call a locomotive engineer a craftsman since he doesn't produce a product. Yet the types of talents a steam engineer requires and his mastery of every phase of the work process that he undertakes marks his occupation as close to that of an artisan. It is this craft dimension of the imagery which contrasts with both the work culture of Keaton's contemporaries and with that of our contemporaries. The twenties stand amidst a period that witnessed the end of the skilled manual laborer of the sort that the railroaders in *The General* represent. This contrast is even more striking for us in the twenty-first century since the kind of work Keaton exemplifies in this film has by now all but disappeared in the First World.

The basic craft[29] that had greatly diminished by the twenties was farming. Because the domestic markets slowed down, due to the stabilization of American population growth (large-scale immigration was slackening[30]) and because the international agricultural market was narrowing, due to stiff competition from new grain producing centers, American farming contracted. According to C. Wright Mills, "[i]n 1820, almost three-quarters of the nation's labor force was engaged in agricultural production. In the century and a

quarter since then, during most of which time frontier lands were still available, every census recorded the numerical decline in the proportion of farmers; by 1880, they comprised one-half; by 1949, farmers of all sorts made up only one-eighth of the population."[31] The decline in the farming population, as it was reintegrated into the burgeoning service sector of the economy, meant that a large part of the population simply lost its direct experience with the manipulation of things, experience working with tools and raw materials. The service sector required skills with people, not skills with things.[32]

> Farming involves not only work with, and understanding of the land, it also combines its craft with the rude practice of a number of others including those of the smith, mason, carpenter, butcher, miller, baker etc. The apprenticeships required in traditional crafts ranged from three to seven years and for the farmer, of course, extends beyond this to include most of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood.[33]

The point of this is that the twenties sit in the latter half of a process of transition of the majority's experience of the nature of work. Whereas, in the nineteenth century, skilled manipulation of things was still part of the majority of Americans' work experience, by the twentieth century, that experience had disappeared. *The General*, more than any other fictional film of the period, dwells on imagery of skilled manual labor. Because of that, it very well may have kindled a certain nostalgia, both in native-born American and in immigrant audiences, for the kinds of pleasures associated with the skilled manipulation of things. By the twenties, many could only recapture that pleasure, not in their work lives, but in their leisure time through hobbies.[34]

As farming declined, the service sector of the work force expanded rapidly. By 1929, the service sector reached 40 percent of the work force (by 1967, it was over 55 percent).[35] In 1900, there were 3.6 million service and sales people; in 1910, 4.9 million; in 1920 still 4.9 million; but by 1930, there were 7.3 million.[36] Urban selling became organized on a massive scale. The specialty shops of the nineteenth century became amalgamated in huge department stores, like Macy's, and mail order houses, such as, Sears. These required massive sales staffs, or sales processors. Business and industry began to reach the point where basic needs could be satisfied easily and cheaply; new areas of expansion had to be found if profit margins were to follow an ever rising arc. The advertising business was born. It grew at a great rate since it answered business's desire for growth by creating and instilling new needs in the buying public. People entering the expanding service sectors

exchanged their workaday practice of manual skills with things for intensive use of social skills involved with handling people.

As business became larger, as monopolies were created, the need for huge office staffs arose. As a result, one notes a striking rise in the clerical sector of the American economy as well as an intensive division of labor among that group. In 1900, there were 0.9 million clerical workers; in 1910, 2.0 million; in 1920, 3.4 million; and by 1930, there were 4.3 million clerical workers.[37] Like the service sector, these people no longer had the skilled manipulation of objects as a workaday part of their lives. For them, a film like *The General* could be compensatory since it did not reflect the values of their work culture. The values portrayed in *The General* as concrete intelligence construed as adaptability were not the sorts of social talent and abilities needed to master routine – such as service and clerical – work. In *The General*, talents presupposed as generic by an earlier work culture are examined, dramatized, and celebrated. For the growing service and clerical work culture of the twenties, *The Genera*l could be seen as vicariously supplying an experience with objects and an occasion for thinking about concrete interactions that were no longer part of the work experience of much of the population.

Even in the factory sector of the population, one notes that, though their work still involved interactions with physical objects, it was, for the most part, not skilled work. In the nineteenth century much factory work was still artisanal. The factory worker had intimate, intuitive knowledge of his materials.

> Because many machines have slow rates of depreciation, the workshops are full of ancient milling machines and lathes, imprecise and poorly adjusted. The worker must know what his machine is capable of, how to wheedle and coax precision out of it. The worker "makes do." He may shore up the frame here or there to take out the play, reestablishing the horizontal alignment for better results in milling. The company cannot retool completely for each new product line. The production machinist must himself take the initiative in readying the old machines. He has his personal little tool kit, consisting of calipers and wedges, He must know something of handwork, of how to use a file, for many of the parts he has to turn out are so complicated that they can only be roughed down by machine. Hand finishing is required.[38]

This picture of nineteenth-century work is celebrated in that period's art by Zola in *L'Assommoir*, and also in *La Bête Humaine*. In film, I submit, *The General* presents one of the finest images of the artisanal work of the nineteenth

century. It achieves this in two ways: through Johnnie Gray's successes, and through his failures. Both modes presuppose the kind of concrete intelligence about things described above. The craftsman develops with his work; he learns about things as Johnnie does with the catapult gag. The craftsmen in the factories of the nineteenth century did not receive formal training.[39] Their skills were empirical. They were not scientific or technical. For instance, their knowledge of metallurgy was not acquired through chemical theories, but based on what they learned on the job. Much of this was intuitive;[40] "body-English" was often required. The worker relied on "the role of practiced dexterity and trade secrets transmitted by experience, the importance of knowing intimately the raw materials, and of developing faculties by doing."[41] Johnnie Gray manifests this sort of intimate knowledge in the dexterity with which he handles his engines. Furthermore, the empirical, trial and error aspect of this intelligence is underscored by the fact that in *The General* there are many failures as well as successes with physical tasks. Johnnie Gray exemplifies a kind of craft knowledge the average factory worker, whose work experience by the 1920s was based on the assembly-line production no longer possessed. The assembly-line divests the worker of knowledge of materials. His own judgments are preempted by the specifications of his work card. Such a worker is denied the practice of the kind of concrete intelligence that is celebrated in Keaton's *The General*. Whereas Johnnie develops his understanding and makes discoveries about things, the twenties factory worker was denied this avenue of development through the division of labor characteristic of the Taylorized assembly-line.

Like the nineteenth-century craftsman,[42] Johnnie has mastery over the totality of his work process in a number of ways. It is important that he understand his business from one end to the other. This is demonstrated by the fact that he runs the whole show by himself. He is not just an engine driver; he is also a stoker, a track attendant, and, in a way, even a dispatcher. He is, by the end of the film, capable of discharging every task connected with his work and of comprehending how each element of the work is part of the entire enterprise. In this regard, Johnnie's work stands in contrast to that of the twenties factory worker. The assembly-line leaves the laborer no overall idea of the place of his work in the overarching process. The laborer is not skilled; he performs one task over and over again. He is hardly master of the process; he rarely understands the whole process of production that he is involved in.

His work also contrasts with Johnnie Gray's in its lack of variety. Johnnie cuts wood, tinkers with the engine, switches tracks, etc. His job involves many

different skills whereas Keaton's contemporaries on the assembly-line had little experience to match the richness and diversity of Johnnie's work.

The assembly-line obliterated many types of artisanal jobs. For instance, in nineteenth-century factories, fitters were extremely important. Workers adjusted pieces of machinery to each other. Their tools included files and the instruments of the blacksmith's trade. Dexterity and judgment were crucial to their work. This kind of concrete intelligence and skill was rendered obsolete by the mass production assembly-line. There, when a part did not fit other parts, it was scrapped. The skilled laborer, the fitter, was dropped because his work, though minimizing waste, was more expensive than the toleration of certain levels of waste. The skilled worker, possessed of a concrete intelligence constantly practiced on the job, was replaced by unskilled labor whose restricted tasks on the assembly-line did not call for a similar exercise of concrete intelligence. *The General* could gratify audiences by rehearsing a lost dimension of their work experience. In this sense, Keaton's theme is appealing to his audiences exactly because it is compensatory. A contemporary factory worker saw a satisfying dimension of work that had been central to a preceding period that was no longer a feature of his twenties work culture.[43]

Keaton's railroad imagery is also crucial to situating the work culture that Keaton is examining. The type of craft labor found in *The General* is characteristic of the steam, steel, locomotive stage of the Industrial Revolution, that is distinct from the gas, electric, automobile culture that sprang up in America after the First World War. Keaton's exploration of the theme of concrete intelligence in work harks back to a period immediately prior to the one in which *The General* was produced. Through Johnnie Gray, Keaton exemplifies and celebrates the kind of workaday intelligence about things that the rail, steam, and steel culture presupposed as the basis for its central processes of railroading, manufacturing, and farming.

The increasingly sales, service, and clerical work culture of the twenties did not presuppose the same skills. Even in manufacturing, where the assembly-line atomized work, concrete intelligence was replaced with routine. *The General*, in this light, is a kind of work of nostalgia eulogizing a lost dimension of work life and the skills inherent in it. Keaton is a ciné-poet of industrialism and of a type of worker that was central to one phase of industrialism. Through success and failure gags, Keaton enables the audience to recall the kind of concrete intelligence that was disappearing from the work experience. *The General* allows the audience momentarily to recapture the positive feeling of work as an opportunity for creativity, intellectual exercise,

and discovery. This compensatory aspect of Keaton was an important factor in the twenties. Hence, if *The General* gratified its audiences because it was compensatory in the twenties, then it is even more compensatory for contemporary audiences, many of whom have no skills in the manipulation of the raw materials and tools of manufacture and building.

The characterization of Keaton we are offering, via *The General*, is connected to his other works. In *Scarecrow*, the wonderful string contraptions let Keaton showcase that facility and savvy with things that was the keynote of the nineteenth-century worker's relation to objects. In *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, Keaton, in order to become a hero, must become a worker. Of course, worker imagery is not the only type of imagery Keaton employs. In *College*, the imagery is derived from sport. In *Seven Chances*, the imagery derives from athletics.[44] In *Sherlock Jr.* and *Our Hospitality*, circus stunts provide a model for the feats. In all cases, Keaton seems to be concerned with the theme of concrete intelligence characterized as adaptability and manifested in the physical interactions with things, often through work. The shorts, for instance, are dominated by images of workingmen. In *The General*, Keaton's concern with concrete intelligence in work, reaches the high point of its articulation. Regarding concrete intelligence as Keaton's theme in *The General* has the advantage of supplying a powerful historical theory for the appeal the film has for audiences. By this account, we can even propose an explanation of why *The General* becomes increasingly popular. As the processes of monopoly capital make the exercise of this type of intelligence ever more rare, the compensation involved becomes proportionately greater.

It may be argued against us that our analysis of Keaton is too sectarian, too conveniently socialist to be believed. I have, it may be claimed, bent and twisted the material to make it fit polemical purposes; the analysis is biased and distorted. Though the analysis is related to certain themes that are common to Socialist Humanism, it is not biased considering the structure of our analysis. We began by noting the large degree of work imagery in *The General*. This is a matter of observation. It cannot be denied that there is a great deal of work imagery in the film. It is reasonable to look for central themes in the film at those points where certain types of imagery predominate. So we turn to the work in the film. How will we determine the significance of that imagery to audiences? Here, it is reasonable to compare the work in the film with the type of work practiced in the broader relevant cultures. The question is whether the work in the film is the same or different from the work in the surrounding culture. If it is the same, then the film may reflect the values of the broader culture. The fact that the work in

the film is not the same as the sorts of work that predominated in the surrounding culture prompts us to abandon the reflection approach. What are the likely relations between the audience and the film when the images of work in the film are different from the sort of work found in the culture at large? A *prima facie* ground for difference is compensation, especially if we can isolate what about the difference would probably be compensatory. Our candidate for the difference is concrete intelligence characterized as active adaptability. It may be that this analysis insinuates that Keaton advances a socialist-leaning perspective toward work, or, to be more accurate, that Keaton affords a kind of humanist attitude to craftsmanship that is shared by people like Marx, Ruskin, Morris, and others. This I do not deny. However, I have, as the preceding summary of our analysis indicates, reached this conclusion by the natural path of research.

On my account, Keaton's view of the kind of skilled work that calls for the adaptive application of concrete intelligence is unmistakably positive, even heroic. In contrast, the film historian Tom Gunning sees a darker side to Keaton's take on work.[45] Gunning finds in Keaton's films an indication of the dehumanizing effects of Taylorization that would abet the further alienation of labor. Gunning concludes that Keaton's films suggest that twentieth-century "man had to learn not only to work in a new way, but also to move, fall, and make love in a new rhythm in order to keep pace with systems no longer measured to human demands."[46]

This baleful insight sounds more like a description of parts of Chaplin's *Modern Times* than anything in Keaton. If Gunning's notion of making love in a new, inhuman rhythm is an allusion to the last scene in Keaton's *The General*, then it pays to recall that that is a joyous moment of comic triumph and not an invitation to the modern rat race, an adaptive conquest, not a defeat of the human spirit.

Moreover, whenever machines appear in Keaton's work, Keaton, the director, clearly loves them. He does not fear them, nor does he encourage viewers to. He relishes playing with the mechanisms, exploring them, and sometimes even inventing them. Indeed, Keaton said that, had he not become a comedian, he would have been a civil engineer. And he self-evidently exhibits an engineer's love of devices, large and small.

Furthermore, as the Keaton character shows, most notably in the feature films such as *The General*, the interaction with machinery can provide an opportunity for self-actualization when it is joined with bodily mindfulness. In his mature work, by the end of the pertinent narratives, Keaton celebrates machines as extensions of our human powers. One finds no trepidations

concerning the tendencies of modern industry to enslave and dehumanize labor. There is no hint of *Metropolis* in *The General*. This is not because Keaton is an apologist for the factory system. He simply does not address it one way or another. Nor is this a symptom of denial. Keaton's interests merely lie elsewhere – not only with different sorts of machines than the assembly lines regimented by Taylor and Gilbert, but, accordingly, with a different aspect of human activity.

Specifically, Keaton's grand theme is the concrete intelligence of the body as it manifests itself adaptively or fails to do so in its encounter with things. Explored positively and negatively, the human assimilation of the physical environment to its purposes is the great topic of the iconography of Keaton's major films. Where that imagery involves manual work or work-like behavior, as in *The General*, Keaton focuses finally on its potentially elevating capacities rather than its more degrading prospects. Johnnie Gray is a skilled worker, not a cog in some satanic mill. Undoubtedly, that is why Soviet filmmakers believed that they had a fellow traveler in Buster Keaton.

NOTES

1 William Pittenger, *Daring and Suffering: A History of the Great Railroad Adventure* (Philadelphia: J. W. Daughaday, 1864).

2 For those who feel that the position attacked here is a totally fabricated straw man, let me say that Rudi Blesh, in his study *Keaton* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), holds that the miraculous transformation of the individual in the face of fate is Keaton's central theme. Hence, at least part of the analysis, attacked above, is evident in the more eminent literature in the field. Hence, my romantic love proponent is not a completely invented straw man; rather, elements of this interpretation are found in esteemed works in the field.

3 Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 131.

4 Tom Gunning interprets this scene as symbolizing the dehumanization that comes with industrialization. He finds the imagery uneasy, as Keaton is alleged to take over the rhythm of his locomotive. But this account hardly suits the affect of the situation which is one of joyous, triumphant hilarity. There is nothing uneasy about the moment at all. See: Tom Gunning "Buster Keaton or The Work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Cineaste*, 21(3) (1995), p. 16.

5 George Adam Wead, *Buster Keaton and the Dynamics of Visual Wit* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University doctoral dissertation, 1973; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 73-30755 1 594816), p. 253.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 262.

8 Ibid., p. 264.
9 Ibid., p. 274.
10 Ibid., p. 264.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 233.
13 *The General* opens with several humorous effects, though it is not the case that these must be designated as gags. The first humorous effect involves the imitation of Johnnie Gray by two local town boys. This is more of a humorous situation than a gag. Though the distinction here may seem somewhat fuzzy, it does seem that in general a gag does involve some significant play of expectation whereas the imitation of Johnnie seems more of the nature of a charming anecdote.

The second humorous effect in the film involves two shots. The first is an intertitle about Johnnie that reads "There were two loves in his life. His engine." Then follows a shot of a photo of Annabelle in a circular frame. This effect may, on the face of it, appear to be a gag insofar as it seems that one might expect that the loves of Johnnie's life will be listed according to priorities and, that under that kind of listing, one expects that Annabelle should be first. However, this explanation of the shot interpolation does not seem right to me; instead this shot interpolation is more of an allusion to a popular sort of verbal cliché than a gag. That is, folklore has it that a cowboy loves his horse and his girl, in that order. Indeed, weren't English squires held to value their property, their horses, their dogs and their wives, in that order? In short, the "in that order" joke is virtually a cliché rather than a gag which subverts expectations. In this context, Keaton's use of this cliché is predicated on eliciting humor through recognition rather than through surprise. Here, what is to be recognized is the "in that order" cliché and, through that cliché, the audience is to further recognize the particularly obsessive, male personality type that the cliché describes. Undoubtedly, at one time, the "in that order" cliché was a full-blooded joke. This may be the reason why an analysis of it in terms of subverted expectations may seem initially appropriate. However, time and use have sapped the strategy of its energy and what remains is an epithet rather than a joke.
14 Of course, in this gag, it is not Johnnie but the boys who behave automatically; Johnnie, in fact, is quite clever here. Later in this chapter I will comment on Johnnie's cleverness at length.
15 John Dewey comments on such a mentality in his "Having an Experience" in *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1908 [1934]) and "Education as Growth" in *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan 1916). This correspondence between Keaton's approach to intelligence and a noted pragmatist's is highly suggestive.
16 Aaron Smuts has reminded me that this sort of behavior recalls Dewey's notion of intellectualism.

17 Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 67.
18 See also Dewey, "Education as Growth."
19 Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1930), p. 24.
20 Quoted in Hofstadter, p. 34.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 48.
23 Quoted in Hofstadter, p. 45.
24 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 400.
25 Norman R. F. Maier, "A Gestalt Theory of Humour," *The British Journal of Psychology*, 23(1) (July 1932), pp. 69–70.
26 David Robinson, *Buster Keaton* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 79.
27 E. Rubinstein, *Filmguide to The General* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 72.
28 Frank McConnell, *The Spoken Seen: Film and the Romantic Imagination* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 23.
29 Harry Braverman, "Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century," from *The Monthly Review*, 26(3) (July–Aug. 1974), p. 34.
30 C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 17.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., p. 182.
33 Braverman, p. 35.
34 Mills, p. 224.
35 Braverman, p. 126.
36 Ibid., p. 112.
37 Ibid.
38 Alain Touraine, "The End of the Road for the Skilled Worker: Automaking at Renault," in *Work and Community in the West*, ed. Edward Shorter (New York, Evanston: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 84.
39 Ibid., p. 90.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Throughout my discussion of nineteenth-century work, I have not meant to suggest that the lot of said workers was idyllic. Obviously, in terms of wages and working conditions, there was much privation. I do not deny the negative side of nineteenth-century work. I am only discussing the positive side of skilled labor during the period. Work was intellectually challenging. This advantage was lost with Taylorization, for via the assembly-line the intellectual dimension of factory labor was destroyed.

43 The loss of the feature of work that involves the practice of concrete intelligence was a result of the successful attempt of factory management to take control of the workshop from the workers. This makes business much less vulnerable to strikes. In the traditional workshop, knowledge of materials and knowledge of production processes were in the hands of the worker. A strike was paralyzing. Such workers could not be replaced easily. Management knew little of production and even less of the peculiarities of the machines in their own shops; all that was in the hands and minds of the laborer. The assembly-line with its segmentation of work and its absolute specification of tasks with work cards involves divesting the worker of mastery over the processes of production. The unskilled worker can easily be replaced by other unskilled workers. Strikes can be easily broken by the use of scabs. Assembly-lines mean the centralization of all knowledge of production in management. Frederick Taylor, the major theoretician of this tendency, wrote, "The managers assume, for instance, the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen, and then classifying, tabulating and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulas." Also Taylor writes, "As far as possible, the workmen as well as the gang bosses and foremen, should be entirely relieved of planning, . . . All possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying-out department." Here, we see that the very *raison d'être* of the assembly line is predicated on divesting factory work of the opportunity for the exercise of concrete intelligence. See: Frederick Winslow Taylor, "The Principles of Scientific Management" in *Scientific Management* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1911), p. 36; also *Shop Management* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1919), pp. 98–9.

44 With respect to Keaton's use of sports imagery, it may be that the rise of sports in America is a compensatory response to the population's waning experience of the intelligent interaction with things.

45 Gunning, pp. 14–17.

46 Ibid., p. 17.

2

Style in *The General*

In this chapter, I will examine key elements of cinematic style in *The General*. This will include discussions of the composition and editing of the film as well as of the interrelations of the composition with the editing. My major concern is with the more Keatonesque elements of style in *The General*, as distinguished from the style that predominates in the work of most other comic filmmakers. In particular, I am interested in these elements of style as they function in *The General*. Here, three different issues will be canvassed: how the elements of style modify one's perception and experience of the film; how these modifications facilitate the gags in the film; and how the gags and their cinematic structure serve as expressions of the deeper themes of *The General*.

Throughout I shall speak of Keaton as the person responsible for the look of *The General* in terms of composition and editing. This is not adopted merely as a convention of exposition. Nor is it based simply on the fact that Keaton exercised executive control, the final say, over the film. It seems that Keaton had practical control as well. He stated, "Now this was my own story, my own continuity, I directed it, I cut it and I titled it. So actually this was my pet."[1] No one has contradicted this claim despite the fact that Keaton's long years of decline would have provided a wide-open field for any counterclaims. Instead, we have the following testimonial from Clyde Bruckman, the man listed as the co-director of *The General*.

> You seldom saw [Keaton's] name in the story credits. But I can tell you – and so could Jean Havez if he were alive – that those wonderful stories were ninety percent Buster's. I was often ashamed to take the money, much less the credit. I would say so. Bus would say, "Stick [Bruckman] I need a left fielder," but

> he never left you in left field. We were all overpaid from the strict creative point of view. Most of the direction was [Keaton's] as Eddie Cline will tell you. Keaton could have graduated into a top director – of any kind of picture, short or long, high or low, sad or funny or both – if Hollywood hadn't pushed him down and then said "Look how Keaton has slipped!" Comedian, gagman, writer, director – then add technical innovator. Camera work. Look at his pictures to see beautiful shots, wide pans, unexpected close-ups and angles that were all new when he thought them up.[2]

Bruckman's statement of Keaton's contribution is quite emphatic. We have no reason to distrust Bruckman here. Bruckman's own career was quite tragic. He ended committing suicide in the bathroom of a restaurant, leaving a note saying that he couldn't afford a funeral. If anything, one would think that someone in Bruckman's straits might be tempted to claim more of the glory that surrounds the Keaton films that he worked on. His lavish praise in such circumstances provides a degree of confirmation to his report. That such testimony is not called into question by other testimony is further evidence.

The Long-Shot

I begin my discussion of the style in *The General* by considering its composition. Isolation of the particularly Keatonesque format of composition need not be a completely *de novo* undertaking. I shall pick up on the observations of other critics, hopefully corroborating these leads via argumentation, and also refining those leads into more specific hypotheses. In this regard, there does seem to be a consensus among recent commentators that the long-shot is the characteristically Keatonesque format.[3] Indeed, Penelope Houston has speculated that the rise of Keaton's critical stock in the fifties and sixties can be accounted for by his use of long-shots, a practice which corresponds to favored strategies in the contemporary films of the period,[4] including those of neorealism, the new wave, and *cinéma-vérité*.

To say that the long-shot is characteristic of Keaton, and especially characteristic in *The General*, is to claim that he uses this device more than other comics. "More" here is ambiguous. It does not simply mean that Keaton's use of this device is statistically greater, but also that the device is of greater importance in Keaton. Every comic director uses long-shots, if only as establishing shots. What people are suggesting when they focus on Keaton's long-shots is not the statistical tabulation that there are more shots that meet the dimensional standards of long-shots. Rather they mean that there are many

long-shots that perform services in the narration that go beyond simple establishment of action. Claiming the long-shot as characteristic of Keaton is to claim that it is central to the ultimate project of the work.

In my analysis of gags in *The General*, I noted on many occasions that the gag under consideration was represented via a long-shot as in the shot of the bemused and dismayed Johnnie Gray sitting on the driverod of a locomotive after Annabelle Lee spurns him. In this shot, we see an engineer in the cab of the locomotive, in the upper screen-left corner of the shot, start the engine while Johnnie sits listlessly in the center of the shot. Johnnie glances screen-right. Suddenly the train begins to move. The camera pans screen-right to follow the movement. Just before the train enters a tunnel, Johnnie realizes his predicament. Why is the long-shot used here?

The Authenticity Hypothesis

This kind of shot might be explained in terms of Keaton's commitment to a kind of authenticity. We have already remarked on the extreme danger the shot involved. Keaton is sitting on the driverod of an ancient piece of machinery.

> The engine was a museum piece; in his search for authenticity, Keaton had found a working locomotive of almost the right Civil War vintage, and had it further modified to resemble the actual "General" in every respect. There was one trouble with such an old piece of machinery, the engineer told [Keaton]: it had a tendency, if the steam was not fed to it just right, to spin its wheels at the start. This would probably kill him outright or at least very seriously injure him. Keaton often talked about the care they took to make sure the gag didn't backfire: they tried a smooth start several times without him on the crossbar, and when the engineer was quite sure he had the knack, Buster actually sat down and they did it again for the camera.[5]

The danger described above is authenticated by the long-shot. This shooting format reveals that the stunt is not faked. Keaton is not tightly framed, sitting on a moving metal rod. Shot that way, it would be possible to disconnect the rod from the train and manipulate it by some directly controllable method. Shot from afar, however, we see there is no chicanery. The rod is unquestionably attached to the wheels of an awesome locomotive. The long-shot confirms our sense of the real risk that the image involves. We say "real" in the same sense as Bazin when he expresses his thrill when Chaplin

truly enters the lion's cage in *The Circus*.[6] Long-shots in such cases putatively vivify the action by establishing that the fictional action being portrayed encompasses many of the same risks to life and limb that the represented act entails offscreen.

The authenticity hypothesis can be used to deal with many shots in Keaton films. One recalls the shot in *Sherlock Jr.* in which Sherlock falls from a moving train onto the spout of a water tower, which drenches him and then sends him tumbling to the track. The shot literally fractured Keaton's neck.[7] Watching the ordeal, one does not doubt the danger of the scene for a second.

The use of the long-shot in such scenes also serves to authenticate Keaton's prowess as an acrobat. His backward catch of the Canfield girl, a dummy, as she shoots over the falls in *Our Hospitality* is quite a testament to Keaton's precision, as is the shot where he uses a railroad gate to lower himself from the top of a building into a moving convertible in *Sherlock Jr.* We may initially suggest that the function of the long-shots in Keaton and in *The General* can be explained by an analysis in terms of authenticity which purports that the long-shot is used to demonstrate that the represented actions are authentic rather than synthetically contrived through editing. The motivation for this authenticity can be explained in several ways, including: (1) Keaton's pride in displaying his own ability; (2) audience appreciation of Keaton's acrobatic skill; (3) the titillation of the audience by actual danger to Keaton. Keaton keeps

> as much of the action as possible within a shot. It started, presumably, with a natural pride in letting the audience see that those leaps and falls and glissades of movement were all his own work. There could be no cutting because to cut into the action would suggest a cheated effect. . . . He was prepared to risk his neck for an effect which might last twenty seconds on the screen. The camera had to get far enough back to take it all in . . .[8]

Further motivation for Keaton's commitment to authenticity can be found in what might be called Keaton's naive commitment to realism. Here, realism is actually a cluster of different attitudes which fall under the same rubric, though the different components of the cluster vary in kind. Keaton was excited by film, in contrast to theater. He wrote:

> In the theater you had to create the illusion of being on a ship, a railroad or an airplane. The camera allowed you to show your audience the real thing; real trains, horses and wagons, snowstorms, floods. Nothing you could stand on, feel or see was beyond the range of the camera.[9]

Today some may bridle at the above implication that cinema is not an illusion. Yet, the passage does show Keaton's obsession with the real, as found in theorists like Kracauer and Bazin. Keaton's obsession is literally implemented – he tackles all those real things that he excitedly enumerates. In comic style as well, Keaton's commitment to the real causes him eventually to drop certain gags from his repertoire. He wrote: "We also discontinued what we called impossible gags."[10] In terms of cinematic style, Clyde Bruckman claims that Keaton was the first comic director to abandon the use of undercranking because he, Keaton, believed that it rendered movement unbelievable.[11] In terms of imagery, Keaton also had a passion for historical detail, taking the filming of *The General* to Oregon because of his desire to use historically accurate, narrow-gauge railroad trains. Admittedly, the historical realism of detail, the physical realism of material possibility, and the realism of the long take/long-shot are different matters. A director could employ one of these practices without being committed to the other two. However, it is also the case that, within the history of twentieth-century culture, these different kinds of authenticity have often been equivocally yoked together in a composite, cluster notion of realism. Keaton has a commitment to authenticity on many different levels of representation. In this light, his use of the long-shot becomes a further instance of his obsession with realism.

The authenticity view of Keaton's use of the long-shot certainly has strengths. It correlates with Keaton's avowed, multidimensional commitment to realism. It also points to experientially felt grounds for an explanation of why audiences relish Keaton, given the way the long-shot enhances the thrills and acrobatic effects of his stunts. The authenticity approach also places Keaton within a comprehensible, historical film framework as a precursor of the deep-focus style of filmmaking. However, all these strengths must be balanced against an unfortunate defect: long-shots occur in Keaton, and especially in *The General*, where no stunts are involved. Even if every stunt in Keaton were represented via a long-shot, the authenticity hypothesis would still be questionable because not every long-shot contains a stunt. Admittedly, the authenticity approach may provide a good analysis of the subset of long-shots that involve stunts, but the authenticity theory cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of Keaton's use of the long-shot in *The General*. How would it accommodate the shot of Johnnie chopping wood as he enters enemy territory, or the shot of the Union-driven General dropping lumber on The Texas from the high bridge? What risky or acrobatic stunts are involved here? What inauthenticity would be perpetrated by representing these events in a tightly composed montage?

Appreciating the narrow focus of the authenticity theory of Keaton's use of the long-shot, E. Rubinstein comments that "the central importance in Keaton's directorial technique of those long-shots of all kinds . . . [is to], by their very nature, communicate in a single image the sense of man in relation to his world."[11]

Rubinstein upholds what we earlier called a conflict theory of the relation of man to the environment in Keaton. The theory that the long-shot constantly describes man in relation to the environment connects conveniently with the adversarial picture of Keaton versus the environment. There are a mass of images that relate man to the environment. The narrative, so a conflict theorist might explain, specifies the nature of that relationship as a hostile one. Here, the long-shot is given the thematic function of constantly repeating the major motif of the work. The long-shot is a device that recurrently sets the terms of the theme that will be developed by the narrative action.

The Environment Approach

Insofar as the preceding "environment" approach to the use of the long-shot derives feasibility from the conflict theory of Keaton's iconography, the environment theory of Keaton's use of long-shots is faulty to the degree that we have shown that the conflict theory is strained. However, one could maintain the environment theory of the long-shot without buying into a conflict theory of the iconography because the environment theory is compatible with any relation between man and the environment including a merely spatial relation.

Admittedly, the environment view of the long-shot is better than an authenticity theory when it comes to comprehensiveness. This is true mainly because it is so vague. The only way the environment hypotheses can fail to apply to any long-shot in any film is if there are no people in the shot. In some cases, even shots without people might be ingeniously integrated into the environment theory by claiming that such shots represent the victory of nature over man. In *The General*, every relevant shot has at least one person in it. Thus, the environment approach does exhaustively cover the data we are concerned with, but at the cost of unenviable amorphousness.

A defender of the environment view might argue that we have looked in the wrong place for specificity when we object to the environment theory of Keaton's long-shot. The specificity of this explanation as a tentative account of the Keatonesque function of the long-shot in *The General* comes from the fact that a long-shot is an unusual device for a comedian. Chaplin

and Langdon prefer a theatrically derived "proscenium" medium-shot. In Lloyd, the long-shot is generally an establishing shot. Hawks, in his comedy, prefers intensive use of the *plan américain*. Here, the specificity of an environment approach to the use of the long-shot in *The General* gains traction, not in contrast to alternative possible uses of the long-shot, but in contrast to the very different forms of representation deployed by other comedians. Thus, the environment view is quite specific to what is specific in *The General* versus films by other comics because long-shots, *per se*, are rare in most comedies, but profuse in *The General*.

In order to short-circuit this mode of defense of the environment theory of the use of the long-shot in *The General*, we need only note that the later films of Tati seem to rely as much as *The General* on the use of long-shots. Obviously, the preceding defense of the environment approach is suspect exactly because it does not differentiate between Tati and Keaton. The fact that Tati and Keaton share the use of the long-shot gives us an inroad to a possible mode of analyzing Keaton's use of it. If we can establish the difference between the two men's use of the shot, we may have a pivot from which to turn to elaborate an analysis of Keaton's use of the format.

In Tati's *Playtime*, in the long-shots that depict the wreckage of the nightclub, it seems that action pervades every square inch of the screen surface. Humorous interactions are constantly occurring without special formal devices, such as centering or diagonal composition, being used to draw audience attention to exactly one sector of the frame. There is no highlighting or underscoring of certain actions over others. The centers of interest in the images are faceted. Tati makes virtually neorealistic comedies. For instance, the audience looks about finding its own sources of interest. A key factor in building this sort of open, multifaceted image is Tati's use of sound. He records voices in a garbled way. He does not erase ambient sound or increase the decibel level of characters. There is little guidance from dialogue for the path our eyes are to follow over the scene. Instead, our attention roves over an image packed with incidents. We may or may not find interesting aspects.

Tati is the type of comic who sees comedy as a philosophical stance or viewpoint on life. He recreates Bazinian compositional patterns that facilitate perceptual realism as a way of engendering a perspective on the flux of everyday life. He provokes the audience to view his comedy as one could view an actual street scene; this is intended to be propaedeutic, one supposes, to viewing actual street scenes as comedies.

In *The General*, the multifaceted aspect of the image is completely lacking. One's eyes are always led to the relevant sections of the long-shot through

strongly directive formal devices, such as diagonals. Keaton rigorously structures his images in highly determinate ways. Keaton does not promote the kind of roving attention Tati encourages. Our attention is forcefully led along a predetermined pathway.

To begin to support this claim let us reconsider two of the shots so far mentioned in this chapter. In the long-shot of Johnnie on the locomotive driverod, the engineer, throughout the pan, is kept in the upper screen-left corner of the shot. Johnnie is kept in the center of the frame. At times, when the driverod rises, Johnnie is at the very epicenter of the image. This composition employs a highly directive set of formal strategies. Johnnie is centered, making him an immediate focus of attention. The cab window is a frame within a frame, the sort of compositional rhythm that has strong attraction for the average Western eye. Keaton further enhances the legibility of this rhythm by framing the cab by the corner of the screen. The image is of one 90-degree edge proximately surrounded and enclosed by a larger one whose sides are parallel to the smaller one. Here, proximity yields an undeniable pattern that immediately rivets the eye. Keaton, by careful design, directs attention to two points in the scene that are crucial for his gag to work.

In the long-shot of Johnnie entering enemy territory, we again see rigorous formal structuring of the shot in operation. There is a shot of an open field; mounted troops, a wagon, and infantry race across it. This activity is at some distance from the camera. Suddenly, the headlamp of The Texas pulls in from screen-right. The camera stays stationary and The Texas dominates the foreground of the shot. As The Texas pulls past the camera, we see Johnnie Gray in the foreground chopping away at the lumber, while in the background, the Southern army continues its retreat. This set-up, with Johnnie in the foreground and the battle in the background, is repeated several more times in this scene. It employs use of foreground/background tension. Given the first of these shots in which we initially see only the battle and then see the train with Johnnie, we can say that the audience is sequentially drawn from one point of interest to the next. There is no question of a viewer's roving eye making sense of this scene. Keaton is in total control. First, he selects the battle as the focus of attention. Then, he shifts attention to the train by filling up the foreground with The Texas. Keaton carefully builds the shot, deliberately modulating the tempo and order of the audience's understanding of the situation. He uses a rigorously and simply structured foreground/background format, enhanced by a sequential shift of the focus of attention, to direct the audience to an apprehension of the two facts. It is these two facts that must be grasped for the gag to work.

We note that a difference between Tati's use of the long-shot and Keaton's involves Tati's use of the format to provoke a multifaceted, open, roving perception of the scene, whereas Keaton's use of the format involves a highly structured one intended to control viewing responses. Tati's structures result in multiple points of interest; Keaton narrows them. Keaton also employs strident compositional devices to draw attention quickly and efficiently to exactly those points of interest that he wishes to make salient.

To analyze the significance of Keaton's use of the long-shot in *The General*, we might attempt to expand upon what we have already learned from our comparison with Tati. An understanding of Keaton's interest in this sort of determinate composition will help us to understand the *raison d'être* of the long-shot in *The General*.

The first hypothesis we might offer for the determinateness of Keaton's long-shots is comic functionality. In the two examples considered so far, we note that, in both cases, the two points of interest stressed by the structure of the shots are the two elements that constitute the sources of humor in the shots. Both shots are inattention gags: they rely on representing an absent-minded character misunderstanding or unaware of his situation. Both shots, then, communicate two situations: the situation as it stands statically in the mind of the character, and the situation as it actually is. This is an example of what Bergson calls an "equivocal situation," namely, "one which permits of two different meanings at the same time, one merely plausible, which is put forward by the actors; the other a real one which is given by the public."[12] One might hypothesize that the long-shot, employed determinately, is the best way to enact an inattention gag of an equivocal situation. If this were true, we would have a perfectly functional account of Keaton's use of the long-shot as the best cinematic means for representing such gags. We could also make use of part of the authenticity approach to the long-shot: that is, for Keaton's achievement gags and stunts, he uses the long-shot as the most functionally efficient means to confirm the audience's admiration of the character's skill. For the automatism/inattention gags of equivocal situations, the long-shot is also favored for functional purposes. Thus, Keaton's concern with representing comic successes and failures at adaptation predisposes him to the long-shot which, for different reasons, is the best device for portraying both successes and failures at adaptation and this is what he wants to achieve in *The General*.

The difficulty with this purely functional account of Keaton's use of the long-shot is that it is simply false that the long-shot is the best means for representing inattention gags of the equivocal situation variety. The long-shot

is one way of doing this, but hardly the only way. Harold Lloyd, for instance, often favors doing equivocal situation gags by editing *à la* Griffith. In *The Freshman*, Harold Diddlebock is tricked into giving a public address. As he speaks, he holds an épée whose tip he absent-mindedly pushes along the floor. An insert shot of the floor reveals an open light socket there, threateningly close to the tip of Harold's wayward rapier. One senses that, at any moment, Harold will unknowingly plunge the sword into the open electrical outlet. Lloyd returns to a frontal medium close-shot of the character speaking. Anticipation builds; clearly the character is unaware of the danger that we, the public, know of from the insert. Suddenly, the character starts dancing frenetically as a shock of electricity courses through the steel sword and into Harold's body. Here, we have an inattention gag of the equivocal situation variety. The character believes the situation is safe while the audience, alerted by the insert, knows an accident is imminent.

This example from Lloyd indicates that there are ready alternatives to the long-shot for representing equivocal situation gags. Lloyd uses editing, juxtaposing a detail to a medium-shot in the case cited. An overhead, medium long-shot might have turned the trick just as well. Someone like Keaton could have done the gag by placing the camera over Harold's head with the open socket on the floor in focus in the background of the overhead shot. However, this means of representing the situation is no more effective than Lloyd's two-shot format for conveying the information that is crucial to understanding the gag. Consequently, why should the single-shot method be considered a superior comic device?

To get the gag, you must know that: (1) the open socket is near the end of the épée, and (2) that Harold Diddlebock is unaware of this. Such knowledge can be communicated by either a two-shot or an overhead, deep-focus shot. To make the gag work as a gag, either format is viable. There is no reason to believe that the deep-focus long-shot is the best functionally available means for representing equivocal situations, though it is one means.

Seeing How

The preceding discussion also reveals that a deep-focus long-shot does more than simply serve the function of making gags viable. As the Lloyd example demonstrates, all the audience needs for equivocal situation gags is the knowledge of the alternative viewpoints on the situation. Such knowledge can be conveyed synthetically without ever visualizing all the elements of the

gag in one shot. In short, we must look for another explanation for why Keaton chooses to use deep-focus long-shots.

The gag will work if the audience knows that event *x* has happened. Keaton's use of the long-shot gives the audience something above just knowledge: they see that the event happens. Knowing that *x* has occurred is sufficient for an equivocal situation gag to work. Such knowledge can be communicated by fragments through editing, as one often finds in Lloyd. Keaton goes beyond the basic requirements of comedy in his treatment of equivocal situation gags by framing the action with long, deep-focus shots in such a way that the audience sees *x* happening in its totality, that is, with all its relevant elements visible.

We should abandon the idea that Keaton uses long-shots simply because they are the best cinematic means for portraying the type of gags with which he is most concerned. We realize that his use of the long-shot is more than simply functional as a comic device. He is committed to the audience seeing the whole event as well as its context, and, therefore, as more than a comic concern.

The comic functionality explication of Keaton's use of the long-shot can also be challenged by pointing out that Keaton uses the format in many situations that are not comic. For instance, the Union troops stream across Rock River in the background of the shot, while Southerners creep up into the foreground, almost a quarter of a mile away from the Northerners. There is no gag here, so a comic functionality explication of Keaton's use of the long-shot is unlikely. On the other hand, one notes immediately that this ambush scene could be represented by editing. The narrative only requires that the audience know that the ambush is taking place; the audience need not see the ambush happening in its totality. Keaton, however, is at pains to represent the ambush in its totality, with the major factors of the scene simultaneously available visually to the audience. Both in gags and in actions in *The General*, we see that Keaton seems to use the long-shot to enable the audience to see events in their totality rather than merely to know what is happening via fragmentary views through editing. Keaton's interest can be contrasted with much of Hitchcock's practice, in which his use of various cinematic techniques usually prompts the audience to know *that x* on the basis of inference from discrete details that are not depicted simultaneously and homogeneously. This explanation of Keaton's use of the long-shot shares an essential feature with the authenticity theory of Keaton's long-shots, since both theories acknowledge spatial integrity, *à la* Bazin, as crucial. Yet this "seeing that" theory of the long-shot is not so closely bound as the

authenticity theory to certain kinds of subject matter, such as stunts. Thus far, we only speculate that Keaton uses the long-shot because he wishes to engender in his audience the cognitive and perceptual experience of seeing *that x* as a visible totality rather than the different cognitive and perceptual experience of knowing *that x* as a result of a synthetic mental construction of fragments of information conveyed by a string of shots of details.

The discussion so far points away from an analysis of Keaton's use of the long-shot in terms of pure comic functionality. We have argued that Keaton, by eschewing editing as a means of representing equivocal situation gags, shows a desire to present events to his audiences, with all the crucial elements of the gag simultaneously visible at the same time. We infer that Keaton is interested in engendering in his audience a state that we have dubbed "seeing *that x*." This state involves knowledge. But it also contrasts with the cognitive state where the audience merely knows *that x* on the basis of an inference from the discrete details of a montage. The experiential modality, "seeing *that x*," can serve as a basis for all Keaton's long-shots, not merely equivocal situation gags. Thus, it affords a comprehensive basis for explicating Keaton's use of the long-shot. This explanation argues that the long-shot is used in order to engender the experience of seeing an event happening in its totality.

The problem with explicating Keaton's use of the long-shot in terms of a desire to afford audience experience of the "seeing *that x*" variety is that this interpretation, like the environment theory, is too broad. For instance, how will this new formulation differentiate Keaton from Tati? We must not only account for Keaton's use of the long-shot; we must also account for his use of it in a determinate versus a multifaceted way. We must add something to the "seeing *that x*" state of mind that characterizes that state as having a highly determinate structure. Keaton's long-shots not only facilitate seeing *that x*; they facilitate our seeing *that x* in a highly specific way. What way is that?

We have already noted that Keaton's use of the long-shot presents us with a situation. We have also claimed that these elements are arrayed in striking compositional patterns such that the eye is drawn to them quickly and efficiently; we are drawn to the central elements of *x* so that in a glance we immediately size up the dynamics of the situation. As the camera presents it, the situation is highly intelligible.

Reconsider the gag with Johnnie on the driverod. We see both Johnnie and the engineer. Formal devices highlight these two quite effectively. We see where both of them are looking: the engineer busies himself in the cab and Johnnie looks listlessly away from the cab. Given this, we understand each man's ignorance of the other. This enables us, *at a glance*, to understand

how the ensuing situation happened. The highly directive structure of the shot leads us to zero in on the crucial elements of the situation in such a way that we understand, at an almost perceptual level, exactly what is causing the situation to unfold as it does.

Keaton emphasizes situations as developing processes rather than simply as facts. He shows a long-shot with the engineer in the cab in order to include the causal antecedents of the event. The event, Johnnie's ride on the driverod, is represented as a process of causes and effects. He could have rejected this method in favor of one that simply presents a medium-shot of Johnnie where the rod starts pumping, and in which Johnnie gradually becomes aware of his movement. This would record the fact of the situation, including the comic fact of Johnnie's inattention, but this method would not explicate *how* the situation came about.

The long-shot in *The General* functions to foster intelligibility in scenes. Intelligibility here is something more than knowledgeability. A close-shot of the engineer starting the engine and a medium close-shot of Johnnie on the rod would afford the audience the knowledge of the steps in the causal transaction, but this would not completely explain how the action happened due to the way the attention of the two men was diverted. Heightened understanding is the result of seeing how the event evolved due to the simultaneous and specifically situated inattention of the two characters.

Seeing how the event transpired is more involved than just seeing the event itself. For instance, the driverod gag might have been represented so that the cab was not in the upper corner of the screen, where it visually echoes the edge of the frame. Instead, it might have been more to the center of the image. In our imagined shot variation, let us call it "the Tati variation," there is also room for the lumbercar in the shot. Suppose a group of workmen are on the lumbercar furiously chopping wood in a semicomical manner. Otherwise, suppose the Tati variation is the same as we find in *The General*. It is entirely possible that one could view the hypothetical Tati variation without attending to the perceptual behavior of the engineer. You might, but it is equally probable that you might not. In Keaton's version, it is undeniably more difficult to avoid attending to the engineer's perceptual behavior. In the Tati variation, you would see the situation in its totality; it is also possible that you might see how the situation happened. Keaton's highly determinate structuring of the long-shot format makes the likelihood of one's seeing how the event comes about far less tentative. In the Tati variation, a structure that facilitates curiosity and the possibility of discovery is adopted. In Keaton, the structure aims at provoking the experience of understanding

at a glance. Keaton propels the viewer's eye – virtually grabs it – and then leads it where it needs to be to grasp the dynamics of the unfolding event.

Provoking the experience of understanding at a glance is not requisite for representing comedy, even sight gag comedy. We have seen that such comedy works as long as the audience knows what is going on. Griffith-derived editing can provide knowledgeability. Keaton, in *The General*, is interested in engendering an experience of intelligibility not simply knowledgeability. To this end he employs long-shots including intensive use of foreground/background oppositions, assertive use of diagonal compositions, and high and low angulation.

In the opening shots of *The General*, we see Keaton's expertise in employing long-shots involving careful play between foreground and background. In the third shot of the film, we have a long-shot of the main street of Marietta, Georgia. In the foreground there is a horse and buggy. The driver is on foot, struggling to quiet his excited horse. Suddenly, from screen-left, *The General* pulls into the image. Here, we see the event of the train arrival narrated in terms of an effect that the train's movement has on the environment. Keaton does not just give us a shot that reports the fact the train has arrived; he also attempts to weave the arrival into a larger network of relations.

The faculty exercised by the arrival shot is not simply our ability to recognize that the train is arriving; understanding is also called for. The horse bucks, but why? It's a mystery until the train appears; the mystery dissolves in short order. The presence and sound of the train frightened the horse. The structure of the shot is such that we are directed to the two elements of the humorous anecdote of the troublesome horse.

First, the horse is alone in the foreground. In the background, there is a sparsely inhabited street. The horse and buggy are in a passageway between two fences. The central position of the buggy in the foreground, at a break in the regular patterns of the two fences, drives our attention to the buggy. Then, the movement of the train draws our attention to the background. Finally, the enormous train fills the background, almost completely blocking out a view of the town. Only the buggy and train remain as focal points of attention.

Though both foreground and background come into play in this shot, one can hardly fall back on Bazinian notions of ambiguity here. The fact that the foreground and background are employed sequentially makes the structure of the scene highly directive. Keaton, in this shot, even though it is in many ways merely an establishing shot, prompts the audience to more than just a recognition of the narrative fact that the train has arrived.

He uses the occasion of establishing the setting for narrative action in order to promote a problematic: why is the horse bucking? He presents the situation as *a process* to be understood rather than just as a fact – the arrival of the train – to be recognized. He uses sequential modulation of the foreground and background to assure that we notice the relevant causal transaction. If the shot began with both the train and the buggy, attention might have only been drawn to the train and not to the trouble with the horse. Representing the process in a *hysteron-proteron* format also facilitates the audience's grasp of the process by reversing the causal order of the event in the order of presentation of the key elements of the event.

Another example of an early use of a long-shot in *The General* occurs in the gag discussed in chapter 1 in which Annabelle Lee falls in line behind Johnnie and the two young town boys mimic him. Here again the very aim of the shot appears to be to show the audience how the event transpired, rather than merely that the event did transpire.

Johnnie and the boys are in the mid-ground of the shot. Their cadence evokes a parade. Appropriately, their eyes are riveted ahead with a frozen martial fixity. We see them march past a hedge. In the background, standing slightly behind the hedge and out of the line of the parade's fixed vision, we see Annabelle. As the parade passes, she lines up behind them. How Annabelle gets behind them, unbeknownst to Johnnie, is thus intelligible at a glance.

The shot of Johnnie chasing the hijacked General is another example of the use of the long-shot we are considering. Johnnie is running away from the camera. He is initially in the foreground. In the deep background of the shot, we see The General pulling away. Johnnie turns, beckoning his comrades to follow him. The comrades jog into the foreground of the shot and then stop. Johnnie runs on alone.

This gag can be easily imagined as a montage. We could have a shot of The General pulling off. This could be followed by a medium-shot. Johnnie and his comrades could show shock and run toward the camera. Cut back to the train. Then, cut to a tight medium-shot showing Johnnie's comrades halted. Perhaps, one of them waves his hand downward, signaling that he's disgruntled. Then, finish off the sequence with a tight, moving shot of Johnnie running alone. This format will make the gag work. The average audience, aware of editing conventions, will know that Johnnie is chasing the train all by himself. Yet they may not understand how this came about because the shots enumerated above could support a number of theories about why Johnnie is unaware that his comrades are no longer following him. For instance, it may be that the tracks swerve a great deal so that it is impossible for Johnnie

to see behind himself. Or, it may be that Johnnie is just too imprudent to ever check behind.

For Keaton, it is important that the audience comprehend the *how* of a situation. Keaton uses the long-shot to enable the audience to see how a state of affairs evolves. We see in the shot we are discussing that Johnnie, despite the fact that he is on a straightaway, is simply too fixated to ever check behind himself. We see his comrades in the foreground as he tears away from them into the background. Johnnie and his comrades are standing in between railroad tracks that lie in the center of the image. The perspectival pull of the tracks rivets our attention along this central axis in the frame, organizing the crucial elements of the scene along a perceptually almost irresistible trajectory of vision that makes the dramatic foreground/background juxtaposition of elements even more compelling.

The shot in which Johnnie gets drenched with water from the water tower is a striking case of Keaton's use of the long-shot for the sake of intelligibility. In preceding shots, the Union hijackers of The General have pulled away from the water tower leaving the spout open. Then, we see a shot of The Texas from behind. In the foreground, Johnnie is bending over in the cab. We also see the window of The Texas and notice that Johnnie is not looking out the window. In the background of the shot, in the upper, screen-right corner, we see water flooding out of the tower. The shot is executed so that we can see the railway running right under the tower.

All the elements of the gag are laid out on the right side of the screen so a narrow pathway of movement is set out for the eye. From the moving cab, we move along the track in the direction of the motion. This draws us deeper into the shot where we see the tower cascading water. The fact that the tower is framed by the corner of the screen adds emphasis.

The compelling structure of the composition directs us to the crucial elements of the gag, first and foremost, by setting out the two elements via a forceful foreground/background juxtaposition. Including a clear view of the track also facilitates the movement of the eye by drawing us into the depth of the shot. Setting the right edge of the frame proximately parallel to the stanchions of the water tower also highlights their vertical linear pattern in a way that elicits attention. Each of these strategies is a determinate compositional element that can modify and facilitate a complete and efficient scanning of the crucial elements of the situation.

Perception is directed from one point to the next in a highly selective way by means of formal compositional devices that give special salience to key elements of the water tower gag. Not only can the audience see all the

elements of this event, but those elements are laid out in such a highly determinate way that a rapid comprehension of the situation is abetted immensely. Moreover, once the composition sets off the basic elements of the gag, seeing how Johnnie's unfortunate drenching comes about is virtually unavoidable.

Johnnie is bent over. We can see out the window of the cab. As the train approaches the tower, we can literally see the water fall through the window. We also see Johnnie's line of movement as he stands up. We see him bypass the window in the front of the cab and instead move to lean out the window on the screen-right side of the cab, thereby unknowingly missing his last chance to notice the water coming and duck. As Johnnie leans out the side window of the cab, the water hits him squarely in the face.

The highly directive strategies employed in the formal layout of the water tower shot enhance one's comprehension of how the event happened by exactly honing in on the relevant factors in the situation. We not only know that Johnnie, from his point of view, was inexplicably drenched. We also understand what Johnnie does not, namely, the source of the water, and why Johnnie failed to see it coming. From the above, we note that a frequent device Keaton uses to direct audience attention in *The General* is exploitation of the possibility of play between the foreground and background of deep-focus long-shots. In Keaton, this device does not involve ambiguity. Rather he uses the visual categories of near and far in order to juxtapose elements. The formal opposition of foreground and background is used to lay out or align crucial elements of the scene, generally by placing one element in each zone. In this way, Keaton exploits the normal perceptual habit of looking close and then looking into the distance. As we have seen already, Keaton enhances this foreground/background play by employing added formal strategies to move the eye from one element to the next. One of the most important and frequent of these devices is diagonal composition in depth.

A number of the diagonally composed long-shots in *The General* rely heavily on the curves in the roadbed of the tracks over which the trains are racing. For instance, shortly after hijacking The General, the Union spies stop to remove a rail from the tracks in order to derail Southern pursuers. The shot that records this is a medium long-shot with the spies in the mid-foreground, and the recently stolen General in the background. The rail is being removed from the screen-right side of the tracks. The tracks sweep from just screen-right of the center of the image and proceed diagonally into the background. The curve of the tracks is slow but sure, the eye drawn along the uniform articulations that result from the intervals between the ties in the roadbed. The

General continues this diagonal pull into the depth, its huge bulk sprawling around the bend, enticing the eye deeper. The recession into depth along this diagonal moves the eye gently further. This formal arrangement serves the narrative quite well. First, the eye moves along the track to the derailing, and then the eye moves back to the train as the center of attention as the action shifts to the vehicle. One might hesitate to say that the formal arrangement here causes the viewer to move from the first point of interest to the second. However, the careful organization of elements in this instance does facilitate, perhaps by overdetermination, an extremely clear presentation of the subject.

Shortly after the spies remove the rail, we are shown a long-shot of Johnnie approaching the portion of track that has been tampered with. Johnnie is in the background. The stretch of track, as mentioned above, is curved. In the foreground, we see the rail missing. Johnnie comes around the bend, getting closer and closer to the gap in the rails. There is nothing to obscure his view of the tracks in front of him. He just keeps pumping away on the lever of the handcar, until he and the car go crashing onto the roadside.

The design of this shot is striking. In the foreground, the roadbed is visually dominant. It is quite large given its proximity to the camera. The eye darts to it. Again, the rhythmic recession of the ties of the tracks pulls us into the depth of the shot, past the absent rail, and then back even further to Johnnie. The natural path of vision here, as dictated by the formal arrangement of elements, leads from one crucial element of the situation, the missing rail, to the next, Johnnie. Editing can be eschewed in favor of a highly directive mode of composition which not only restricts details to what is relevant, but which also further enhances the legibility of those details by setting them in an arresting formal context that exploits foreground/background play, and which also enhances this juxtaposition by aligning the key details along a continuously articulated diagonal running from the front to the back of the shot.

From the above shot we can see that Keaton's use of the diagonal articulation of long-shots involves the same penchant for clarity of presentation that we saw in his particular use of foreground/background play. The rigorous structure of the shot is meant to give salience to the basic elements of the comic events so that the audience sees how the event transpired instead of merely knowing that it did transpire. The use of the diagonal in these shots also has another striking effect; namely, it gives the audience quite a dramatic sensation of depth as the distance from the foreground to the background of the shot is continuously annotated by the virtually measurable units of the spaces between the railroad ties.

The subject of depth is constantly reemphasized by the long-shots in *The General*. The long-shots with diagonal schemas are particularly important in this regard. On many occasions, when Keaton represents trains as stopped, the format he chooses is a long-shot from the side of the train with the entire train stretching diagonally from one of the lower corners of the frame backwards toward one of the upper corners. For instance, this method is used when The General first arrives in Marietta, when The General leaves Marietta, at the hijacking at Big Shanty at Kingston, where Johnnie enlists The Texas, and at many other stopping points along the chase. In all these many shots, as in the handcar shot, a strong sense of depth emerges given the constantly articulated recession. The uniformly spaced elements of ties and of railway cars in these shots are like dotted perspective lines, fostering a powerful sense of depth.

When I say that depth is the subject of these shots, I mean that depth and distance, as physical dimensions of the scene, are given prominence by the composition that Keaton favors. This is not to claim that there is no depth in shots by other comedians who do not employ the diagonal. Depth is there; it is a feature, just not an especially highlighted feature. In this regard, we see a special interest in Keaton not only for depicting action in a way that is intelligible at a glance, but also for engendering a sense of the scale of the action by prompting the audience to exercise its faculty for distance judgment. Keaton's concentration on the subject of physical judgment, which is presented to a passive audience through some of the gags and feats in his films, is dealt with in these diagonal compositions in *The General* by way of activating the audience's spatial intuitions.

An interesting use of the railroad tracks that more or less falls into the category of diagonal composition occurs in the shot in which Johnnie realizes that the Confederate troops are not attached to The Texas. Initially, this begins as a medium-shot. The camera seems to be mounted on the bridge that runs from the cab of the locomotive to the cowcatcher. In the foreground of the shot we see Johnnie staring ahead. We know that the troops are not attached to the train and we know that Johnnie is unaware of this. There is a certain comic reaction to Johnnie's confidence, given that it is groundless. In the screen-left background of the shot, we see trees lining the roadway. We can also see a receding line of the tips of the railroad ties that make up the roadbed. Initially we cannot see the track. Because the rails are straight, we cannot see behind the train. Given the position of the camera, the locomotive and the timbercar completely block out the track behind. The effect is somewhat like that which Keaton achieves in *The Playhouse* when Big Bill

Roberts camouflages the entire line of Zouaves by standing in front of them with his enormous bulk. Since the stationary camera can't see around corners, it is easy to interfere with the sheaf of light rays that is being delivered to the audience by interposing objects in that sheaf.

In the shot in *The General* the blocking effect is only momentary. Suddenly, the train hits a bend in the track and as the locomotive and lumbercar snake around that bend, the lumbercar jostles out of the camera's path of vision and the open track behind The Texas comes into view, pulling off diagonally toward the upper, screen-right corner. The audience again sees evidence of what it already knows: there is nothing behind Johnnie; he has lost his army.

The foreground/background tension is comically exquisite with Johnnie, confident yet totally ignorant, counterpoised against the devastating absence of his confederates. Eventually, Johnnie turns around, briefly pausing before poking his head out of the side window of the locomotive. Pausing again, he then thrusts his entire torso out of the train. He turns his face toward the camera in a look of disbelief that gradually metamorphoses into a mixture of anger and determination.

The use of deep-focus, foreground/background play and diagonal composition in this gag are hardly necessary for the gag to be effective. A much easier mode of representing the event would be to break the scene up into four shots. There could be an establishing shot from the side of the train showing the locomotive and the lumbercar with nothing behind them. Then, there could be a close-shot of Johnnie turning around, followed by a point-of-view shot involving the camera moving over an empty track. Then, we could return to another close-shot of Johnnie in order to catch his comical disgruntlement.

Alternatively, the shot might have been done in a single shot from alongside the train. Here, the camera would pull up from behind the train, at first registering the absence of the troops and then passing by the cab of the train at just that moment when Johnnie leans out the window and realizes that he is alone. This variation of the shot might end with Johnnie turning forlornly toward the camera.

What is achieved by Keaton's way of handling the scene as opposed to the suggested alternatives? The answer has to do with that swerve in the track. The audience understands how in the geographical context of the situation it is physically possible for Johnnie to learn that the troops are not attached to the train.

In the montage we suggested, the audience would know that Johnnie learned that he was alone. But they would not know how he was able to see from

the cab that he was alone. It is a notorious fact about point-of-view shots that, though they tell you what a character sees, they do not supply evidence of how he manages to see what he sees. There is a noteworthy example of this in Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948). Kirby York (John Wayne), aided by binoculars, sees Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda), get killed in a box canyon. Or, at least, this is what the point-of-view shot establishes. One would have thought that given the distance, the narrowness of the canyon opening, and all the smoke and fury of battle, this feat of vision on York's part to be unbelievably extraordinary. Given the point-of-view shot format, we understand that York sees Thursday die. But we have no idea how this incredible feat is accomplished.

In our hypothetical, alternative single-shot method for the relevant scene from *The General*, the audience does see that Johnnie learns he is alone; it does not just know that he learns this. However, in our alternative single-shot variation, the audience does not see how it is physically possible for Johnnie to learn what he does. Keaton's actual approach makes the swerve in the track absolutely perspicuous. Shooting from the side would, in all probability, flatten out such a subtle curve. But, even if the shooting angle didn't obliterate the curve, it would still require a somewhat thoughtful viewer to make the connection between the curve and the possibility of Johnnie's rude awakening. The viewer would have to reconceptualize the lateral scene frontally.

Keaton's approach, of course, starts frontally. To account for why he does this we have to go beyond what is required to make the gag work, for, as we have outlined, there are at least two other formal structures that will probably make the gag work. Keaton's choice has more behind it than merely comedy: he wishes to engender a particular cognitive/perceptual state in his audience – the state that we have dubbed "seeing how."

"Seeing how" is perhaps an awkward locution. For that reason, it may be better to refer to the effect of Keaton's highly determinate composition as "visible intelligibility," where this is understood as a situation which one comprehends at a glance in terms of its causal processes. So far we have found that it is fruitful to explicate Keaton's highly determinate long-shot compositions in terms of his desire to facilitate visible intelligibility in the situations he depicts. The fruitfulness of this explication can be measured by the large number of shots we have been able to explicate under this concept. By large, I don't mean to suggest that this explanation covers the majority of shots in the film. I don't even mean to claim that I'm handling every long-shot in the film; there are many merely establishing shots. By large I mean there

are a significant number of highly determinately composed long-shots in *The General* especially compared to the works of other comic directors, including Tati. For that significant group of shots, the explication in terms of visible intelligibility seems more compellingly appropriate than competing explanations.

Intelligible Physical Relationships

What is interesting about many of the examples that we have so far considered is not only that they promote visible intelligibility *per se*, but that they promote visible intelligibility about physical relationships and physical processes. Keaton's composition makes crucial physical elements and relationships in a situation salient. For instance, the curve in the track in relation to the movement of the train is made prominent in the shot that depicts Johnnie's realization that he is alone. In this light, we can say that an important feature of Keaton's composition in *The General* is the way that it can sensitize the audience to key physical variables in the situations being portrayed.

To consider yet another example of Keaton's diagonal composition, recall the scene in which Johnnie, again in command of The General, topples the Union telegraph pole. The scene is portrayed in several shots including a long-shot of Johnnie hurling a rope over the telegraph wires, and then tying the rope to The General, plus another long-shot of The General starting. The third shot in this chain is especially interesting. It is taken from the top of a freightcar that is attached to The General. In the lower screen-left corner of the frame we see a cleat with the rope wrapped around it. The rope stretches diagonally across the frame upwards toward the screen-right corner. It is connected to the telegraph pole. As the train moves, the pole crashes onto the track. Keaton then cuts to a shot of Union troopers futilely attempting to wire ahead to their advance positions. Then Keaton returns to the shot from the top of the boxcar; Johnnie Gray enters the frame with an ax in hand. We see the telegraph pole being dragged along the track. Johnnie severs the rope with his ax and we see the pole lying still on the track. What is important about the above shot of the cleat and the pole is its extraneousness to the narrative. The narrative would be perfectly served by a single lateral shot of The General tearing down the telegraph pole. The first shot set-up in this interpolation could have sufficed here. However, Keaton adds this extra set-up of the cleat and the pole. Why? He clearly conceives of physical work processes as intrinsic to his viewpoint of the situation. There

is no comic effect here, nor is key narrative information being added. Neither comic nor narrative functionality explains the shot. Rather, postulating that Keaton is committed to concentrating on the physical process dimension of situations seems a more apt explanation.

The way that Keaton supplies this additional dimension on the toppling of the telegraph pole is also worthy of note. The forceful diagonal composition, with the cleat bracketed by the edge of the frame and the rope strikingly taut, leading the eye across the visual field, directs us almost sequentially to the key physical variables within the physical process. Because of his interest in physical processes, Keaton shows us the whole event, including much more detail than is required to make a simple comic narrative function. Furthermore, he shows us the physical process via a compositional structure that emphasizes the crucial physical elements of the situation in such a way that we understand the physical unfolding of the scene at a glance. The composition renders the process visibly intelligible immediately.

The use of the rope in the above shot is highly reminiscent of the scene in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* where Willie Jr. rescues King's daughter. King's daughter is on the roof of a house. The house floats next to the steamboat. Willie throws a line with a grappling hook onto the house. He climbs across and then attempts to inch his way back to the steamboat along the rope with King's daughter hanging on his neck. Two of the set-ups used to portray this situation recall the use of the diagonal spoken of above. One shot, taken from the boat side of the action, diagonally aligns the physical elements of the action. Then, Keaton reverses the action to the house side of things. In both shots what is emphasized by the diagonal is the rope and its anchor points. That is, the crucial physical elements of the event are emphatically advanced as primary features of the situation for the audience to attend to.

Editing, of course, enhances the salience in these elements by enabling the audience to view the same elements from systematically different viewpoints, thus engendering a felt sense of greater familiarity and intelligibility. One feels one has a better grasp of the environment due to the reverse-field cutting. The systematic alternation of the same strikingly diagonally articulated event also activates one's sense of depth, drawing the audience into a context that engages its faculties of physical judgment. Moreover, the use of the diagonal in *The General* seems to parallel its use in this sequence of *Steamboat Bill Jr.* In both, the aim appears to be to use highly directive compositions in such a way as to put the audience in a "seeing how" frame of mind.

Examples of Keaton's use of diagonal composition in *The General* can be multiplied handily. In the shot where The Texas pushes the burning boxcar

from the enclosed bridge, Keaton diagonally sprawls the locomotive and the freightcar across the screen in such a way that the point of contact between the two vehicles is placed in the center of the screen so that one can see how the slope of the cowcatcher of The Texas rides under the carriage of the burning car, pushing it along.

Keaton also employs a diagonal composition in the shot showing the disabling of the retreating Union train during the battle. In the first shot of this retreat, Keaton includes two boxcars in the image of the withdrawal of the train. The cars pull away from the camera diagonally. The shot is also somewhat low, chopping off the top of the boxcar nearest the camera. The diagonal nature of the shot draws the eye to the last boxcar, while the lowness of the shot leads the eye to the wheels. A cannon shell hits the wheels, crumbling the boxcar to the track. The composition here directs the eye exactly to the relevant physical point in the action.

In the next shot, Keaton continues the diagonal approach by taking an extreme long-shot of the entire train starting with the locomotive in the lower screen-right corner with the line of boxcars aligned higher and higher into the upper screen-left quadrant. Here, the shot emphasizes the great mass of the train jammed against the shattered axle of the last boxcar that has been so effectively bombarded. The interrelations of the scene are thus strikingly arrayed via a highly determinate composition that makes the situation physically intelligible at a glance.

Another compositional strategy in the long-shots in *The General* is the recurrent use of high and low angulation. An important example of a high-angle shot has already been discussed in our analysis of the gag in which Johnnie Gray attempts to run the boxcar onto a siding. There, the camera is mounted high on the lumbercar. We see Johnnie Gray busy in the cab of the train. He is in the center of the foreground of the shot. Off in the background, in the upper screen-left corner, we see the wayward boxcar on the parallel track. The rectangular boxcar echoes the edge of the frame while the rectangular window of the cab sets up a third resounding echo. We move naturally through this formal pattern. Johnnie is bending down under the window, fiddling with this or that. The high-angle shot not only shows us the key elements of the situation, but also shows how the boxcar winds up in front of The Texas again, and why Johnnie is insensible to this sequence of events.

Editing could have easily rendered the event. One shot from the side of the moving vehicles, a close-shot of a preoccupied Johnnie, a shot of the point where the tracks converge, and a return to the lateral shot of the boxcar sliding ahead would have done the trick. But Keaton is not interested in the

easiest way of hammering home the gag; rather he is interested in the formal structure which will facilitate the audience's seeing how the physical situation yielded the results it did.

In the second part of the boxcar gag, shot angulation again is central. Unbeknownst to Johnnie, the boxcar goes careening off the track when it strikes a piece of debris the Union spies have thrown there. The shot that represents this is a low-angle long-shot. Here, angulation substitutes for editing in terms of selecting the relevant aspects of the situation. The low angulation directs the audience to the track and to the wheels of the boxcar. We anticipate and then effortlessly understand how the crash occurred. Rather than starting with a close-shot of the tie on the track and then shifting to a standard lateral medium long-shot of the crash, Keaton employs a single long-shot with low angulation so that the eye follows the subtly rising trajectory of the low angle to the center of the screen where, on the track, we find the tie that overturns the car. At a glance, the whole event is comprehensible because the low angle immediately gives prominence to the tie and sensitizes us to the key physical variable in the situation.

The shot in which Johnnie is pinned under a railroad tie on the cowcatcher of The Texas provides another example of the way the overhead shot sensitizes us to the relevant physical feature of the situation. Here the overhead shot emphasizes the weight of the railroad tie, which will be crucial when Johnnie hurls the tie on his chest onto the tie on the track, thereby catapulting it out of his path. In this way the overhead shot of Johnnie pinned to the cow-catcher emphasizes the dimension of the railroad tie that is crucial for the physical process that is being depicted.

This is not to deny that the audience is aware of the weight of the tie in the level-angle shot of Johnnie pinned on the cowcatcher. Rather what is claimed is that Keaton adds the high-angle shot to the level-angle shot which on its own is perfectly suitable for narrating the gag. Keaton adds the high-angle shot to heighten, enhance, and emphasize the matter of weight in the scene, thereby sensitizing the audience to the key physical variable in the situation. What the audience is sensitized to is exactly that property of the tie that Johnnie must concentrate on for his "catapult insight." Seen in this light, the high angle anticipates the determinant factor of Johnnie's reconceptualization of his predicament.

The preceding shot from *The General* is reminiscent of the overhead shot in *The Navigator* in which Rollo Treadway bombards the attacking cannibals with coconuts. The cannibals have laid a tree against the side of the ocean-liner intending to use it as a ladder to climb onto the deck of the ship. The

overhead shot that depicts the battle gives particular salience to the length of the tree, and to the distance between the oceanliner and the canoe of the marauding natives. The tree runs down the center of the screen acting as a virtual measuring rod of the distance between the oceanliner and the canoe. Our spatial intuitions are titillated, drawing our attention to the fact that the tree is just long enough so that, if it were pushed from the side of the ship, it would arc over and topple down, crashing the cannibals' boat.

Because of the overhead shot, we anticipate the insight that Rollo is about to have. The overhead shot emphasizes the length of the tree whereas a shot from the side of the ship would emphasize the function of the tree as a ladder. In a manner of speaking, the overhead angulation of the shot performs for the audience that transformational operation of reorganizing the elements of the visual field that Rollo must perform mentally.

Here we see that the condition of intelligibility as a cognitive state for the audience is a close analogue to the operation of concrete intelligence on the part of the character. Angulation is a literal means to reorient the visual field. This serves as an analogue to the processes of mental reorganization that Keaton's successful adaptation gags presuppose. Thus, Keaton's highly determinate compositions may be seen as a means of returning, at the level of style, to the concern with concrete intelligence that dominates his gags. The function of Keaton's highly determinate compositions seems to be to elicit extreme audience awareness and sensitivity to the key physical elements of physical processes. This is not undertaken simply for comic functionality since Keaton's attention to physical detail occurs in contexts that are noncomic. Rather, Keaton gives salience to key physical details through highly determinate compositions in order to engender in the audience an alertness and concrete sensitivity to the environment, which is what characters lack in failure gags and which is what characters have in abundance when they excel. The visual intelligibility manifested in Keaton's cinematic style corresponds neatly to the theme of concrete intelligence that recurs in the action throughout the film.

We have cited foreground/background juxtaposition, diagonal composition, and angle elevation as major means in Keaton's highly determinate manipulations of the long-shot. As our analyses of shots so far should bear out, we are not claiming that these strategies are the only ones that Keaton employs to give prominence to key elements of the situations that he depicts. For instance, on occasion, we have cited echoing structures as further determinations of the composition added to angulated, foreground/background, and diagonal composition.

Furthermore, there are strategies that result in highly determinate long-shot compositions that we have not discussed because they often occur once and thus are not classifiable in an overarching category such as diagonal compositions. An example of this sort is the shot in which the Union spies, sitting atop a high railroad bridge, drop lumber on Johnnie Gray in The Texas below. Here, the shot has an incredible vertical emphasis. The extremes of the vertical positions of the shot are employed as the only centers of narrative interest. The extreme high point of the shot and the low point are respectively occupied by The General and The Texas. An imaginary perpendicular line could be drawn from one to the other. This striking geometrical array of crucial elements gives them visible intelligibility.

A simple objection might be offered against the preceding interpretation. It might be claimed that Keaton really uses the long-shot because of the scale of his comedy and not because of his desire to instill the initiation of visible intelligibility in his audiences. This alternative seems ill-advised. First, there is no reason to suppose that, just because a film is about a train, it must be developed predominantly by means of long-shots. Several establishing shots of the train might initiate a train narrative, after which the narrative could be depicted by the use of medium-shots and close-shots. It might be objected that, to do the kinds of gags Keaton employs in *The General*, the long-shot is called for. However, as we have demonstrated in several of our analyses, montage solutions are available that would make Keaton's gags work. It is not the scale of the gag that offers an account of Keaton's use of the long-shot; something else is required.

Another weakness with the scale objection to our thesis is that, even if it explains the use of the long-shot, it gives no account of Keaton's highly determinate employment of that device. It hardly covers all the data to be examined. If it went on to account for the determinate composition in terms of visible intelligibility, then it would hardly count as an objection to our theory.

I do not claim to be the only commentator to have realized the correlation between Keaton's use of the long-shot and the way this technique elucidates the processes it records. Gerald Mast writes:

> Keaton favored the far shot not only to juxtapose his individual body with the natural universe but also to provide a distant view of how a particular mechanism works. The cinematic far shot provides the means to see both cause and effect, to see all the relevant elements, to illuminate the total process of a mechanism. And that is why Keaton's far shots are so memorable and so revealing – not just a little man on the vast plains in *Go West* or a little man

> falling from a rope bridge in *The Paleface* or leaping from train car to train car in *The General*, but the principle of showing how a totality works.
>
> In both The *Haunted House* (1921) and *The High Sign*, a Keaton far shot reveals all four rooms of a house (one wall cut away) and exactly how the chase progresses from one to another. In *The Navigator* (1924), a far shot reveals exactly how a ship's hugeness can keep two lone passengers from finding each other.[13]

I certainly agree with these observations of Mast, and find much in them that is compatible with my position on Keaton's use of the long-shot. However, my position is even more refined since I have cited recurring strategies within the long-shot that facilitate the kind of intelligibility that Mast speaks of. Though acknowledging an undeniable convergence between Mast's formulation and my own, I must also point out that I part company with Mast in what he counts as the significance of Keaton's use of the long-shot – a means to show how a total process works as a mechanism. Mast describes the physical processes as mechanisms, holding that the motivation of Keaton's far shots is to turn "human processes into mechanisms."[14] Mast attempts to assimilate Keaton's shooting style into a Bergsonian perspective which cites a constant correlation between what is laughable and the intrusion of the mechanical in human behavior. He holds that it is the basis of Keaton's comic endeavor to evoke laughter through the synthesis of man and machine in such a way that the mechanical predominates, thus causing laughter. Since not every case of long-shots that shows how things work in *The General* is laughable, we should reject Mast's analysis of the significance of Keaton's use of the long-shot. For instance, Keaton shows us how Johnnie Gray has anchored one end of the rope on the boxcar cleat to pull over the telegraph pole. In this case, it neither seems appropriate to claim that rendering the process intelligible is to render it a mechanism, nor does it seem that the situation is humorous in any way.

Thematic Significance

In order to understand the thematic significance of Keaton's highly determinate use of the long-shot in *The General*, I turn, like Mast, to the iconography of the film. However, I do not turn to a simple, Bergsonian characterization of that iconography, but rather to the more comprehensive, more specific, and more elaborately structured interpretation of that iconography that I offered in chapter 1.

In chapter 1, I claimed that the major theme of *The General* concerned an aesthetic examination of the role of concrete intelligence in the manipulation of things. This examination was exemplified by the behavior of the characters, notably Johnnie. At a stylistic level, we are now faced with making thematic sense of a highly determinate use of long-shot composition which seems directed toward rendering physical processes visibly intelligible in a salient way.

At the level of the iconography, concrete intelligence is the theme. At the level of style, concrete intelligibility appears as the consistent effect of the major recurring representational formats. How are the two related?

The relationship between concrete intelligence and concrete intelligibility does not seem hard to divine. The success and failure gags present the audience with representations of different ways of responding to the physical processes in the environment. The highly determinate long-shot compositions of *The General* are stylistic manipulations by which the audience participates in a certain way of seeing the physical processes of the environment. The theme is concrete intelligence in both style and content, though in one case this faculty is exercised by the character, and in the other case it is provoked in the viewer.

In terms of content, the conditions of concrete intelligence are manifested in action; the audience is passive in its reception of the subject matter. At the stylistic level, the audience is participating; it adopts a perspective on the action that is maximally legible in terms of the physical processes and factors involved. Composition, through highly determinate long-shots, embodies a viewpoint on the environment that is sensitive to relevant, ongoing physical processes. The camera, here, organizes the visual field in a manner that is virtually, unavoidably conducive to the understanding of the ongoing events in the environment. The camera incarnates the kind of perception that characters should but don't have in the failure gags concerning concrete intelligence. At the same time, the camera replicates the kind of attentiveness the characters do have in the success gags and feats concerned with concrete intelligence. Concrete intelligence as a theme that the audience witnesses passively in the behavior of characters is the active, participatory equivalent of the stylistic theme of the visible intelligibility of physical processes which the audience engages in through the mediation and promptings of Keaton's highly determinate use of the long-shot. Keaton's visual style promotes the kind of perspective on the physical environment that an engineer might have and thereby encourages the activation of a comparable species of intelligence in the viewer, namely, a variety of concrete intelligence.

By means of the concepts of concrete intelligence and concrete, visible intelligibility, we can explicate a uniform preoccupation underlying both the iconographic content and the long-shot style of *The General*. The relationship I am postulating involves a doubling relation between the character's experience, which concerns concrete intelligence, and the audience's experience, which *vis-à-vis* the long-shot display of processes, concerns visible intelligibility. Concrete intelligence and concrete intelligibility are related as passive and active refrains of a single preoccupation, which involves sensitivity to and understanding of the ongoing physical processes of the environment. Characters either show this sensitivity or fail to show it. The audience is led to exercise this faculty of understanding through compositions that select and array the significant physical variables in a salient way. Keaton makes geometers of us all.

Concrete intelligence is a matter for the character who fails to adapt if he does not constantly reorient himself to the changing environment, and who succeeds in adaptation if he is able to reorient himself to the environment. The process of organizing visual information is also a theme of the style of the film, which lays out the pertinent visual data in ways that facilitate immediate audience insight into ongoing physical processes. The concrete intelligence of the audience is thereby prompted and engaged by compositional formats that prime the audience's cognitive faculties, leading one to an immediate insight into the processes at hand. Keaton examines the conditions of concrete intelligence through the success and failure gags of the character. The theme is also developed at the level of style, which exercises the audience's faculty for concrete understanding by means of highly determinate long-shot compositions that facilitate the audience's comprehension of how the processes happen. Here Keaton seems concerned with engendering a very definite cognitive state in the audience, one in which the audience sees how events happen rather than a cognitive state where the audience simply knows that an event has happened. What Keaton's compositions aim at appears to be to produce a flash of understanding in the audience, thereby doubling, at the level of the audience's experience, the motif in the success gag of the character's insight into physical interrelationships.

Postulating a thematic unity of style and content in *The General* between the iconography of the gags and feats, on the one hand, and the highly determinate long-shot compositions, on the other hand, places us in a position to transfer, almost as an inheritance, certain explanatory dimensions of our account of the iconography to an elucidation of Keaton's long-shot style. We suggested that part of the power of Keaton's iconography in *The General* was the way it was compensatory. That is, Keaton's imagery, to a certain extent,

exemplified, celebrated, and valorized certain dimensions of concrete intelligence that were no longer part of, or at least were a diminishing part of, the everyday experience of twentieth-century, white-collar society. This compensatory gratification can also be attributed to the highly determinate long-shot composition of *The General* insofar as that composition makes it possible for the audience to exercise a faculty for concrete intelligence that is either a declining or extinct part of the audience's everyday work experience. In the short time of the film, the audience is presented again and again with occasions for insights into the workings and physical interrelations of things. The visible intelligibility of the shots reawakens an aspect of intelligence that our service-oriented culture leaves dormant in most workers.

This possibility of compensatory gratification is not an invariant causal effect of Keaton's composition. Rather, it is a possible response to the structure of the imagery which the highly determinate composition favorably affords, but does not necessitate. Moreover, that this style promoted compensatory pleasure can sensibly be attributed to audiences in the twenties, many of whom had already lost the everyday experience of exercising concrete intelligence in their work. Compensatory gratification can also act as a source of pleasure for our contemporary audiences who are even less practiced in the daily employment of concrete intelligence. The highly determinate long-shot compositions engender pleasure by the way they intelligibly represent physical processes. A dimension of experience, the faculty for concrete intelligence, is animated again, and regaled with the possibility of insight after insight into the workings of things. The iconography of concrete intelligence, exemplified in the behavior of characters, is reinforced by the viewer's experience involving the felt exercise of concrete intelligence. Keaton's preoccupation with physical interrelationships informs both style and content in *The General*. Culturally, the way in which a concern with physical interrelations compensates for an absence in twentieth-century work makes *The General* an emblem for an earlier industrial civilization in which creativity and insight in relation to things were a common source of satisfaction.

Because we have extended our analysis of Keaton's iconography to Keaton's single-shot composition, it may be objected that our argument is incomplete. We noted two modalities in Keaton's iconography: (1) failures at adaptation which correspond to character fixation and (2) successes at adaptation that correspond to character insight. In the analysis of Keaton's composition, however, I have only considered salient organizations of the visual field which can be identified as audience correlates to insightful character organizations of the visual field. But shouldn't we also expect there to be stylistic correlates

to the failure imagery in the film if the model is to be comprehensively extrapolated from Keaton's imagery to his compositional strategies?

To answer this question, it should be admitted that had I discovered a string of compositions in *The General* that corresponded to the failure gags, I would have claimed this discovery as supportive of my hypothesis as it further systematized the data of the film. However, there is no reason this explanatory model for the iconography has to correspond to my explanation of the composition point-for-point. It might be an added nicety if the correspondence were a point-for-point correlation of each feature of the analysis of the iconography with a related feature in the composition, but this is not necessary.

Exact symmetry of iconographic and compositional analysis would be intellectually dazzling. But there is no reason to postulate that all works are designed so intensively. My analysis respects the data of the film; there are compositional correlates to the insights, but not to the failure gags. Our explanation is not symmetric because the film is not symmetric in this way. This is not a limitation unless one has prior expectations that analyses and the masterpieces they dissect must display point-by-point symmetries between style and content. Such an expectation seems completely unhistorical.

For the reader who does place some weight on symmetric correspondences between content and style explications, I can say one thing in favor of my analysis. In Keaton films other than *The General*, we can isolate elements of compositional style that do correspond to Keaton's failure gags. Keaton's failure gags presuppose that the character is fixated on one, generally misconceived, picture of how the environment stands. Such characters have a misleading organization of the elements of the visual field.

Similarly, sometimes in Keaton films other than *The General* the audience is presented with shots that provoke misunderstanding of the situation at hand because the shot organizes information in a misleading way.

Cops opens with a shot which leads the audience to believe that the character is in jail while actually he is behind a cast-iron gate. The closeness of the shot is misleading; it organizes the information in a way inappropriate to locating characters behind gates. We might call these occlusion set-ups since they are composed in a way that blocks a correct understanding of the shot.

In *The Blacksmith*, the shot of the chestnut tree also subverts our expectations, while in *The Navigator* we are as misled as Rollo about the number on the pier, due to the angle of the shot *vis-à-vis* the gate.

The point of the shots in Keaton that trick the audience is that such shots represent faulty organizations of the elements of the visual field. These

occlusion set-ups correspond to the faulty perceptual habits and fixated misconstruals of the characters that lead to failures of adaptation. These shots also contrast with the types of shots we have analyzed in *The General* where the organization of elements is such as to provoke a correct, insightful grasp of the situation. The shots of *The General* that we have discussed correspond to Keaton's success imagery, and contrast with shots in other Keaton films that correlate with Keaton's failure imagery. So my model for the explanation of Keaton's gags is systematically expandable to Keaton's style if we consider all Keaton's silent films and not just *The General*.

On the other hand, my analysis cannot be faulted because *The General* does not contain any of the kinds of misleading shots previously cited. For even the critic with a predilection for explanations of the most elaborate structural variety will acknowledge that not every permutation of an artist's structural variations has to appear in every one of his works. It is enough that our analysis of the iconography successfully predicts stylistic correlates to both the success and failure imagery across Keaton's *oeuvre*.

Editing

Shifting from the composition of *The General* to the editing, one discovers in the latter the same lucidity concerning physical processes that was evident in the former. One technique that accounts for the terrific clarity in the depiction of physical processes is the sedulous way that Keaton breaks down a process into a careful, step-by-step causal analysis of the event. This technique, let us call it causal ordering, is hardly Keatonesque; virtually every film, one would hazard, has some causal analysis. What seems Keatonesque about the causal ordering in *The General* is not that the technique is unique, but rather that the volume at which it occurs is quite distinctive. Many films contain causal orderings of events. In *The General*, these causal orderings are very often not merely operating on events, but on very specific events, namely physical processes or actions involving physical manipulations. Few films seem so completely devoted to laying out incessantly the causal underpinnings of the physical events depicted. In the second and fourth parts of the film, it appears that predominant stretches of narration seem to be based on an action/reaction model of cause and effect with nary a stray shot for a colorful detail or a touch of psychology.

Keaton hardly invented causal ordering, but the intensive use he makes of the technique colors one's experience of the film quite profoundly. It

gives one a sense of it as a virtual clockwork of causes and effects. Typical examples of causal orderings are rampant in the film. For instance, the Union hijackers stop The General and run over to a telegraph pole. There is a cut to a medium-shot of a telegraph operator banging the telegraph key. Cut back to the hijackers; the wires are severed. Cut back to the telegraph operator; there is something wrong with the mechanism. Or, the hijackers remove a rail from the roadbed. There is a shot of Johnnie pursuing on his handcar. Then, there is a shot of The General escaping. These two shots establish that sufficient time has elapsed for Johnnie to have reached the sabotaged portion of track. Finally, there is a shot of Johnnie approaching that section of roadbed and derailing.

Again and again, the editing traces a strict process of cause and effect. In a medium-shot from inside the boxcar in the repossessed General, Johnnie knocks out the back of the boxcar, littering the path of the pursuing Yankees with dangerous debris. In the next shot, we can see the Union troops removing the obstacle. This shot is followed by a medium-long-shot from Johnnie's perspective; he is heaving barrels and boxes from the freightcar onto the track. This is followed by a deep-focus long-shot that perspicuously records a line of barriers from the foreground of the shot to the background where the Union troopers struggle to clear the track. The rhythm of the sequence is cause/effect, cause/effect. The intensive use of this causal ordering method of narration focuses the subject succinctly on the process dimension of physical interactions, while also fostering in the audience a detailed comprehension about the fictional environment as almost every event is laid out in respect to its causal genesis. The film narration becomes an almost constant process of explanation, detailing the why and wherefore of every physical process and manipulation.

Through the addition of striking details that clarify the relevant ongoing physical process, Keaton contributes an added degree of lucidity to his development of the causal ordering technique. For instance, when Johnnie pulls up the switchtrack to permanently sidetrack his Union pursuers, Keaton uses two shots. The first shows Johnnie in a medium long-shot behind The General. He attaches a chain from the back of the tender of The General to the switchtrack and then runs over and pushes the lever that switches the track. He waves to Annabelle, urging her to start The General so as to bend the switchtrack permanently in the wrong direction. Then, Keaton cuts to a close-shot of the switchtrack being bent into the wrong position. This second shot shows the audience how the switchtrack is bent out of shape. However, from the point of view of the narrative, the shot is extraneous. The first shot

would have sufficed to convey the narrative information that Johnnie was preparing to sidetrack his Union pursuers. Yet, Keaton adds a shot, thereby enriching our comprehension of the causal process by showing us exactly how the desired condition was effected. Keaton's way here is to supply further details so that the audience not only knows what is going on, but also sees how it happened. Perfect clarity on the matter of physical interactions is Keaton's motivation.

The switchtrack example is also analogous to the earlier example we offered concerning Johnnie Gray's dismantling of the Union telegraph wires. That sequence begins with a long-shot of Johnnie hurling a rope over the telegraph lines, and then attaching the rope to the top of a freightcar. Next there is a shot of The General starting up, followed by a shot that we have already analyzed, of the rope diagonally extending from the top of the boxcar to the telegraph pole. The pole is toppled. After this, we see a shot of Union troops futilely attempting to wire ahead. We then return to the third set-up in this shot interpolation as Johnnie cuts the telegraph pole loose. In this causal ordering the third set-up is extraneous from a narrative point of view. Keaton might have returned to the camera set-up of the first shot to record the telegraph pole's crash, but instead he includes the third set-up, thereby adding a significant detail to our picture enabling us to see precisely how the physical process emerged.

The causal ordering technique as well as the addition of illuminating details is not special to Keaton though he executes this conventional technique masterfully. He also uses it to promote his major effect, that is, clarity about physical processes. Of course, the technique of causal ordering with striking detail does not always result in giving the audience the sensation of a flash of intelligibility that the composition promotes. Consequently, we would not attribute the importance of this technique to a doubling of the experience of the characters and the audience. Nevertheless, even though the flash of immediate comprehension is often missing in the causal orderings, the topic is still the examination and understanding of physical processes. The causal ordering technique performs a compensatory function by concentrating on a dimension of experience, such as interaction with tools, raw materials, nature, and industrial objects, that was diminishing in the broader work culture as well as being a rare film topic. Furthermore, the intense lucidity about physical processes afforded by Keaton's use of the causal ordering framework compensates for two elements: (1) the lack of attentiveness to the exact chain of physical causation in most action films; and (2) the lack of the need to understand the exact causal interrelations in twentieth-century work.

A technique that is more distinctively Keaton's than the causal ordering format is his variation of the field/reverse-field trope. In *The General*, on several occasions, Keaton reverses the field of a long-shot. What seems distinctive about this technique is that it is a long-shot that is being reversed. Everyone employs the shot–countershot convention for interpolating close-shots in the representation of dialogue, but, in *The General*, Keaton occasionally uses this device with long-shots. This technique does not appear as prevalently in the work of Chaplin, Lloyd, or Langdon. This may be because this particular structure is closely connected with the characteristically Keatonesque adaptation of the long-shot, that is, with editing functioning as a means to accentuate the foreground/background juxtapositions of elements by systematically rotating them in relation to their screen position and prominence.

An example of the sort of shot interpolation that I have in mind occurs when Johnnie first acquires The Texas. Southern troops crowd on to the flatcar behind the timbercar of The Texas. This shot is diagonally organized. In the lower, screen-right quadrant of the image, we see the cab of The Texas. Stretching diagonally upwards in screen position and backwards in photographic space is the flatcar the troops are on.

In the far background, we see the stationhouse of the Kingston depot. Johnnie sticks his body out the cab window to see if the flatcar is loaded, and if all is ready. Keaton then cuts to the reverse of the first shot. Flipping the diagonal, the flatcar loaded with troops is now in the foreground in the lower screen-right quadrant while the locomotive is in the background. Whereas previously the camera was in front of and slightly to the side of the locomotive, now it is behind the locomotive and the flatcar. As the locomotive starts, a gap grows between the edge of the flatcar and the locomotive. Johnnie has forgotten to attach the two. The flatcar stays stationary while the locomotive plunges ahead. Some soldiers leap from the flatcar and shout to Johnnie, but to no avail, given the presumably great noise of the chugging engine. Off Johnnie goes alone and falsely confident.

Several factors seem to justify Keaton's way of representing the above scene. Clearly, the scene could have been depicted with one shot from the side of the train, but Keaton chooses to use two. One reason for this seems to be his desire to portray the event from behind. This approach might be preferred because it underscores the theme of Johnnie's departure from the Southern outpost as he is also moving away from the audience. Thus, the shot from behind serves to emphasize the departure theme since we are in the same orientation as the Confederates *vis-à-vis* the train.

Shooting from behind also serves to emphasize in a crucial way the distance between Johnnie and the depot. The uniformly articulated tracks provide a palpable measure of the growing distance between Johnnie and the Confederates. Since the scene is about Johnnie inexorably moving away from his cohorts, shooting from behind vivifies the event and engages the spectator's spatial intuitions by providing a felt sense of the distance that Johnnie is from his allies.

The same shot can also elicit a sense of audience participation because of the way in which the shot gives prominence to the motion of the locomotive versus the stasis of the flatcar. The diagonal composition draws the eye along the side of the train emphasizing the edge of the flatcar and the edge of the tender. As the train begins to move, one immediately notices that the edge of the flatcar is getting progressively lower in relation to the back of the timbercar. Here Keaton is exploiting the natural perceptual tendency to use what psychologists call "edge phenomena" in order to judge distance. The eye is instantly drawn to the edge of the flatcar and its background by the diagonal composition. The eye is automatically sensitive to that gray edge of the flatcar moving relative to the black back of the timbercar, which functions as a field for the lighter edge.

Keaton has found a telling way to alert the audience to the central aspect of the scene. Had the shot been taken from the side of the train, one's spatial intuitions would not have been engaged in the same emergent realization sort of way. Essentially, in this shot, Keaton is triggering a natural depth and movement cue, enabling the viewer to discover motion through an exercise of concrete judgment. The viewer participates in the scene, relying on an almost subliminal feedback mechanism about a change in the environment. In this way, the audience is prompted to employ the mode of attention Johnnie ought to be using to avoid many of his failures at adaptation.

So far, I have given reasons for Keaton's use of the second shot in the interpolation under description. But the question arises as to why he didn't simply use the second shot to characterize the scene? Why does he have a shot of the situation from two orientations? Three reasons seem to come into play here. First, in the initial shot, Johnnie is included; ironically Johnnie is looking behind himself, a procedure he unfortunately fails to repeat when the train starts to move. Second, by including both vantage points, the two key elements of the scene, the locomotive and the flatcar, are highlighted by being systematically repeated through the rotation of the visual field whereby the two major elements sequentially occupy the prominent foreground screen position. And third, the major common feature of the two shots is

the continuous line that the train forms. It is this aspect of the scene with which the gag is concerned. Consequently, the field/reverse-field functions to draw attention to precisely the key dimension of the scene. In this light, the field/reverse-field technique functions like Keaton's compositional manipulations as a means of directing attention to the critical dimension in the situation.

After directing attention to the crucial element of the situation, Keaton arranges the shot from behind the locomotive in a way that engages the audience's spatial intuitions, provoking the audience's faculty of concrete judgment. The shot from behind, by underscoring the distance and the forward velocity of The Texas, gives the audience a visual account of how the soldiers can't catch the engine. The billowing smoke from the locomotive indicates that the chugging of the engine makes it impossible for Johnnie to hear the shouting soldiers. We see that this field/reverse-field interpolation involves many of the same modifications of attention we find in Keaton's long-shot composition. In this example, the field/reverse-field technique directs the viewer to attend to the crucial physical factors in the situation so that the manner in which the event happens is intelligibly represented. The audience arrives at its understanding by employing a concrete cue of spatial intuition, thus practicing the kind of adaptive attentiveness valorized by the film.

Perhaps the most memorable and most brilliant sequence in *The General* – the mortar sequence – relies heavily on the field/reverse-field technique we have just discussed. This scene involves 11 shots of which the field reverse-field interpolations are among the most central. The scene progresses as follows (shots 1 to 11, shown in figures 2.1–2.11).

Shot 1: a medium lateral shot. Johnnie loads and lights the mortar.

Shot 2: a medium lateral shot of a space adjacent to that of shot 1. Johnnie moves from the mortar carriage to the timbercar. He gets caught up in the

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.4

linkage between the two cars. When Johnnie frees his foot, he unfortunately drops the linkage between the two cars onto the track. This disconnects the mortar car from the locomotive. The mortar carriage is slower than the train, so it drifts out of Johnnie's control.

Shot 3: a medium, three-quarter lateral shot of the mortar carriage alone in the frame. It bounces on the track. The elevation of the artillery piece is jostled and it lowers until the muzzle of the gun is parallel to the track,

Shot 4: a lateral long-shot that displays the timbercar with Johnnie on the back on the extreme left side of the frame with the mortar on the extreme right side of the frame. In between there is an open space. The mortar is seen to be pointed directly at the timbercar. This shot is composed in a highly determinate manner, using the sides of the frame as striking formal markers or brackets to underscore the significant narrative elements.

Shot 5: a medium long-shot from behind the mortar with Johnnie in the background of the shot. His foot is caught in a chain. He is stuck on the top of the ladder on the back of the timbercar. Our sight line runs along the trajectory the mortar shell will take. Here the foreground/background juxtaposition aligns all the crucial elements of the scene. In the foreground, we see the mortar; we see its fuse; we see it is directly aimed at Johnnie. The composition makes all the important elements stand out. The shot also emphasizes the interrelations of the elements since the line of vision of the camera is virtually the same as the line of fire of the mortar.

Shot 6: a slightly closer shot than shot 5 of Johnnie from the cannon's side of things. He succeeds in shaking off the chain that shackled him.

Shot 7: a frontal long-shot with the camera mounted on the timbercar. In the foreground we have lumber; in the mid-ground, Johnnie climbs onto the top of the car; and in the background, we see the implacable gun, its fuse

Figure 2.5

Figure 2.6

steaming, and its muzzle lowered directly at The Texas. Johnnie throws several chunks of wood at the mortar, hoping to alter its elevation, but to no avail. This shot is especially important because it reverses the field of shot 5. In this way it formally underscores the two crucial features of the scene – the cannon and The Texas. The foreground/background juxtaposition of the fifth shot, of course, already achieved this.

Shot 7 further accentuates this formal underlining by systematically rotating the visual field so that the gun and The Texas exchange the most prominent screen positions. This is a powerful means of giving utmost salience to key elements. Field reversal also gives the audience more data about the relative positions of the two objects, eliciting from the audience a felt sense of depth via the systematic permutation of screen configurations. Lastly, this shot alerts the audience to the fact that there is a curve in the track, a factor of decisive importance in what follows.

Shot 8: a medium-shot on the top of The Union boxcar. The Union spies have their weapons drawn; they are ready to fight.

Figure 2.7

Figure 2.8

Figure 2.9

Figure 2.10

Shot 9: a lateral medium-shot of the cowcatcher of The Texas. Johnnie has put the whole train between himself and the mortar in an effort not to be blown to smithereens.

Shot 10: an overhead long-shot with extreme depth of field. In the foreground, in the lower screen-left corner of the image, the mortar rolls into the frame. In the mid-ground, there is The Texas and in the far background we can see The General. From behind the mortar, we can no longer see its fuse smoking; it is about to discharge. Between The Texas and the mortar, however, we see a fast curve in the track. As we know from previous gags, Keaton can exploit curves magnificently. The Texas is suddenly pulled out of the trajectory of fire by the swerve in the roadbed. The gun fires, the shell whizzes past The Texas, and the explosion detonates a mile away, just missing the last boxcar of The General, deep in the background of the shot. In the foreground a cloud of white smoke hovers over that part of the track where the fuse burned out; it is just before the curve. The mortar fired just as The Texas lurched out of its line of fire.

Figure 2.11

Shot 11: another long-shot. This shot is taken from the top of The Union boxcar. It reverses the field of shot 10. The explosion in the background of shot 10 is in the foreground of shot 11. The Union spies are shocked. They'll not stand and fight the entire army that they mistakenly assume just bombarded them.

These 11 shots represent one of the most carefully and brilliantly edited

sequences in film history. Many elements of style we have analyzed individually are incorporated in this shot interpolation including foreground/background play, field/reverse-field cutting, shot angulation, and a canny use of curves in the track. As a result of these techniques, the scene is extremely intelligible despite the scale and complexity of the physical process involved.

The audience understands completely how the mortar misses The Texas due to the swerve in the track. The high angle of shot 10, with its striking design, is especially important here in drawing the eye from the mortar to the track to The Texas and then to The General. This masterful shot clearly arrays the four crucial elements of the scene in such a way that the audience immediately sees how the event happened. There is a rush of excitement as the gun discharges, due to one's awe at the precision synchronization in the scene, but also due to a flash of comprehension of exactly how these elements interact to save The Texas from damage.

The extreme salience of the crucial elements in the scene is prepared prior to shot 10 in the various compositional and editing strategies employed earlier. In a fairly conventional manner, shot 3 isolates the gun as a major detail. Shot 4, a medium lateral long-shot of the gun and the timbercar, is a highly determinate composition that not only records that the gun is lowered at the train, but also formally underscores this relationship by placing the key elements at the extremes of the frame.

Shot 5, a medium long-shot from behind the mortar is an example of the kind of foreground/background juxtaposition that we spoke of at such length. This shot gives special emphasis to the interrelationships of the gun and the train because the line of vision of the camera and the line of fire of the gun are coincident, underlining the key physical relationships in the most dramatic way, virtually predicting the trajectory of the bombardment by suggestively aiming the camera.

Shot 7 reverses the field of shot 5. The elements of shot 5 exchange screen position with those in shot 7. As in our earlier example, this is an inductive means of narrowing attention to pertinent visual information in the two shots to what is common to them. Again, in shot 7 the gun, Johnnie, and the timbercar predominate. Reversing the field gives emphasis to these elements through repetition. It also adds to the intelligibility of the situation by reconfirming, from another perspective, the line of fire of the gun.

Given shot 5, one assumes, in a predictive way, how the basic elements in the scene will be aligned from the train side of things. Shot 7 confirms these assumptions. This gives us a much more familiar scene of the situation. Our cognitive map, derived from earlier shots, is corroborated. The more angles

we have of a situation, the more we feel it is in our grasp. Shots 4, 5, and 7 give us a very rich cognitive map of the situation, visualizing the material from three different perspectives. The reversal of field in shots 5 and 7 is also telling because of a divergence between the two shots that stands out because the two shots are so systematically interrelated. That is, in shot 5 the track is a straightaway, while in shot 7 there is a curve in the roadbed. The juxtaposition of the two shots underlines the basic relationship of key elements, while also giving salience and alerting us to a new element, the curve in the track. This fact, of course, will be indispensable in shot 10.

Shot 10 is certainly composed in a way that maximizes the intelligibility of the scene in and of itself. Nevertheless, the earlier field/reverse-field alternation facilitates the clarity of the situation by formally underlining the basic elements and relations of the event. The field/reverse-field here, in a manner of speaking, primes the audience for the basic insight of shot 10 wherein one sees how the event happens.

Shots 10 and 11 of this sequence also involve a reversal of field. The background elements of shot 10, the explosion and the hijacked General, become the foreground elements of shot 11. Shot 11, however, does not facilitate any insight into the event. But it does give the audience a greater feel for the space of the event by proposing two systematically linked vantage points on the action. The result is a more elaborate mental map of the situation. One has a more vivid sense of spatial relations of the basic elements of the situation from having seen those elements transformed from more than one perspective or orientation. This is true of shots 5 and 7 as well as of shots 10 and 11. Thus, Keaton's field/reverse-field long-shot technique not only fosters intelligibility *vis-à-vis* causal relations but also *vis-à-vis* spatial relations by giving the audience several orientations on the same event.

The mortar scene just considered might be said to be edited in-the-round since Keaton shoots from the side of the train as well as employing the field/reverse-field strategy that we have noted. Keaton does not approach the scene from one perspective, but rather has camera set-ups at many different points around the scene. Contrast this to the incessant frontality of the scenes inside the hut in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*. A major effect of supplying the audience with different orientations on the action is to familiarize them with the geography of the event by enriching their mental maps of the situation.

Of course, having many camera set-ups around the event, in and of itself, does not guarantee a sense of geographical intelligibility; the different orientations must be linked. This linkage is not merely sequential. It must include a kind of cross-referencing whereby elements of one shot are included in the

next shot in a way that concretizes the relation of the spaces of the two shots. For instance, in shot 7 the composition repeats the elements of shot 5 in a way that one can concretely relate the space of the two shots. In shot 11, the repetition of the explosion makes it simple for us to mentally place the freightcar in relation to the wayward mortar.

Throughout *The General*, we have repeatedly argued, Keaton's stylistic preoccupation is with the lucid representation of physical states of affairs and physical processes. Field/reverse-field editing in particular and editing in-the-round in general vivify this by imbuing causal factors in events with salience and/or by rendering the geography of settings highly intelligible.

One method of editing in-the-round that we have not emphasized so far is Keaton's recurring tendency to include set-ups from in front of the action along with set-ups from the side of the action. In the mortar scene, the transition for shot 5 to shot 6 is an example of this. The film abounds with examples of this schema of frontal/lateral editing. Johnnie's entry into Union territory involves four alternations comprised of two shots each. Similarly, the battle at Rock River is epically laid out with long-shots, from the Southern side of the battle, overlooking the frontal thrust of the Union assault, and with lateral long-shots from the Union flank as the Yankees wade across the river. This frontal/lateral editing contributes to a vivid sense of familiarity and spatial intelligibility in the audience. Any object, even a toy, becomes more familiar if we can rotate it, looking at it from many orientations. We come to recognize it with its various facets arrayed in different configurations. We have a more concrete feeling for the object. Keaton's editing in-the-round and his frontal/lateral editing perform the function of rotating the geography of the event for us, steeping us in the various facets of the place and process from different orientations, thereby rendering the event extremely intelligible. As a result, we have a richer experience of the environment in Keaton than we do with many other filmmakers because Keaton includes many vantage points on the action that are extraneous in terms of narrative information but which nevertheless enrich our mental map, our schema of assumptions and correlative expectations, about the environment. It is important to reemphasize that not just any montage will result in the effect we are describing The editing must be systematic and cross-referential in order to give the concrete sense of geography that Keaton elicits.

Consider, for instance, the sequence in which Annabelle removes the linking-pin from The General so that she and Johnnie can hijack *it* from the Yankees. There is a frontal shot of men heaving provisions into a freightcar. In the

foreground, a Union officer with a beard directs the activities. Johnnie, with Annabelle hidden in a bag on his shoulders, walks past the point where he should throw the sack into the freightcar. Instead, he walks to the lower screen-left corner of the frame where there is a junction between two freightcars. The Union officer gesticulates. Then, Keaton cuts to a lateral shot. This shot is mounted from behind Johnnie. The camera looks down the alleyway between the two freightcars. A hand, Annabelle's, reaches out from the sack and lifts the linking-pin from between the two freightcars, thereby disengaging them. In the background of the shot, over the top of the sack, we see the Union officer from the previous shot still gesticulating. He orders Johnnie to put his sack in the freightcar that Johnnie just passed. Keaton then cuts back to the frontal long-shot set-up and throws the sack, with Annabelle and the pin, among the provisions. The second shot in this chain is essential. By repeating the officer from the foreground of the first shot in the background of the second shot the spectator can concretely locate the action of the second shot in regard to the action of the first shot. A tighter shot of Annabelle's removal of the pin that did not include the officer would have rendered the geography of the scene more synthetic and abstract. By systematically cross-referencing the elements, however, Keaton conveys a concrete, intelligible picture of the situation. Eisensteinian montage, since it generally lacks cross-referencing of details in this way, does not engender a sense of geographical intelligibility, though in terms of camera set-ups, Eisenstein certainly edits in-the-round. Rather, it is Keaton's use of systematic cross-referencing that allows us to attribute to him a theme of geographical intelligibility.[15]

The frontal/lateral interpolation just described also seems committed to another Keaton theme which we have described as visible intelligibility. The effect of the second shot is not only to orient the audiences geographically to the first shot, it also functions to show us how Annabelle could remove the pin undetected. We see how Johnnie and the sack obscure the officer's vision and camouflage Annabelle's activity. The centrally organized foreground/background juxtaposition, in a highly determinate way, illuminates the physical relation between the officer, Johnnie and the sack, and the pin. A much tighter shot could have been used here; an insert of a hand removing the pin would have sufficed. From such a shot the audience would know that the cars had been disconnected. By opting for a wide lateral shot Keaton enables the audience to see how the cars were successfully detached in a secret manner. We have seen on earlier occasions as well that the frontal/lateral format can be used for the purpose of enhancing the visible intelligibility of events. Both the catapult gag and Johnnie's dismantling of

the Union telegraph involve frontal/lateral alternations that are extraneous to the narrative, but which enhance the visible intelligibility of the physical process being recorded. The themes of geographical and visible intelligibility are aspects of the lucidity with which Keaton attempts to represent the physical environment. As for geography and causal processes, Keaton strives to find editing patterns and compositional formats that will facilitate the audience's comprehension of the location and cause of events. One is constantly struck by the insistent physicality of *The General*, not only in terms of what is represented, but also in terms of the way it is represented. Again and again, one's judgment of depth and one's sense of spatial orientation are engaged, prompting a kind of cognitive-perceptual participation in concretely placing elements of action in relation to each other. This attitude to the geography of the environment is to be expected from a director so devoted to prompting a consonant reaction to the causal processes in the environment. In both cases, Keaton seems to aim at enlivening and awakening categories of judgment that are less and less part of the daily practice of work in the kind of urban, postindustrial society that was arising during his youth, and which predominated during his maturity.

Summary

In this chapter, I have focused on the cinematic elements in *The General*, including especially Keaton's forcefully articulated long-shots, his long-shot field reversals, his editing in-the-round, his use of camera angulation, and his abiding preoccupation with detailed causal editing. These are stylistic features that give Keaton's work and *The General* in particular their characteristic look and feel. The leading question in this chapter is: what, if anything, does this panoply of formal strategies add up to?

Beginning with an analysis of Keaton's highly determinate long-shots – long-shots that draw the viewer's attention emphatically to selected points in the visual array – we noticed that Keaton deploys this technique for a recurring purpose: to direct audiences to the pertinent physical variables in scenes and events in order to facilitate and even to prompt seeing with understanding how those events came about. The itinerary of the eye assigned to spectators by Keaton's extremely directive long-shots with their pronounced diagonals and subtle angulation is one that is predicated upon making the events, notably the physical events, that transpire in *The General* visibly intelligible, where visual intelligibility is a matter of enabling viewers to see how and

to comprehend how events, especially at the level of physical processes, unfold. Whereas, for most purposes, filmmakers aspire mostly to assuring that viewers know that the pertinent events happen – what we call knowing *that x* – Keaton, through his particular use of the long-shot, manifests commitment to showing how events, particularly physical processes, evolve. This concern with visual intelligibility, as initially located in Keaton's long-shot, moreover, can also supply a persuasive explanation of the other recurring, characteristic cinematic forms in *The General* – the long-shot field reversals, the camera angulation, the detailed causal editing patterns, and the editing in-the-round. These all contribute to the visual intelligibility of the film, most of them with respect to the evolution of a physical event, like a train derailment.

But what is the purpose of this stylistic preoccupation in *The General*? Does it have some larger point? In response to this, I advance the hypothesis that the cognitive state engendered in the audience by these cinematic techniques is an analog to the concrete intelligence exhibited operationally by the character of Johnnie Gray in the course of the sort of insight gags discussed in the previous chapter. That is, the concrete operations engaged by the Keaton character as he negotiates various and sundry challenges posed by the physical environment and its objects presuppose the mental reorganization of the physical factors that beset him. This is not a matter of reflection, but of what Merleau-Ponty might call "bodily intentionality." Nevertheless, it is a species of intelligence. Keaton's cinematic techniques, then, make comparable cognitive experiences available to the audience by making the pertinent physical variable and their relationships salient, thereby affording the audience, nonreflectively and automatically, the kind of insight and bodily understanding of the physical environment that is presupposed by the character's successful concrete manipulations of troublesome objects.

For example, cutting to an angulated shot is a literal means to reorient the visual field, serving as an analog to the processes of mental reorganization that Keaton's successful adaptation gags presume. Likewise, Keaton's highly determinate long-shot compositions may be seen as returning, at the level of stylistic presentation, to the concern with concrete intelligence that dominates his gags. Visual intelligibility as a stylistic theme ideally promotes a certain cognitive state in viewers that is the formal correlative of the insight demonstrated by the Keaton character at the level of the comic content of his successful adaptation gags. Keaton's visual approach manages the physical environment in terms of a cognitive-perceptual style that parallels the sort of concrete intelligence the insight gags imply. In this way Keaton's cinematic

stylization matches and reinforces his thematic fascination with concrete intelligence and the operations that embody it. It bequeaths to the viewer the kind of concrete organization of visual field the character needs in order to negotiate it.

Keaton's highly determinate compositions are intended to elicit heightened audience awareness of, sensitivity to, and a nonreflective or bodily grasp of the key physical variables and interactions in Keaton's material environment. Since Keaton's attention to physical detail occurs in contexts that are noncomic, the compositional clarity one finds in *The General* is not reducible to comic functionality. Instead, I argue, Keaton gives salience to key physical details through highly determinate compositions in order to engender in the audience an alertness to and a concrete comprehension of the environment, which is precisely that which Keaton's characters lack in the failure gags in *The General*, but have in abundance when they excel. Thus, visual intelligibility as a stylistic theme advances the concern with concrete intelligence explored in the behavior of the characters which constitutes the most important content of the film.[16]

Just as the purpose of Keaton's ensemble of cinematic techniques can be illuminated via the relation of the concept of visible intelligibility to the theme of concrete intelligence in *The General*, so the cultural significance of the film's devices can be specified by reference to what was said in the last chapter about the ways in which the content of the film enlivens and reawakens faculties of judgment and thought that, though commonly available through labor at the height of the steam, steel, and industrial culture of Keaton's childhood, were beginning to disappear for many by the 1920s and perhaps for most in contemporary American culture. Keaton explores that species of concrete intelligence through his gags, but also celebrates it through a series of coordinated cinematic strategies that virtually incarnate a concrete intelligence about things through the point of view advanced by the shooting and editing. In this respect, *The General* – in terms of both its subject matter and the manner in which it is presented – offers a powerful emblem of compensation for viewers whose lives have alienated them from any sustained intelligent interaction with things *qua* things.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968), p. 490.

2 Quoted in Rudi Blesh, *Keaton* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 150.

3 See E. Rubinstein, *Filmguide to The General* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 68; and Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and The Movies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 130.
4 See Rubinstein, p. 69.
5 Raymond Rohauer, "On the Track of *The General*," in *The General*, ed. Richard J. Anobile (New York: Flare Books, 1975), p. 7.
6 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema*?, tr. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), vol. I, p. 52.
7 Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), pp. 168–9.
8 Quoted in Rubinstein, pp. 67–8.
9 Keaton, p. 93.
10 Ibid., p. 174.
11 Rubinstein, p. 67.
12 Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 123.
13 Mast, pp. 130–1.
14 Ibid.
15 The fact that throughout the chases the camera is generally mounted on moving vehicles also enhances one's sense of the geography of the film. That is, the continuity of offscreen space and onscreen space is constantly reconfirmed by these moving shots, for at the edges of the frame adjacent spaces are always being added or subtracted. Thus, besides dynamizing the image, the recurrent moving shots in the film also engender a sense of the continuous geography of the world of the film.
16 That is, Keaton's style of presentation itself is a contribution to the theme or content of *The General*. This way of putting it, moreover, may be one way, albeit a moderate one, of understanding Merleau-Ponty's assertion that form cannot be separated from content. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The World of Perception*, tr. Oliver Davis (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 96–7, 101.

3

Keaton, Chaplin, Lloyd, and Langdon

In order to assure the reader of the specificity of the account I developed in the past two chapters, I will contrast my analysis of *The General* with analyses of Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman*, and Harry Langdon's *Long Pants*. Often, when silent comedies are discussed, exegeses of specific films or specific filmmakers are offered in such broad terms that the accounts, if applicable at all, apply to entire genres, not merely to single films or even single filmmakers. Consequently, I will contrast my analysis of *The General* with the aforesaid works in order to demonstrate that the hypotheses generated with respect to Keaton are not exportable to the major works of other silent clowns.

The kind of error I wish to avoid would be committed by the critic who claims that fate, symbolized by objects, nature, and machines, is the major theme of Keaton. Here, two errors are probably committed, though I am primarily concerned with the second rather than the first. Obviously the association of fate, on the one hand, and objects, nature, and machines, on the other, is quite suspect. Even if this association is supportable, though I believe that it is not, a second problem would arise because the motif of humans involved with objects, nature, and machines is central throughout all silent slapstick comedy. Thus, if the association of fate with objects, nature, and machines is a solid one, it would have to be considered the theme of all slapstick comedy, and not a characteristic theme of Keaton alone. I hope that my analysis of *The General* has avoided this kind of generality. To substantiate this claim, I will show that, unlike the "fate" mode of explication, the model offered in the past two chapters for *The General*, cannot be extended to *The Gold Rush*, *The Freshman*, and *Long Pants*.

It may be felt that in my quest for specificity, I have begged the question of the standards of critical plausibility against two kinds of critical approaches, namely, the universalist approach of the humanist critic,[1] and the genre approach.[2] The universalist seeks the essential human themes of a work in an effort to elucidate how great works appeal to people of all times and climes. The genre theorist analyzes a work by showing how a given film is part of a group of works that rehearse some basic, enduring human drama. My approach seems to demean general themes whereas both the universalistic humanist and the genre theorist maintain that it is precisely the general theme of a work that is key. It is precisely where the work thematically overlaps with other great works, the humanist says, or where it thematically overlaps with genre concerns, the archetypal genre theorist says, that the work is most interesting.

Although I am not very sympathetic to either the universalist humanist approach or the genre approach, my concern with specificity is not a covert slap at either. Though both theorists favor big, general themes, both also acknowledge that, in the individual film, the general theme receives an individual interpretation and inflection. I, in turn, do not deny that *The General* evokes the very generic theme of humanity and its environment. I merely claim that a maximally plausible analysis of *The General* should be able to specify the particular relation of man to his environment that one finds in *The General*. I do not claim that we must weigh the specific theme as aesthetically primary. I also maintain that a plausible analysis of *The General* should be able to elucidate the significance of the major themes of the film in its social and cultural context. Specificity is important here. However, I have not prohibited the further attempt, which is to establish the significance of the film in a timeless, ahistorical "human" context. Thus, the demand for specificity on the analysis of the individual film is not incompatible with attempting to state the theme more generally, unless the general statement explicitly or implicitly denies the specific variation of the general themes that one identifies.

The Gold Rush

Beginning our contrasts with *The Gold Rush*, it is immediately apparent that work imagery is much less in evidence in the Chaplin film than in *The General*. There are many gags that involve objects, but few that could be described as representations of the characteristic tasks of traditional or contemporary

work cultures. Rather, we find stretches of pantomime, such as the Oceana Roll dance, the Thanksgiving dinner, and the mixed pantomime of the big chicken. There are also many Sennett-like roughhouse gags involving fighting, pushing, kicking, biting, tripping, pratfalls, and all manner of sheer sadism. Yet, there are few gags that involve performing recognizable tasks.

One exception to this is the gag in which the Tramp shovels snow in order to earn money for the New Year's Eve party that he plans for Georgia and her friends. The Tramp, hired to shovel snow from a walk, energetically starts heaving snow over his shoulder. There is a fade-out in the image, signaling the passage of time. When we fade into the image again, we see that the Tramp has unintentionally transferred the pile of snow he was shoveling to the walkway next to the one he was hired to clear. The owner of this adjacent walkway pokes his head out of his window and hires the Tramp to undo the mess he has just wrought. This is doubly comical because the Tramp's new client had earlier brusquely refused the Tramp's services.

What is especially noteworthy about Chaplin's means of representing this incident is the degree to which technique provides the audience with knowledge of what happened without enabling the audience to see how it happened. We see the Tramp throwing snow over his shoulder, but we have no idea how his frantic method of hurling snow results in the neat formation of a pile of snow exactly along the adjacent walk. That is, the Tramp's shoveling gestures are of an extreme, exaggerated comic sort. As he shovels, snow whirls everywhere. One really doesn't understand how that wild procedure could so efficiently result in the deftly piled mound. The fade-out/fade-in technique tells us that this is *what* happened, though we have no idea *how* it happened. Chaplin, unlike Keaton, has little interest in rendering physical work processes visibly perspicuous. Chaplin is not interested in a theme of work nor in a mode of representation that renders the processes of work intelligible.

This is not to deny that Chaplin is involved with themes of humanity and the environment. Surely, *The Gold Rush* devotes great attention to themes of privation, especially themes of hunger and exposure. One feels that these are concerns close to Chaplin insofar as *The Gold Rush* vividly recalls the types of misery Chaplin is said to have experienced as an orphan on the streets of London. Yet, these themes of privation and hardship are represented as physical facts, not as processes. The process dimension of the world is not a major source of attention for Chaplin. Indeed, when Chaplin does choose to depict a physical process, there is little of the finesse one finds in Keaton.

For instance, in the final cabin scene of *The Gold Rush*, one finds outright physical inconsistencies in the sequence. On the one hand, given the

opening shots of the cabin tipping, we are led to believe that when both the Tramp and Big Jim are on the same side of the cabin, the cabin will tip. However, there is a tight medium-shot insert of the Tramp on Big Jim's side of the cabin where the cabin does not tip. The Tramp is folding the blanket from his cot, and the cabin stands as if on solid bedrock. This and other inconsistencies in the scene do not detract from our knowledge of the peril of the characters in the fiction, but it is clearly the peril and not the mechanics of the peril that is emphasized. Indeed, consider the way the rope anchors the cabin on the ledge is given by editing, and the whole scene is shot from one side of the action. Though the situation involves a physical process, the composition and the editing seek to achieve neither visible intelligibility nor geographical intelligibility. The danger of the prospectors is expertly represented; one shudders at their predicament. The how and the exact wherefore of the event are obscure. There is none of the lucid physicality one finds in *The General*. Intelligibility simply is not the theme of the composition and editing of *The Gold Rush*.

One sequence of *The Gold Rush* that does appear to have visible intelligibility as its theme involves the incident in the Monte Carlo saloon where the Tramp mistakenly believes that Georgia is waving to him. The Tramp had entered the bar somewhat earlier. He has picked up a torn photo of Georgia whom he obviously admires. The Tramp is standing in a medium-shot looking at the photo; a tall man walks into the shot behind the Tramp. There is a cut to a two-shot of Georgia and one of her girlfriends. The girlfriend looks offscreen, and then nudges Georgia to do likewise. As Georgia looks offscreen, Chaplin cuts to her point of view. This is a shot with both the Tramp and the man behind him looking, one surmises, at Georgia. The man behind the Tramp smiles; one assumes he is an old acquaintance of Georgia's. The Tramp also smiles; he seems to believe that Georgia's attentions are directed at him. There is a cut to Georgia; she waves and begins to walk offcamera. Then, Chaplin shifts to a deep-focus, diagonally composed medium-shot from behind the Tramp and from behind the man behind the Tramp. This shot composition gives special emphasis to Georgia's actual sight-line; her line of vision shoots way over the Tramp to the taller man behind. At the same time, it is clear how someone, unaware of someone else behind him, and standing where the Tramp is, could mistakenly think that Georgia was looking at him. The Tramp walks towards Georgia; she passes him, completely oblivious to his existence; they almost literally exchange screen positions. Here, a highly determinate diagonal composition aligns the basic elements of the event in such a way that it is visibly intelligible how the Tramp made his

mistake. However, the process involved here seems more aptly described as a social process rather than solely a physical process.

Composition in *The Gold Rush* is exceptionally studied. Chaplin again and again returns to the use of medium-shots and medium long-shots. Somewhat closer than Keaton's, Chaplin's range is modeled on the relation between a theatrical audience and the stage. Often, there are strikingly composed shots, neatly setting off foreground/background juxtapositions; however, as in the preceding example, this careful structuring seems designed to depict social situations in a certain way rather than to represent physical processes.

When the Tramp enters the Monte Carlo saloon, he stands alone in the foreground. In the background of this medium-shot, the clientele of the bar mills about. Significantly, they are all in groups, chattering animatedly to each other. The famous shot of the Tramp, outside the saloon on New Year's Eve, repeats this structure. The Tramp is in the foreground of the shot, gazing through the barrier of a glass window at the rollicking community within, which cavorts in the background of the shot. Here, the foreground/background zones of the shot become associated with two modes of being – the exile versus the community.

Chaplin supports this compositional theme of loneliness in numerous ways. First, he casts actors who are generally larger than himself thus setting himself visually apart from others. Also, he dresses quite differently from everyone else in the film. And, of course, he walks in an absolutely unique fashion. Other characters are generally grouped together; blocking thus emphasizes the theme of loneliness versus society. In addition, through much of the first part of the bar scene, Chaplin composes the scene in such a way that the Tramp is outside of virtually everyone else's sight-lines: he is effectively invisible. He is the only person not involved in a conversation or a dance. He seems almost invisible to everyone in the room since it is palpably evident that no one is looking at him. Added to striking foreground/background juxtapositions, these strategies communicate a powerful image of exclusion and alienation from the community.

Many of the shots of the mining town are such that the Tramp is isolated in the foreground versus groups moving in the background. Again and again, Chaplin strives to isolate the Tramp. In the shot in which Big Jim and the Tramp leave the cabin, Chaplin purposely holds the shot after Big Jim leaves the frame in order to present yet another sustained image of the Tramp alone. Throughout *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin proposes imagery that, given its visual organization, evokes concepts like separateness, which have emotional as well as formal senses. In this way, Chaplin employs his medium-shot

compositions in a way analogous to the dream process of dramatization described by Freud. The themes of being alone, alienated, and outside are dramatized by compositions in which the character is visually isolated and outside, thus literalizing social relationships through visual relationships.

The visual theme of alienation is much enhanced by the juxtapositions one finds in the editing schemas of *The Gold Rush* which often involve counterposing or contrasting shots of groups of people with shots in which the Tramp is the only person in the frame. For instance, the film begins with seven establishing shots of lines upon lines of men struggling to reach the Yukon gold fields. Then, there is a shot of the Tramp, alone on a ledge, wending his solitary way through the North country. Here, in the very first images of the film, a contrast is struck between a mass of humanity, arrestingly represented as a society organized in lines, versus one person who is outside and apart.

This type of contrastive editing is brought to a crescendo in the New Year's Eve sequence. Between the image of the clock at 12:00 and the shot of the Tramp standing outside the bar, there are almost 30 images and subtitles. The basic alternation of images here is between the Tramp, alone in his cabin, and the revelers, including Georgia, at the saloon. In the saloon, group shots predominate. There are overhead shots of the crowd. At one point, the camera pans around the saloon community and then cuts to the Tramp as if to underscore that he is outside the circle of the community. The camera also cuts around the circle, formed around the dance floor of the saloon, and then cuts back to the Tramp. Everyone is singing "Auld Lang Syne"; everyone but the Tramp, the man apart. Most of the shots of the Tramp are the same: they are not added to convey new information, but to repeat the theme of loneliness again and again and again. In all, there are eight cuts from the group to the Tramp, each reemphasizing the theme of exclusion.

Chaplin uses his medium-shot compositions and his contrastive editing patterns to visually articulate a theme of alienation. This somewhat symbolic employment of technique occurs often in Chaplin. In *The Circus*, for instance, the visual theme of loneliness reaches almost epic proportions as the circus, with the Tramp's own true love aboard, pulls out, leaving the Tramp in the middle of a huge circle where only a day before a circus tent full of laughing, cheering people had stood. The shooting and editing emphasize the circus as a social concert, a community, moving as one, to its next destination. The editing emphasizes everything moving away from the Tramp; the long-shots emphasize how alone the Tramp is. It seems that, for miles around, he is the only person present.

The kind of compositional strategies and editing contrasts that we have so far described can be readily explicated in terms of an effect that has long been acknowledged as Chaplin's specialty, namely pathos – a feeling of pity engendered in the audience. In the nineteenth century, pathos was most commonly associated with situations in which a worthy character, such as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, is excluded from membership in the community.[3] The audience is called upon to sympathize with a character whose talent and virtue is great but unrecognized. The pathetic figure can also provoke audience affiliation, encouraging a fantasy of self-pity, that is, "despite all my abilities and merits, they still exclude me."

Chaplin discovered the theme of pathos as a comic narrative theme. Like many comedians, he employed the marriage convention as a basic story device. As a genre convention, it suggests an image of social reconciliation and integration[4] – a lingering record of the stabilizing function of kinship systems as analyzed by Lévi-Strauss. That is, through marriage different social classes and social types are integrated peacefully. Antagonism is buffered by drawing it into the webs of affection and obligation within the family. Shakespearean tragedies end with mass murders whereas the comedies end with mass marriages. The former symbolizes the extreme of social disorder while such comedies celebrate the height of social order where all classes and factions amalgamate into complex tribal unities. What Chaplin realized about the marriage convention in comedy was that, as success in marrying symbolized integration into society, an unrequited suit would suggest irreconcilable otherness.

In April of 1919, in his sixth short at Essanay, Chaplin made a two-reel short entitled *The Tramp*. In it, the Tramp fails to win the hand of the female lead, played by Edna Purviance. The film ends with the lonesome Tramp proverbially setting off down the road of life, an outcast of everyday society. In this film, Chaplin inaugurated the possibility of pathos in film comedy. He realized that the marriage convention, as it afforded an image of a fully integrated society, also afforded the possibility of an image of alienation insofar as an unrequited quest implied the contrary of a requited one.

Chaplin heightened emphasis on the female characters in his films to a point where sympathy with the Tramp's romantic quest is the felt focus of audience attention. The longing of the Tramp is framed in idolatrous close-ups of his darlings. In some films, such as *The Tramp* and *The Circus*, his quest fails. In a film like *The Gold Rush*, the possibility of a romantic outcome favorable to the Tramp remains an outside chance, until a purely unpredictable event unites them. Indeed, until that ending, the audience is led to believe that Georgia

still loves Jack. Thus, until the very end of the film, the audience is prompted to indulge itself in the sentimentality of unrequited love, and of the Tramp's complete lack of connection to society. Chaplin underscores the possibility that the Tramp will be eternally exiled and alienated. This is symbolized in the narrative through the pervasive theme of unrequited love.

The theme of the social outcast supplies the *raison d'être* for much of Chaplin's directorial technique in *The Gold Rush*. His way of visually underlining the difference between the Tramp and others by means of foreground/background juxtapositions, scale oppositions, blocking, sight-lines, and costuming continually individuate and differentiate the Tramp. Within the narrative context, that visual differentiation functions as an iconographic marker of isolation. Chaplin renders the Tramp absolutely distinctive in manner, bearing, and dress. This uniqueness again provides an intensification of the gap between the Tramp and the social world around him. The narrative theme of alienation is constantly reinforced through editing and compositional formats that suggest the pervasive difference of the character and the surrounding community.

It is a common complaint that Chaplin failed to mature formally as a filmmaker. Many think he remained somewhat of a primitive wedded to a frontally organized proscenium-like medium-shot, occasionally relieved by simple Griffith-like editing. However, from the above analysis, one might hazard that the reason for Chaplin's highly restricted vocabulary of forms is that, by the twenties, he had learned to employ these minimal techniques in a way that perfectly expressed the theme of pathos that he sought. What is disdained as retrograde is actually an artistic program that has fully developed its potential and which can confidently rework its basic premises with little if any innovation. Such a program becomes impervious to progress because the notion of improvement is alien to it.

In Chaplin, the various compositional schemata and editing patterns do not add salience to the important aspects of physical processes as they do in Keaton's films. Keaton's theme, in terms of the character, is concrete intelligence; in terms of the audience's experience, it is intelligibility. Chaplin's theme, in terms of the character, is alienation, while, in terms of the audience's experience, it is pathos. Chaplin uses composition and editing to supply visual correlatives for the character's estrangement from society. His style is highly symbolic and expressive in the sense of communicating a deep psychological anxiety. Unlike Keaton, Chaplin does not strive after techniques and strategies that will render the inanimate world intelligible. Chaplin instead attempts to picture the social world from a certain perspective, namely from the viewpoint of a virtually irredeemable outcast. So much of

Chaplin's technique is devoted to this end that there doesn't seem to be a single shot in *The Gold Rush* that could be mistaken stylistically as originating in *The General*.

One might attempt to draw a similarity between *The Gold Rush* and *The General* by arguing that one finds insight gags and inattention gags in both. For instance, when the Tramp dances with Georgia, his pants begin to fall down. In response, he swings his cane around and uses it as a hook to hold his pants up. This involves an insight into the possibilities of the cane. The Tramp must cease to conceptualize the cane functionally as a walking stick, and rethink its physical possibilities. Shortly after this achievement, however, the Tramp ties a rope around his drooping pants, hoping this will save the day. He fails to notice that on the other end of the rope there is an enormous dog. The toll of this act of inattention is quite heavy, for when a cat strays across the dance floor, the huge dog lurches after it, dumping a dazed Tramp on the floor. Given such examples of insight and inattention gags in *The Gold Rush*, someone might attempt to argue that concrete intelligence, characterized as adaptiveness, is a parallel theme between Chaplin's film and *The General*.

Undeniably, there are insight and inattention gags in *The Gold Rush*. However, these gags do not seem quite as numerous or as important in *The Gold Rush* as they are in *The General*. These gags also convey a different significance in *The Gold Rush* than they do in *The General*. Embedded in a different context, they take on another coloration in *The Gold Rush*, where, instead of insight/inattention gags, sadistic gags and mime gags seem more numerous and more central. The brutality serves to constantly underline the fact that Chaplin narratives transpire on the margins of civil society. The mime gags perform a somewhat different function.

The Chaplin character has the capacity, through gesture, to transform any object into a range of other objects. He has a supremely metaphoric imagination.[5] He transforms the wick of a lamp into a boiled egg by substituting the behavior appropriate to a boiled egg to a piece of wick: he salts and swallows the thick, white wick in the manner in which one eats a hard-boiled egg. Likewise, Chaplin condenses or superimposes various eating habits on an old shoe, suggesting a vision of the old shoe as highly specific types of food. When Big Jim bites into the boot, the boot is just a boot. When the Tramp tastes the boot, his carefully mimed interaction with parts of the shoe evoke highly variegated and distinct images of the boot as part turkey and part spaghetti.

Chaplin's miming ability even comes into play in the big chicken gag, although the identification between the Tramp and a rooster, here, is primarily

achieved through literal superimposition. The situation is as follows: Big Jim is famished; all of a sudden, he sees the Tramp as a huge rooster. Big Jim's hallucination is communicated to the audience through the literal superimposition of Chaplin in a rooster costume over the image of Chaplin in the Tramp outfit. The imagery intermittently shifts between the Tramp as chicken and the Tramp as Tramp. But miming becomes important in this scene during the stretches when the Tramp appears as the Tramp. For at these moments, Chaplin shapes the Tramp's gestures in ways evocative of the movement of roosters. He abruptly shrugs his shoulders, evoking the jerk of a wing; he shakes his head, suggesting a neck craning. As he walks, he pauses on each foot, alluding to the barnyard strut of a rooster. At one point, when Big Jim hands the Tramp the gun, the Tramp buries it. As the Tramp walks away from the spot where the gun lies, he suddenly kicks some snow behind him onto the place where the gun is. Immediately, a comparison of the way chickens scratch dirt comes to mind. Here, Chaplin, the mime, directly addresses the audience, carefully setting out the visual basis for Big Jim's fantasy through the gestures of a character who, at moments, is a perfect pantomime of a rooster. One almost feels that Chaplin, the director, might have forgone the use of superimposition in this sequence, relying wholly on mime to communicate Big Jim's hallucination.

The consummate visual imagination of Chaplin, the director, extends to the Tramp. The Oceana Roll dance marks the Tramp as a man who sees things differently from others. He sees from the vantage point of a highly metaphoric visual imagination that can divorce objects from their utilitarian functions and project them onto a plane of pure aesthetic playfulness. The Tramp is a sort of Romantic artist, seeing the world differently from the rest of society. This identification of the Tramp with the capacity for highly individual thought operates decisively within the context of Chaplin's concern with pathos, because it seems that it is exactly because the Tramp thinks differently that he can be an apt object of pathos. A connection seems to be suggested between the unique, original, and highly individual consciousness of the Tramp and his alienation. The Tramp seems an outcast partly because he thinks differently. Society closes itself off from the inventive consciousness. If one views Chaplin's treatment of objects in the context of the opposition between the exile and the community, then the type of insight/inattention gags that we examined earlier in the Tramp's dance with Georgia take on a new light. The Tramp's use of the cane to hold up his pants is important because the Tramp puts the cane to a use society never imagined for it. The Tramp's disastrous use of the rope, on the other hand, illustrates the

Tramp's inability to use objects in the way society typically uses them. As Bazin remarked, the Tramp excels when he uses objects differently by inventing new uses for them; but when the Tramp attempts to use a device as others do, the result is a catastrophe.[6] The Tramp's success and failure with objects is a measure of the character's alienation from society. The use of insight and inattention gag formats does not evoke a theme of adaptation to the physical environment, but rather, in the highly specific context of *The Gold Rush*, they function within a system of relations wherein the gags are further vehicles of the theme of alienation.

One must be extremely careful not to suppose that comic formats have invariant themes that remain constant from one film to the next. The specific context of a format greatly colors its significance. For instance, there are equivocal situation gags in *The Gold Rush*, but they do not necessarily always connote a theme of stupidity. The Tramp believes that he has knocked out Jack when the rest of the characters and the audience know that an accidentally dislodged clock really kayoed the bully. The gag, here, does not connote stupidity; rather, it connotes yet another way in which the consciousness of the character of the Tramp is distinct from that of the rest of the community. His prideful response to the ambiguous situation, his unquestioning assumption that he immobilized Jack, marks the dignity and esteem with which the Tramp regards himself versus the contempt of the onlookers. The gag gets a laugh partially because of the way in which it reveals the nerve the character has in thinking about himself. His faith in his own possibilities is pitted against society's complete dismissal. In this way the gag accrues a surcharge of humor for the way it highly, illustratively, and elegantly reveals the Tramp's opinion of himself, an opinion, moreover, that is more appreciated, more courageous, and more admirable because it is at odds with everyone else's.

The themes of the alienated individual, the alienated consciousness, the isolated imagination, and, indeed, the artist pervade every dimension of cinematic, comic, and narrative organization in *The Gold Rush*. Whereas the Keaton character meditates on means rather than ends, the Tramp emotes more about ends, such as Georgia ensconced in a polite, bourgeois setting. This concentration on marriage and on symbolic integration into society provides an overarching unity to the shooting, editing, acting, and joking throughout the film. In *The Gold Rush*, the Tramp's quest is successful, though the imagery of alienation is quite extreme. The effect of this is nine reels of unrelenting pathos. *The General* is virtually bereft of this emotion, substituting physical intelligibility as the primary theme for the audience's attention. As a result, the techniques and iconography of the two films are very different. Even when

a format such as an insight gag or an equivocal situation gag appears common to both *The Gold Rush* and *The General*, closer examination shows that the structures have very different significances and functions due to the very different projects of which they are part. *The General* presents an image of *homo faber* in relation to the physical environment. Every level of cinematic organization enhances this effect; *The Gold Rush* presents an image of the unique individual and society. Chaplin's cinematic and comic techniques seem consistently manipulated to threaten the utter irreconcilability of society and its exiles. His major aesthetic choices in *The Gold Rush* revolve around finding the best methods for wringing pathos out of his materials; Keaton's aesthetic problems in *The General* demand solutions to the question of what techniques would most lucidly represent the crucial features of the physical processes that the film depicts. An attempt to extend the kind of analysis that we offered for *The General* to *The Gold Rush* would be foolhardy since such an attempt would miss everything that is central in *The Gold Rush*.[7]

The Freshman

Turning to *The Freshman* (Harold Lloyd, 1925), we find much less reliance on the Bazinian long take in Lloyd than in Keaton's use of the long-shot in *The General* or in Chaplin's use of the medium-shot in *The Gold Rush*. Some commentators feel that by *Grandma's Boy*, Lloyd surpassed Chaplin in the use of the cinematic medium.[8] By superior use of the medium, what is actually meant, I think, is a sense that Lloyd relies more heavily on editing to depict comic events than does Chaplin.[9] This tendency is especially evident in *The Freshman*.

The first gag of *The Freshman* is achieved purely through editing. One group of shots shows Harold in his room practicing various college cheers; the other set of shots shows Harold's father adjusting his wireless radio. At first, Harold's wild shouts, represented by titles, lead the father to comment, through intertitles, that he is receiving static. Then, when one of Harold's cheers involves the phrase "chop-suey," Harold's father announces that he has succeeded in reaching China with his set. This gag is created entirely through editing.

Likewise, several of the gags that depict Harold's arrival at the Tate train station are extremely reliant upon editing. Harold is alone at the station; he is trailing along behind a group of students who are adulating the campus idol, Chet Trask. There is a medium-shot of a student in a suit, standing on a train platform. The student waves and shouts offscreen. Then, there is a

medium-shot of Harold, following along behind the Trask entourage; Harold turns, presumably responding to the other student's shout. Lloyd cuts back to the first shot; again the student on the train beckons and shouts. Then, Lloyd returns to the shot of Harold. Harold lifts his hand in response, at first slowly, and then excitedly. Harold runs toward the camera, loaded down with luggage. At the same time, we note that several students who are behind Harold in the shot have also turned and responded to the first student's wave. We suspect that actually they, and not Harold, are the objects of the first student's addresses. Finally, Lloyd sets up a shot in which Harold and the waving student are in the same frame. Harold runs up to the student on the train and starts his jig – a dance he has rehearsed to introduce himself. However, he doesn't even get halfway through the jig before the crowd of students, previously behind him, rushes into the frame and pushes him out of the way in order to welcome the student on the train.

The very next gag is also built through editing. Harold has been pushed aside by the group of students. A tight shot follows showing a man at the train window lighting his pipe. He strikes a match along the edge of the window, and then drops the match out of the frame. Next there is an extreme close-shot of the match landing on a white, woolen background. The ensuing medium-shot identifies that white, woolen background as Harold's sweater. Lloyd cuts back to the shot of the match, revealing that the sweater is starting to burn. Back to the medium-shot – the man with the pipe looks down and sees that his carelessly dropped match is igniting Harold's sweater. The man bends out of the train window and slaps Harold on the back in order to snuff out the fire. The blow is a hard one and it momentarily knocks Harold off-balance. By the time Harold turns around to see who hit him, the man with the pipe has recomposed himself and sits reading his paper. A man previously identified as the Dean of Tate is standing behind Harold. His back is turned toward Harold and he is talking to a distinguished-looking group. To Harold's mind, the Dean is the only possible person who could have slapped him on the back, a slap, by the way, which Harold seems to interpret as a robust greeting. Harold hits the Dean on the back, nearly knocking him over. Lloyd cuts to a close-shot of the Dean's face. He is astounded and enraged. Lloyd cuts to a close-shot of Harold attempting to introduce himself. The ensuing close-shot of the angered Dean bodes badly for Harold's future at Tate.

The use of editing as a major device for setting forth gags continues throughout *The Freshman*. The introductory gag series involved with Harold's speech to the student body is set out employing numerous shots. Prior to the gag

itself, close-shots establish that a mother cat is searching for her kitten which is caught in some of the rigging on the stage. Harold enters backstage and decides to rescue the kitten. Trying to reach the kitten, he gets a pedestal and stands on it. At this point, the gag begins. There is a close-shot of the mother cat meowing. Then there is a medium-shot of a group of upperclassmen, standing by the curtain ropes, presumably watching Harold. It has already been established that there is a tradition of hazing at Tate, so the upperclassmen's observation of Harold's rescue efforts seems ominous. Lloyd cuts back to the shot of Harold reaching for the kitten. Then Lloyd returns to the shot of the upperclassmen. They are giggling, having decided to open the curtains in order to reveal the stage to an auditorium full of students awaiting a lecture from the Dean. Lloyd cuts to the auditorium view of the stage. The curtain opens. Harold wobbles precariously on the pedestal and then topples ungraciously. Even Harold's fall and his subsequent, embarrassed retreat from the stage is recorded in several shots.

The use of editing to build gags is so consistent that when Lloyd does lay out a gag in a long take, it stands out. One instance of Lloyd's use of the long take for sketching a gag occurs during the football practice. Harold attempts to tackle the practice dummy on several occasions. The dummy is held aloft by a rope which is held by the coach or an attendant. On Harold's first try, the attendant, without knowledge of Harold's attempted tackle, drops the rope so that as Harold hits the dummy, he brutally falls, since there is nothing holding the dummy up. On the next try, the attendant, again unaware of Harold's attempts, pulls the dummy upward so that Harold misses it completely. This gag continues with further variation. What is interesting about it is that it is mounted in a single medium long-shot which contains all the elements of the gag. The dummy hangs in the middle of the screen; the attendant with the rope is on screen-right while Harold runs at the dummy from screen-left. Unlike other gags with the tackling dummy, where Lloyd simply cuts from tight shots of the tacklers to tight shots of the dummy, Lloyd includes all the elements of the gag in medium long-shots. We see how the attendant's attention is diverted from the tacklers. We see how the attendant accidentally and inadvertently manipulates the dummy to Harold's discomfort. Unlike most of the rest of the scene, this is one of the few points where all the interacting variables of the event are not synthetically conveyed via the editing of fragmented details.

In the gags that follow the one just cited, Lloyd returns to the use of editing. For instance, there is what might be called a straight-arm gag. The coach is warning his team not to tackle opponents around the neck because they

might be hurt. For instance, an opponent might straight-arm a high-bounding tackler. The coach illustrates this using Harold.

The straight-arm gag has two units. In the first, the coach hits Harold in a medium close-shot. This is followed by a medium-shot of Harold flying backwards and landing on the slanted, double-door of a cellar. Harold staggers back to the coach. The second unit of the gag repeats the first; the coach wants to be sure that his team understands his point; he straight-arms Harold again. However, in the time between these two demonstrations, editing has informed us that, as Harold dragged his way back to the coach, the cellar doors were opened. Consequently, when the coach straight-arms Harold this time, Harold reels back in the second shot, stumbling through the open doors. Ensuing shots depict him crashing down the cellar stairs and landing on the cellar floor.

Clearly, the shooting procedure used in Lloyd's edited gags, such as the straight-arm gag, are quite at variance with what we have observed in Keaton's *The General*. The previously cited dummy gag, which is the exception in *The Freshman*, is the norm in *The General*. An analysis in terms of visible intelligibility can explicate the composition in the dummy gag, but in the other gags Lloyd is quite satisfied with merely enabling the audience to know what is happening, but not to see how it happens.

For instance, in the curtain-raising gag, one feels that Keaton would have included a shot from the side of the action in which the audience could simultaneously see both Harold on the pedestal and the upperclassmen in the wings. Likewise, in the straight-arm gag, one imagines that the Keatonesque method of shooting would involve a shot of Harold in the foreground with the open cellar doors in the background. Indeed, if our model of Keaton composition in *The General* is correct, one would expect the Keaton variation of this gag to have the cellar doors opening while Harold was in the shot so that the audience could see how the doors could open unbeknownst to Harold.

The analysis of Keaton's style in terms of visible intelligibility that we offered for *The General* cannot be mapped onto Lloyd's *The Freshman*. The data resists it. Large numbers of Lloyd's gags are created on the editing table via Griffith-like editing techniques. This is not to say that all the gags in *The Freshman* are edited. A rather large number of them are; indeed the largest consistent bulk of them seems to fall into this category. There are also a few long take shots with highly determinate compositions. Thus, visible intelligibility hardly seems attributable to *The Freshman* as a comprehensive theme. Instead, actions are repeatedly broken down into details and related to master shots in such a way that the audience knows what happens without

seeing exactly how it happens. Lloyd's technique in *The Freshman* most often seems to be a foil to Keaton's in *The General*; Lloyd's paradigmatic concern seems satisfied with merely engendering audience knowledge of events rather than with finding the single, determinately composed shot that will reveal the dynamics of the event. Visible intelligibility rarely provides an apt characterization of Lloyd's use of technique in *The Freshman*.

It is also the case that a concern with geographical intelligibility appears to have scant attraction for Lloyd. For instance, in the straight-arm gag previously described, there is no cross-referencing of details between the shot of Harold being straight-armed and the cellar door. There is no effort made to suggest a continuous geography. None of the environmental cues from the first shot are included in the second shot. For all intents and purposes, the cellar door could be on a different continent from the place where the coach hits Harold. The setting of the action is pure Kuleshov, which is to say, pure creative geography.

Contrast the straight-arm gag with the baseball practice session in *College*, Keaton's follow-up to *The General*. There, as a player rounds the bases, a shot of third base will also include second base visible in the background. Consequently, one has a concrete sense of the continuity of geography from one stage of the action to the next. The contiguity of each zone of action is specified by including geographical markers of earlier phases of action in later phases. This kind of cross-referencing is absent in Lloyd. He is much more like Griffith, tightening his frame in such a way that it selects only major narrative elements for attention, thereby squeezing out geographical cues about the physical relations between the different zones of action. Space in Lloyd seems abstractly rather than concretely represented in his editing. This is in sharp contrast to its representation in Keaton.

After the football practice, Harold returns to his apartment. As he disembarks from the taxi, he bends over to pick up a piece of his gear. From this, Lloyd cuts to a medium-shot of a gardener selecting sticks which he will use, presumably, to prop up a plant. The camera cuts back to Harold; he is still bending. Another insert of the gardener shows him breaking a stick. Back to Harold bending – he stops, feeling his back for damage. Harold believes the breaking sound is his own back! We see an ambulance and then Harold waving to the ambulance in order to get immediate medical attention for his imagined injury. Lloyd depicts this gag entirely through editing. Keaton, as observed in *The General*, would probably have represented this matter with a diagonally composed long-shot with Harold in the foreground and the gardener in the background. Perhaps he might also have reversed the field here,

presenting a shot with Harold in the background from the gardener's vantage point. These techniques would have enhanced the visible and geographical intelligibility of the gag. Lloyd, however, is apparently not interested in these effects, seeking only to give the audience the basic information necessary for the gag to work. This tendency to rely on editing for the purpose of simply instilling knowledge that events happen is the major, consistent approach throughout *The Freshman*. It implies a use of technique radically different from the one we find in *The General*.

The values celebrated through the character in *The Freshman* are also at variance with what one finds celebrated through Johnnie Gray. Like Lloyd's style, his character is virtually a studied contrast to Keaton's. For while Keaton's engineer is part of a proportionately diminishing class of skilled manual laborers, Lloyd's character is more of a representative of the rising class of white-collar workers. In Preston Sturges's sequel to *The Freshman*, entitled *Mad Wednesday*, Harold Diddlebock becomes a clerk in the Waggleberry firm. But even in *The Freshman*, the yet unhired character evinces a white-collar mentality in that social success – popularity – is the character's central aim. Most of the gags in the film grow out of the character's attempt to become popular, an attempt, moreover, which is undertaken as an explicitly deliberate campaign. Harold is an original subscriber to the "win friends and influence people ethos."

Harold's jig, his speech, joining the football team, the evening party, and his final efforts at winning the football game are each activities consciously initiated to boost his popularity. His ambition is to be the most popular student on campus. White-collar skills are skills in managing people.[10] In *The Freshman*, young Harold Diddlebock tests his skills in influencing people, at first, with disastrous results, but later with marked success. By the end of the film, everyone imitates Harold's silly jig, serving as a measure of his success at influencing others.

The Harold Diddlebock character seems to incarnate many of the clichés of the white-collar ethic. He is involved in selling himself to others in the sense of putting himself over. His ambition is overweening although all he seems to have in his favor is his will to succeed. It is not clear whether he has any abilities, but he does have determination and energy. No test, including acting as a tackling dummy, is too outrageous for Harold. Successively pounded to the ground, he rises again and again congratulating his assailants and urging them to try even rougher tackles the next time around. Doggedly determined, Harold keeps throwing his body on the line, his energy being the only thing that he can trade for a chance at playing on the football team,

the highroad to popularity. Harold's actions virtually embody the beliefs that unstinting effort and a cooperative good nature are the keys to success.

Although the Lloyd character is not the same from film to film,[11] there is a way in which the character's activities very often dramatize, in the Freudian sense of literalization, metaphors of the brash, business culture of the twenties. In *Safety Last*, for instance, Harold's partner Limpy Bill is supposed to climb up the side of the Bolton Building as part of a scheme to attract publicity to the department store Harold works for. Limpy Bill and Harold hope to split $1,000 as a result of this scheme. Unfortunately, the plan miscarries somewhat and Harold rather than Limpy Bill has to climb the building. Throughout the film, Harold has been exaggerating his business success to his girlfriend.

In this context, the $1,000 represents a chance for Harold to at least partially vindicate his boasts. It is a means for Harold to be the success he has claimed to be throughout the film. In terms of dramatization, Harold's literal climb to the top of the Bolton Building represents his "climb to the top" of the business world. Success and money await Harold on the roof of the Bolton Building. This literalizes the figurative "race to the top" that comprises the rest of the film.

In *The Freshman* the business clichés that are dramatized have to do with energy, for example, with the efficacy of "drive" and the need to "keep plugging." Unlike Johnnie Gray in *The General*, Harold is often on the verge of exhaustion. Yet, he continues to wring out one last ounce of energy, mustered in order to throw his wearied body into the breach one more time. Finally, it is that unrelenting energy and drive that grant Harold success. In situations such as his workout as a tackling dummy he seems to literalize the expression, "keep plugging," as he repeatedly staggers to his feet to be knocked down again and again. The narrative connects themes of energy and determination, as exemplified in Lloyd's gestures and movements, with the theme of success, thereby recapitulating in the narrative the connection of energy with success in popular clichés. Harold is always willing to try again; his only enemy is discouragement, though he never surrenders to it no matter how weary his body is. Such themes of physical effort are key in *The Freshman*, whereas Johnnie Gray's bearing never indicates physical effort in *The General*.

Harold Diddlebock's sole virtue, if such it can be called, is ambition. This is the only thing in his favor. Johnnie Gray, on the other hand, has skill at his command. Harold Diddlebock is an extremely pushy sort, constantly striving to promote himself socially. He represents a class more reliant on social expertise than on traditional work skills. Indeed, it seems to me that

one of the most significant recurring subjects of Lloyd's gags, throughout his *oeuvre*, is manipulating people – often by the character attempting to make things appear other than they seem. Humor can erupt with respect to these manipulations either when they are unmasked (Harold is the butt) or when they succeed (other characters are the butt). In either case, the manipulation of appearances is surely an apt theme for this "hero" of the white-collar service sector. Is it stretching this interpretation too far to suggest that there may be a fit between Lloyd's preoccupation with the manipulation of appearances at the level of narrative action and a proclivity toward the use of editing in terms of the presentation of that action? His ultimate satisfaction does not derive from his work, but from measuring up to others' ideas of what constitutes success. If that means being a football hero, that is what Harold will do. His activity is a means to a social end, in contrast to Johnnie Gray's rescue of The General, which is, for Johnnie, an end in itself.

Unlike Johnnie Gray, Harold Diddlebock's activities cannot be analyzed as a compensatory valorization of skilled labor. Harold has no skills; he only has energy. The physical tasks he undertakes succeed because of effort and luck, not skill. Harold literally throws himself into his work. Hardly exemplifying skilled manual labor, he demonstrates the white-collar ethic of ambition with its notion of selling oneself to others as a key to success. Harold Lloyd does not express the values of the older work culture in his imagery; rather he promulgates the newer white-collar mentality.[12] Any attempt to transfer our analysis of *The General* to *The Freshman* would, therefore, have the effect of turning Lloyd's theme on its head. If Johnnie manipulates things, then Harold manipulates appearances – or perhaps, better yet, Harold manipulates people through appearances (which are often of the nature of comic confidence tricks).

The subject of social achievement and influence permeates most of the gags in *The Freshman*. There are few physical task gags in the film; rather, the subject matter of the gags most often concerns mortification or the avoidance of mortification through ingenuity. Often Lloyd employs the equivocal situation format. Very often this involves Harold Diddlebock thinking that the situation is one way when the audience knows otherwise. The cost of this gap in understanding is usually embarrassment for Harold. For instance, Harold believes that the Dean has slapped him on the back when, in fact, it was the man with the pipe. The result of Harold's misunderstanding is extremely mortifying.

At other times, Harold avoids mortification by mastering the equivocal situation. Many of the gags at the dance are examples of this. On several

occasions, by ingenious devices he is able to disguise the fact that his tuxedo is falling apart. When, the arm of his jacket is torn off, he stands in front of a curtain and thrusts his arm behind so his tailor can mend the torn sleeve. When a friend approaches, Harold pushes the tailor's jacketed arm out from behind the curtain so that two sleeved arms appear, concealing the fact that he has lost one of his sleeves, and thereby avoiding embarrassment.

Harold often evinces ingenuity in *The Freshman* as he also does in *Safety Last*. However, this ingenuity is not an exemplification of concrete intelligence. It does not range over physical tasks and physical processes, but over social interactions. Very often it involves trickery with someone being deceived. In this regard, it is the structural opposite to the gags in *The Freshman* in which Harold is victimized by upperclassmen. This structural opposition of fool or be fooled in the equivocal situation gags in *The Freshman* does not embody a theme of adaptability. Instead, it serves to emphasize a theme of the importance of appearance in social situations. The appearance rather than the reality of these equivocal situations is what counts in terms of Harold's social standing. Social success is tied to mastering appearances, and mortification often results from appearing contrary to one's intentions.

Unlike Keaton in *The General*, Lloyd's gags in *The Freshman* devote attention to the character in relation to a social rather than a physical environment. This change of focus results in Lloyd's equivocal situation gags expressing themes of the importance of appearances and of social mortification rather than expressing themes of adaptability. As with the cinematic style and characterization in *The Freshman*, we see that Lloyd's interpretation of the equivocal situation gag varies from Keaton's approach in *The General*. Consonant with the theme of social influence and achievement, Lloyd makes social manipulation and mortification his subject. Given this difference in the interpretation of equivocal situation gags, as well as the differences in cinematic style and characterization that we have already cited, it seems rather impossible to imagine extending the explanatory model we offered for Keaton's *The General* to Lloyd's *The Freshman*.

Long Pants

In our contrastive analysis, turning from *The Freshman* to *Long Pants* demands shifting gears. Keaton and Chaplin directed their films. Lloyd was an extremely active participant in the direction of his films.[13] But, Langdon was not the director of *Long Pants*; Frank Capra was. As a result, *Long Pants* is by

no means the aesthetic and creative unity that we have encountered in the other films studied so far. In fact, the film seems divided down the middle, between the flashy narrative editing, such as the exciting opening, which is Capra's contribution, and the long-take, frontal medium-shots that are virtually the only means capable of conveying Langdon's contribution, that is, his highly studied pantomime.

Speaking to Theodore Dreiser, Mack Sennett said, "Langdon knows less about stories and motion picture technique than perhaps any other screen star. If he isn't a big success, on the screen, it will not be because he isn't funny, but because he doesn't understand the many sides of picture production. He wants to do a monologue all the time."[14]

Those "monologues," Langdon's perpetual hesitations, must be housed in long takes. In a roundabout way the long-take aspect of *Long Pants* is Langdon's stylistic contribution since the extreme long take was the primary way of mounting Langdon's brilliant miming. What Sennett calls "monologues" are Langdon's specialty – gestures garnered through years of practice in a vaudeville skit called "Johnnie's New Car." The rest of *Long Pants*, the editing, the narrative scaffolding, and even crucial aspects of the persona seem likely to have been the product of Capra and Arthur Ripley. Consequently, in contrasting Langdon with Keaton, the comparison cannot be made along every dimension of creativity as it was in our discussions of Chaplin and Lloyd. Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd can be held responsible for the cinematic *and* comic style of *The General*, *The Gold Rush*, and *The Freshman* respectively. But all we can be absolutely sure that Langdon contributed to *Long Pants* is what Sennett called Langdon's "monologues," which we might basically consider his stage business.

Perhaps, here, the objection might be made that, instead of *Long Pants*, we might consider *Three's a Crowd*, since in that film Langdon did attempt to shoulder the role of complete *auteur*. The problem with using this film is that it is almost a deliberate imitation of Chaplin. As such, it tells us less about the nature of Langdon's comedy and more about Langdon's idea of Chaplin. Langdon's following film, *The Chaser*, also seems a bad bet in that it seems to be the work of a man desperately grasping at straws. Unlike the other three major silent clowns, Harry Langdon seems to have flourished best in films directed by others. He needed others to help him with story construction, gag construction, and even with characterization. With the help of others, in films like *Long Pants*, Langdon's unique talents were able to surface. Those unique talents have to do primarily with Langdon's bearing and with his movement in pantomime, rather than with his cinematic or narrative skill.

Thus, in contrasting Langdon and Keaton, we should focus on movement as the significant dimension of comparison.

When observing Langdon's movement, one is immediately struck by the character's inability to execute movements precisely. It is as if, to a certain extent, the character is not in complete control of his body. For instance, in *Long Pants*, Harry refuses to marry Priscilla. His love is Bebe Blair, the gun moll. Harry decides that the best way to avoid marriage with Priscilla is to shoot her. He brings her out into the woods to accomplish this task. As he reaches for his gun, an old-time Colt .45, he struggles to get it out of his pocket. When he finally succeeds, Priscilla turns toward him. Trying to hide the gun, he keeps trying to slide it into his pocket, but it keeps slipping along the side of his pants. This is the gag; the pantomime signals a personality physically incapable of the degree of precision necessary to fit a gun in his pocket without looking.

Later in the film, Harry pretends to faint to catch the attention of a police officer, who, unbeknownst to Harry, is really a store dummy. Of course, the dummy policeman cannot respond to Harry; instead, a shopkeeper throws a shaker full of water on him. Harry's reaction is quite characteristic; he repeats a set of gestures that can be found in any number of Langdon films. First, he sneezes, then he rubs his nose with his hand.

However, the manner in which he uses his hand here is quite striking. Rather than using his thumb and his index finger so that he can apply pressure exactly where the itch is, Harry uses his whole hand. He rubs his nose by applying the palm of his hand, in a circular motion, to his whole nose. Harry seems incapable of differentiated and refined movements. His movements are evocative of a child who, as yet, does not have full muscular control. The gross movement described above is as precise as Harry can get.

When Harry opens the crate that Bebe is in, his hammer swings in every direction. Harry uses the hammer overhand and underhand as he attempts to break open the crate. He never seems to be able to land his blows in the same place twice. Miraculously, the crate opens when he pulls on the lid; but one wonders how that wild bit of carpentry could have done it. The hammer swings as if it cannot be brought under control, as if each blow were a one-shot affair, not part of a larger, intentional process. One severely doubts whether Harry could bring his hammer to bear on the same point two blows in a row. He has that little muscular control.

Along with an inability to perform precision movements, Harry evinces major coordination problems. Bebe is standing next to a passerby with a gun pressed to his ribs. She orders him to turn over his money and his valuables to Harry, making him an unconscious accomplice to the holdup. He thinks

that the passerby is giving him his money and jewelry. Harry is thanking the man as the loot is handed up, but Harry, apparently, can't talk and collect at the same time. His hands start getting confused. What will go in which pocket? As Bebe and Harry make their getaway, Harry must press the swag against his chest. He can't figure out where to put the money at the rate that it is being turned over.

At the end of the film, Harry makes one of his most famous gestures. Bebe has just beaten another woman, a showgirl. Harry finally sees Bebe for the vicious, gun-toting Momma that she is. The famous Langdon finger juts out in admonishment. He is about to tell Bebe off. What is interesting about this pointing gesture, which often appears in Langdon films, is the way that it seems divorced from the rest of Langdon's body. Unlike most actors, and, indeed, most people speaking in public, Langdon does not integrate his pointing finger with a set of complementary gestures from other parts of the body, such as furrowing the brow and stiffening the shoulder. The finger shoots out, but the rest of the body and the face stand pat. The action has the look of a spasm, not like an intentional signal. It is as if Langdon's body were not yet matured enough to carry off a fully determinate action that simultaneously synchronizes complementary coordinated activities involving more than one set of muscles.

Langdon projects, through mime, the image of a body quite distinct from Johnnie Gray's. Johnnie Gray may be inattentive, but his body is magnificently coordinated. He is capable of highly differentiated, precise, and specific movements. Langdon's activities are replete with extraneous jerks, spasms, starts and stops, twitchings, waverings, and flutterings, whereas Johnnie Gray's actions are more economical. His body is directed efficiently and functionally to the task at hand. This quality of movement is present even in the inattention gags when the task at hand is past. Langdon's body is much more problematic. It seems an impossible instrument of any directed, precise, coordinated activity.

Keaton works a great deal with things. He often encounters disaster when he attempts to work with things. But Langdon, in *Long Pants*, confronts problems even before interacting with things. His own body seems unprepared to deal with objects; it is too uncoordinated and imprecise. Johnnie Gray's movement differed from Harold Diddlebock's insofar as Harold's movement evinced effort, which served as the embodiment of the theme of striving in *The Freshman*. In *Long Pants*, Harry's movement is quite distinct from Johnnie's since it suggests an underdeveloped body, incapable of normally controlled adult movements.

Harry matches his underdeveloped body with an underdeveloped brain. Langdon's pantomime suggests the slowest thinker in film history. For instance, in *Long Pants*, Harry is sitting under a crate, munching on a roll. A woman walks next to the crate. Not knowing that Harry is there, she hoists her dress and begins to adjust her garter. Harry sits there a full five seconds, it seems, before realizing a woman's naked thigh is right in front of his nose. He blinks his eyes in utter disbelief, keeping the lids tightly shut, in typical Langdon style, for several seconds, before reacting. Langdon is a comic whose pacing is incredibly slow. His pantomime can always include yet another detail. Yet the slowness and the details are always aimed at the same end, which is to communicate the monumental backwardness of the character. The adagio blink of disbelief occurs throughout *Long Pants*. It occurs when Harry unwittingly attempts to shoot Priscilla with a stake rather than a gun. Yet, in all its appearances, the blink remains a constant icon of Harry's slowness of thought.

Harry's mentality is also inflexible, but inflexible in a way that far outstrips Johnnie Gray at his worst. If Harry has any way of dealing with a situation, he generally has only one way. His repertoire of responses is always spectacularly limited. If his first response to a problem aborts, his only recourse for coping with the situation is to repeat his first response, even if it has already been disastrous. During his attempted assassination of Priscilla, Harry's top hat gets banged over his eyes. He can't see at all. Then, his foot is caught in a trap which is chained to a tree. When trying to pull his foot free, the tree, a young supple poplar, swings down and clouts Harry on the head. Harry repeats this dubious strategy for freeing his foot five times with the exact same repercussions. The character is almost literally helpless, totally bereft of imagination. There is no part of the Langdon character that corresponds to Johnnie Gray's gift for insight.

Another key component of Langdon's pantomime is his capacity for indecision, vacillation, and hesitancy. After Bebe Blair's touring car has pulled away from the front of Harry's house, Harry runs screen-right and screen-left, wavering as to which direction to follow in order to find his city siren. Here, we have a picture of the mind in motion, first drawn to this possibility and then to that. The thing about Langdon, of course, is that he just can't decide upon a course of action. He resembles the proverbial ass that dies of hunger midway between two haystacks. Langdon is a mime of the mind, albeit of a painfully slow and confused mind. He cannot decide which way is best to follow Bebe. This hesitancy and indecision are incarnated through Langdon's starts and stops in opposite directions. This sequence is somewhat reminiscent

of the extended vacillation in the beginning of *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*, in which Langdon walks back and forth between Joan Crawford and a billboard portrait of her fourteen times before getting the relationship between the two straight.

Of the relationship of Langdon's mind to his movements, James Agee wrote:

> Twitchings of his face were signals of tiny discomfits too slowly registered by a tinier brain; quick squirty little smiles showed his almost prehuman pleasures, his incurably premature trustfulness. He was a virtuoso of hesitations and of delicately indecisive motions.[15]

The appearance of the terms "prehuman" and "premature" are quite interesting in this context. These are concepts which supply unity to Langdon's mime of the underdeveloped body and the underdeveloped mind. Langdon seems to mine the area of prehuman and premature existence for the vocabulary of forms that his pantomime employs. That is, a child at its earlier stages might be called a prehuman and premature creature. Harry Langdon is pantomiming the behavior of a child, and his humor is based on the revelation of the child in the man, that is, of the child's gestures in the man's body. Walter Kerr writes:

> Look at him. His motor responses and to some degree his cerebral responses are approximately those of a five-year-old. Call him and he doesn't know whether to come or not. Children are uncertain about how to respond properly; they have difficulty in reading the social message that is being imparted. When a parent beckons, it may be for a hug or it may be for a spanking, Which? The five-year-old hesitates, drawn to the parent, fearful of the parent's power. A child can stand paralyzed between choices.[16]

One need not agree with Kerr in placing Harry at exactly the level of a 5-year-old. Often, Harry's motor responses seem to belong to an even more infantile stage of development. For instance, often when Harry sits down, the operation is closer to falling down, just as it is for a child first learning to walk. Harry's underdeveloped, childlike gestures suggest more a near infant than a 5-year-old.

Capra and Ripley understood that it was the image of a child that Langdon evoked. In *Long Pants*, the plot explicitly makes maturation its subject. Harry has been kept in knickers almost until he is ready to marry in order to keep him out of trouble. The result of this enforced childhood, one surmises, is the incredible imagery of infantilism that runs through the

film. When Harry goes to shoot Priscilla, he is stunned by a sign that says "No Shooting." He pulls away twice in terror of the sign. He seems to think that the sign's presence is some indication that the world knows of his plans. Harry's movements suggest the childhood belief that whatever one is thinking is transparent to the entire world.

Another instance of childlike imagery occurs when Bebe and the showgirl argue. Harry has no idea of what the discussion is about. His eyes are literally wide-open. But as the argument becomes more intense, Harry's jaw incongruously clenches. He does not understand what is going on, but his body automatically takes on the emotions of the situation. He registers tension and anger without being in either state. Like a child, he merely apes what he sees.

In the scene in which Harry and his father argue about his marriage to Priscilla, Harry again acts out childlike movements. He stands with his back to his father wildly flailing his right arm in a downward gesture of refusal. The speed and carelessness of the gesture suggest a child in a tantrum.

In some films, like *His First Flame* and *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*, Langdon literally appears as a baby. In films like *The Chaser* and *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*, there are anal incontinence gags that seem to refer directly to childhood traumas. In some films, Langdon's outfit, as well, accentuates the baby-like effect. The shoulders of his jacket are tight and his hat is extremely large, rendering the proportion between a big head and small shoulders much more like a child's than a man's. Furthermore, Langdon's baggy pants seem packed as though they have diapers underneath.

In *Long Pants*, the narrative identifies Harry as a somewhat backward adolescent; yet the gestures he employs are from a much earlier developmental stage. His body flutters in a welter of confusions and vacillations. He is supremely ignorant of the nature of social situations and is physically, as well as mentally, incapable of performing almost every action he undertakes.

Given the image of a child that Langdon's pantomime establishes, Capra and Ripley had to be careful about types of gags they used. Their emphasis was on helplessness, which coincided with the theme of the underdeveloped body in Langdon's mime. Capra said, "If there was a rule for writing Langdon material it was this: his only ally was God. Langdon might be saved by the brick falling on the cop, but it was *verboten* that he in any way motivate the brick's fall."[17] Gags tended to play up Langdon as an innocent.

Very often fortunate things merely coincide with his wishes. For instance, the wind storm in *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* turns when Harry throws rocks at

it and not because Harry throws rocks at it. Likewise in *Long Pants*, Bebe has already broken out of jail; Harry has not rescued her.

In terms of the imagery of helplessness, Langdon is distinct from Keaton, especially Keaton as Johnnie Gray in *The General*. The Keaton character is an agent: he is causally efficacious. The Langdon character is an infant: he is often an inadvertent cog in a causal chain.

In *Long Pants*, notice how extraneous Harry is to the robberies. Johnnie Gray, for better or for worse, is always a participant in the events in which he is involved. He has bouts of inattention, but they do not reach the level of pervasive incomprehension that grips the Langdon character. Again, Johnnie Gray is an agent; Harry is a baby. Harry seems far too young, intellectually and physically, for the burdens of agency. His body, let alone his actions, seem beyond his control. In Langdon films, like *Long Pants*, things happen to and around Harry. This is a persistent theme of the gags. In *The General*, we find a character that makes things happen and we find gags about how he makes things happen. Such agency is beyond the developmental capabilities of baby Harry.

Langdon's main contribution to a film like *Long Pants* seems to be of the nature of comic business. This business involves pantomime of an underdeveloped mind in an underdeveloped body. Langdon carefully mimics the gestures of young children and infants. His movements are full of twitches and jerks, and his body seems like that of a child, which is not completely under control. Langdon's pantomime is best developed in long-take medium-shots in which Langdon can elaborate, with innumerable, well-observed details, the habits of the age group he evokes. Both in terms of this pantomime business and in terms of the proscenium-like, long-take medium-shot through which this pantomime is mounted, Langdon differs from Keaton. Keaton characters, by the end of the films at least, are physically masterful. In some films, like *The Navigator*, they are initially lazy, but they are not physically immature. Johnnie Gray is sometimes inept, but not infantile. The whole point of Keaton's humor would be lost if Johnnie Gray did not have the capacity for agency. Keaton's composition is also at odds with the highly theatrical medium-shot Langdon employs. This shot in Langdon is purely functional. It is the easiest means for representing Langdon's intricate, slow-paced pantomime. Unlike Chaplin and Keaton, apart from the use of frontality and centrality, there are almost no other compositional structures in evidence in the medium-shots in *Long Pants*. Thus, neither the stylistic nor thematic analyses we offered of *The General* can be exported to Langdon.

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to show that my previous analysis of *The General* was specific to that film. It is at least specific to the extent that it does not explicate *The General* in terms of generic themes and styles that apply to all silent comedy. I have attempted to exhibit this specificity by considering films by Chaplin, Lloyd, and Langdon, Keaton's major competitors in feature film production of comedies in the twenties. I have analyzed the work of Chaplin, Lloyd, and Langdon to show that these works have their own special emphases, emphases that often diverge sharply from what we find in *The General*. Given these divergences, it would be folly to attempt to map our analysis of *The General* onto Chaplin, Lloyd, and Langdon. Each of the kings of silent comedy had his own domain, as I hope I have suggested in this chapter. Film criticism should respect the boundaries between these different domains.

NOTES

1 For an example of this line of criticism, see Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1972).
2 For an example of this type of criticism, see Stuart Kaminski, *American Film Genres* (n.p.: Pflaum Publishing, 1974).
3 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 39.
4 Ibid., pp. 43–4.
5 Roman Jakobson, *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 70.
6 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, tr. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), vol. I, pp. 145–6.
7 It may be felt that, even if *The Gold Rush* is dissimilar to The *General*, *Modern Times* is not. In *Modern Times* Chaplin deals with the subject matter of machinery. However, it seems to me that the similarities between *Modern Times* and *The General* end here. In *Modern Times*, Chaplin seems to be committed to depicting modern machinery as unintelligible. For instance, the function and structure of the machine Chaplin works on are absolutely opaque. It is a pile of gears and cogs with no apparent purpose. Its fantastic aspect is further emphasized by the gag in which Chaplin gets caught in its mechanism, and passes through its network of gears. Here, Chaplin represents the machine as absurd. Chaplin also represents work on the assembly line as unintelligible, i.e., as incalculable in terms of an overarching process. Chaplin in *Modern Times* pursues his

quasi-Marxist derived notions of work and machinery by means of extreme caricature. His approach, unlike Keaton's in *The General*, is to represent the work-processes and machine-processes of the film as quite unintelligible.

8 For example see Donald W. McCaffrey, *4 Great Comedians* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1968), p. 72.

9 For instance on p. 76 McCaffrey gives an example of Lloyd's use of "the full force of the medium," which boils down to an intensive use of editing.

10 C. W. Mills, *White Collar* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 182.

11 Harold Lloyd, *An American Comedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), p. 130.

12 The word "promulgates" is used here because Lloyd uncritically presents the white-collar values we have discussed. He is not a satirist; he is not representing white-collar values in order to question them. For instance, his disappointments in *The Freshman* derive from his lack of popularity. He never questions the value of popularity, even when the whims of fashion oppress him. Finally, he triumphs not by being self-reliant, but by becoming a football hero, the very terms of success society offered him. Lloyd does not reject the vapid demands that society places on Harold; he embraces and fulfills them. Hence, it seems probable that since Lloyd's aim is not satirical, it is supportive insofar as one or the other of these motives seems the likeliest motive for representing a set of values.

13 Lloyd, p. 131.

14 Quoted in George C. Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 189.

15 James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 450.

16 Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), p. 267.

17 Agee, p. 451.

Summary

This book focused primarily on an in-depth analysis of Buster Keaton's 1926 film *The General*. We began by examining the iconography of the film, isolating the gags and physical feats of dexterity as the center of audience interest. We argued that the subject of the film is concrete intelligence, thematically characterized as adaptability. Keaton explores this theme by developing a polar system of gags and physical feats involving inattention and automatism, on the one hand, and insight, on the other. In this way, Keaton systematically portrays intelligence with regard to physical things contrastively – both in terms of the possession of concrete intelligence and in terms of the lack of it. The latter elements in Keaton's comic practice can be explicated in light of Bergson's theory of comedy; the insight gags and feats of physical *savoir faire* are better dealt with in the framework of the Gestalt theory of comedy.

The insight gags and feats exemplify concrete intelligence with respect to physical processes; they are heights of adaptability. The automatism/inattention gags also evoke the theme of concrete intelligence because they indicate states of mind and body that are systematically contrary to concrete intelligence characterized as adaptability: they represent heights of unresponsiveness to the environment. With reference to adaptability, insight and dexterity stand to automatism and inattention as abundance stands to privation. Through emphasis on the positive and negative poles of concrete intelligence, Keaton explores different qualities of mindful bodily interaction with the material environment.

Keaton's characterization of concrete adaptability corresponds to the evolutionary idiom of his day which, since the 1870s, had applied metaphors derived from the theory of natural selection to numerous aspects of life. In this vein,

the popular, pragmatic identification of intelligence with adaptability finds its visual correlative in Keaton's concrete, comic engagement with the physical world around him.

The General is fairly dominated by the imagery of manual work, bodily coping, and the performance of physical tasks and concrete operations. This work imagery, moreover, appears relevant to the culture within which the film was produced. For *The General* seems to valorize the kind of concrete intelligence and creative manipulation of tools and raw materials associated with the more craftsman-like manual labor that preceded the rise of the white-collar, assembly-line, service/information economy of the twentieth century. The sort of skilled labor and the concrete intelligence it presupposed on a daily basis that Keaton glorifies in *The General* really harks back to the period of Keaton's youth and before. In this way, *The General* may be said to gratify its audiences through compensation by providing them with a taste of something they lack or are beginning to experience in a diminished way in their lives.

By the 1920s, due to the decrease in the farm population, the rise of white-collar work, and the Taylorization of factory work, there was a proportionate decline in the opportunities the average working person had for exercising and developing skills in relation to the manipulation of things. This is not to say that skilled manual labor disappeared, but rather that the experience of skilled, intelligent interaction with the material environment became less and less common, particularly, one hypothesizes, with the largely urban audiences of the film. In this social and historical setting, Keaton's emphasis on concrete intelligence fills a gap; it affords a reminiscence and an artistic celebration of positive human experiences that were once everyday affairs for the many, but which, by the twenties, were becoming less and less commonplace.

The General casts intelligent physical labor in a heroic mold. Undoubtedly, there is nostalgia in this – a conjecture supported by the efforts Keaton lavished on producing an aura of historical verisimilitude throughout his images. But, along with nostalgia, a degree of compensatory gratification is also proffered by making accessible to one's imaginative response the work imagery experiences which no longer comprise part of the audience's practical lives. This compensatory component of *The General* was already starting to be significant in the twenties when the economy was shifting more and more away from craftsman-like manual labor. And, of course, it goes without saying that this effect becomes more heightened as time goes on and the proportionate decline in the employment of skilled manual labor becomes ever more dramatically pronounced than it was in the twenties. One might

even speculate that the increasing popularity of *The General* since its initial appearance owes a great deal to the fact that the kind of skilled, intelligent interaction with things that the film explores so joyously is becoming even rarer as more and more of us come to live by computer alone. Thus, over time, *The General* has become a greater and more vivid source of compensation for an increasingly bypassed avenue of human potential.

The cinematic style of *The General* is quite distinctive. Much of Keaton's composition in the film is based on a highly determinate use of the long shot, involving such strategies as marked, biplanar, foreground/background articulation, often elaborated along a diagonal, and extremely directive high and low camera angulation. With respect to editing, Keaton employs elegant long-shot field reversals, editing in-the-round, and always careful causal editing, that is, editing that is consistently attentive to laying out causal processes, especially physical ones, perspicuously. It is the argument of this book, furthermore, that the cinematic style of *The General* is also a means for developing the theme of concrete intelligence that we found advanced in the iconography of Keaton's gags and feats.

Through the strategies just enumerated, Keaton creates an image of a physical environment that is remarkably intelligible to the audience. The aforesaid devices facilitate the audience's understanding of the physical and mechanical processes the film depicts. They make the material world of the film visibly intelligible. Keaton's cinematic style invites and enables spectators to *see how* the physical events portrayed in the film happen *qua* physical processes. This "seeing how" modality of audience attention, whose onscreen correlate is the visible intelligibility of physical processes, moreover, contrasts with other types of cinematic attention. Whereas most directors are satisfied with showing audiences that such-and-such occurs in a way that enables us to know *that* it happened, Keaton wants us to see and to know *how* physical events evolve step by step, force by interacting force.

Because the visual style of the film prompts the audience to use its own faculties of concrete judgment and intelligence in its reception of Keaton's arrestingly intelligible imagery, we have argued that there is a parallel between the kind of attention the audience is induced to mobilize and the variety of concrete intelligence, exemplified in the gags by Johnnie Gray's modes of attention. Visible intelligibility with regard to physical processes at the level of cinematic style echoes or mirrors the iconographic theme of concrete intelligence. At the diegetic level, the theme that predominates is the comprehension of physical processes by characters. Stylistically, the theme of visual intelligibility promotes the comprehension of physical processes as

the epicenter of audience attention. Visible intelligibility thus functions as the stylistic correlate to the theme of concrete intelligence; it translates, at the level of the audience's attention, the characters' preoccupation with the understanding and awareness of physical processes.

Through both the subject matter of intelligent interaction with things and the formal elaboration of that subject matter by devices that enhance visible intelligibility, Keaton makes the understanding of physical processes the preeminent theme of *The General*. To the degree that the understanding of physical processes, at the level of manual skills, is not part of everyday experience, *The General* can provide a high degree of compensatory gratification, while it simultaneously commemorates a time when skilled, mindful interaction with the physical environment was a more generic workday experience.

The convergence between the iconographic preoccupation with concrete intelligence and the stylistic concern with the visible intelligibility of physical processes makes *The General* a strikingly unified film. These intersecting interests motivate Keaton's imagination along every dimension of artistic invention in the film, including his design of gags, stunts, shots, and cuts. Moreover, Keaton's commitment to the pellucid depiction of physical states engages and exercises in the viewing experience the audience's faculties of concrete intelligence and physical judgment in a way that makes the prospect of mindfully engaging the physical world come alive.

The strengths of this analysis include that it is highly specific. The analyses of films by Keaton's comedic peers – Chaplin, Lloyd, and Langdon – indicate that the hypotheses we have advanced to account for *The General* cannot be extended to works by the other major silent clowns. In other words, we have not spent our energies dwelling on matters that were more or less common coin across all silent comedies.

Of course, many of the aspects of *The General* that we have underscored also appear in other works by Keaton. This is to be expected in a work so central to an artist's *oeuvre*. This does not compromise the specificity of our analysis. At the same time that similarities between *The General* and other works by Keaton have been noted, it has also been argued that *The General* is Keaton's most thoroughly and clearly realized paean to skilled manual labor and the understanding of the physical processes that underlie such labor.

Regarding criteria such as comprehensiveness and simplicity, it may be observed that the hypotheses proposed in this book are able to integrate or colligate a surprisingly large number of gags, feats, shots, and cuts into an extremely economical system of relationships with reference to the theme

of concrete intelligence. In fact, the comprehensiveness of the present model could have been shown to be even more commodious, embracing further gags, feats, shots, and cuts than described herein. Instead of striving for utter exhaustiveness, the principle followed was to employ only as many examples of the basic iconography and formal devices as seemed necessary to: (1) clarify their structures, and (2) substantiate their statistical pertinence.

Our approach renders *The General* extremely unified and coherent internally. Elements as disparate as gags, feats, shots, and cuts have been characterized purposively in a way that makes their systematic participation in an overarching project apparent. Our hypotheses are also contextually sensitive, explaining how *The General* fits coherently in its historical circumstances – how it is intelligible within the specific social and economic situation of its origins. The analysis connects what we emphasize as deep themes of the film to the transitional work culture and evolutionary idiom of the period of its production. Though this account of *The General* does not make the film any funnier, it does, I hope, further advance the claim that *The General* is a masterpiece and Keaton a master filmmaker.

Appendix: Narration in Keaton's *The General*

When I began writing about Keaton's *The General*, I deliberately bracketed any sustained discussion of the narrative from the text. I did so for several reasons. First, and probably least defensibly, I myopically identified narrative analysis as essentially literary and, therefore, as not an adequate way to approach cinema. Indeed, it seemed to me at the time that almost all film analysis was of this sort and that it ill served cinema.

Much of the analysis I had in mind was what I now call "allegorical" in the introduction to this book and called "dramatic" in the first chapter. The allegorical interpretation of the plot struck me as problematic because:

1) It could be derived from a superficial paraphrase with little or no attention to how the film looked.

2) The sorts of allegories that commentators discovered often seemed overly generic; they did not hone in on what was specific about the artist or film in question. Saying that Keaton's work was about "Man versus Nature" or the "Transcendent Power of Love to Clear Any and All Obstacles" did not capture what is special about Keaton or *The General*. The themes are broad enough to apply to many other directors and films. The fit is just too loose and too facile.

3) An allegorical interpretation of *The General* risked placing emphasis in the wrong place. The plot does not appear to be the main vehicle for Keaton's vision. Rather it functions as a serviceable armature for presenting the gags and physical feats of the film – the things that Keaton ultimately cares most about. That is where the action is in both senses of that term. This problem, moreover, is connected, most likely, to the previous one – the allegorical themes that one might distill from *The General* are highly generic because in some ways the plot structure is fairly generic. After all, most "boys"

in film have to overcome daunting obstacles in order to win back the "girl." The transcendent power of love is more like one of the presiding myths of the commercial cinema rather than the distinctive theme of any artist or film in particular. Does Keaton have any more claim to it than Lloyd or Langdon?

For these reasons, I eschewed any in-depth narrative analysis in the original manuscript. However, with hindsight I see that my avoidance of narrative was motivated by my erroneous confusion of narrative analysis *tout court* with the allegorical interpretation of the plot. Even if that is an essentially literary enterprise, and I confess that I am no longer so certain that it is, that does not preclude other varieties of narrative investigation.

Looking at my reservations concerning narrative, I realize that they all reduce down to my suspicion of allegorical plot interpretation. But there are more ways of appreciating the importance of the plot construction in *The General* than allegorizing it. In this brief appendix, I would like to explore two of them.

First, I will examine the *narrative* structure of the plot – its "inner logic," if you will. One motive for this is a question viewers often raise about the film, namely, why the final battle scene? I have had several students who have argued that it is tacked on. An analysis of the narrative structure of the film, I think, will show that this criticism is unwarranted. The narrative is as tightly and as elegantly constructed as any of Keaton's gags. In fact, I will propose that it is an exemplary instance of a type of narration that I call *erotetic*.

After elucidating the narrative structure of the film, I will try to demonstrate why the plot of *The General* is a comic plot and how it enhances our amusement. One limitation of the allegorical approach, not mentioned thus far, is that it fails to explain why the narrative structure of *The General* contributes to its comic effect. Consequently, after dissecting the narrative structure of the film, I will go on to show why that structure is also capable of supporting a comic structure; indeed the kind of narrative structure it possesses gives rise quite naturally to the kind of comic structure it evolves. Keaton's plot is not only functional as a showcase for his routines; it also provides a charge of humor in its own right.

Narrative Structure in *The General*

There is a scene early on in *The General* in which the Union spy, Captain Anderson, shows his commanding officer a map of the railroad tracks

between Chattanooga, where the Northern forces are encamped, and Marietta, Georgia, where the opposing Southern army is headquartered. It is along this route that Anderson plans to hijack Johnnie Gray's locomotive The General and then drive it behind Northern lines whence it can be used to spearhead an attack upon the Confederates. I have heard commentators refer to this map as a diagram of Keaton's narrative, literally a plot line. Keaton's evident love of geometry and especially symmetry, it is suggested, drew him to this neatest, cleanest, most elegant of narrative designs. First, the Union hijackers steam the train one way with Johnnie in earnest pursuit; then he recovers the engine and races home in the opposite direction with the Northerners on his tail. Was there ever a more linear narrative? Moreover, the symmetry involved in these two chases over the same terrain affords the opportunity for a wealth of comic variations on various recurring themes, such as decouplings and side-trackings, made all the more risible for being repeated.

This interpretation of the map is very tempting. It corresponds nicely to what we might call Keaton's engineering mentality – his obsession with connecting every action to its reaction, his infatuation with the ups and downs of gravity, and his endless fascination with balances and imbalances, motion and arrest. It seems quite fitting that a directorial imagination like Keaton's would envision his story as a schematic or a blueprint.

But however tempting this gloss of the map may be, it does not tell the whole story about Keaton's story. It is certainly informative to the extent that it highlights the importance of symmetry in *The General*. Yet it fails to take account of the narrative in its entirety, which in addition to the two symmetrically developed chases has an elaborate opening in which Johnnie's courtship with Annabelle Lee derails and the sustained battle sequence that ensues after Johnnie crosses the Rock River Bridge. Both these rather substantial episodes are off the map, so to speak.

One response to this observation might be that since the opening scenes establish the premises of the rest of the plot, they are not part of the action proper and, therefore, don't really belong on the map. Perhaps. But what about the battle sequence?

This question is apt to elicit a different sort of answer. It goes like this: the map represents the story as Keaton should have told it; it is the ideal version of the narrative of *The General*. The battle episode, sad to say, is a mistake. It spoils the perfect symmetry of the film. It really shouldn't be in there. It is at best anticlimactic, a pretext for padding the film with a few more gags, but to little narrative purpose.

Yet, if the battle sequence is a mistake, it cannot be a mistake that Keaton committed carelessly. For this interlude is probably one of the most expensive scenes in the film, involving literally armies of extras in expensive, rented uniforms. Would Keaton have invested so much in the battle, unless he had a sound reason?

I don't think so. Furthermore, it is not difficult to reconstruct that reason. After Johnnie Gray fails to enlist in the opening segment of the film, Annabelle suspends their engagement until Johnnie manages to don a Confederate uniform. She says to him, "I don't want you to speak to me again until you are in uniform." Thus, since wearing a Confederate uniform and the status it symbolizes, enlistment in the rebel army, are a condition for the romantic reconciliation of the hero and the heroine, Johnnie must somehow get into a Confederate outfit, in both senses of that term. And, of course, it is through his participation in the battle that he ultimately earns *his own* uniform.

Keaton, the narrator, takes that early line about the uniform quite seriously. A subtle motif concerning uniforms continues throughout the film. Just before Johnnie rescues Annabelle, he incapacitates a Union guard and steals his uniform. The joke here, of course, is that the next time he speaks to Annabelle, he is in uniform. But it is the wrong sort! So the narrative mandates that Johnnie get the right sort of uniform, a gray one. He does get a Confederate cap and sergeant's jacket on the return trip on The General; Captain Anderson had disguised himself with these during the hijacking. But this is still not a satisfactory resolution, since it is not really Johnnie's uniform. And, of course, he is still not enlisted.

For that to happen, Johnnie needs to demonstrate his courage under fire. And that is what he does during the battle scene, thereby enabling the Southern general, who initially denied Johnnie a position in the army, to see for himself how very deserving Johnnie is. Without the battle scene, the reason for making Johnnie a lieutenant with a uniform of his own would not be so compellingly motivated. And, without a uniform of his own, the plot would have at least one loose thread: Annabelle's condition for their reconciliation would not be met. In a way, acquiring the uniform is what has to happen for the couple to reunite officially. No uniform; no marriage. Consequently, something like the battle scene is not excessive or digressive baggage. It is a necessary ingredient for achieving closure in *The General*.

The care with which Keaton handles the motif of the uniform, never losing track of it, but never forcing it either, attests to his estimable narrative craftsmanship.[1] The plot construction is as tight as a drum. The film coheres around generating and then answering a series of related questions: will the

breach between the lovers be repaired, which question itself is related in the plot to the question of whether Johnnie will win himself a Confederate uniform and rank in the rebel army; and then these two questions are momentarily supplanted once The General is hijacked by two more questions: will Johnnie retrieve his engine and rescue Annabelle, whose affirmative answers will be instrumental in securing affirmative answers to the first two questions.

Once the narrative delivers answers to these questions, the film secures a very satisfying, even resounding, state of closure. There is a short coda, involving Keaton's solution of the question of how to salute and kiss at the same time. Even though this does not introduce any new narrative elements it, in effect, serves to ratify the affirmative answer to the question about the future of the happy couple.

As this description of the plot of *The General* should indicate, the narrative unity and coherence of the film is accomplished by inviting the audience to entertain a series of questions about the world of the fiction such that the audience continues to be interested in the story in order to learn the answers to those internally generated questions. The principle underlying this sort of cohesion was identified long ago by David Hume, who noted, "to move a person extremely by the narration of any event, the best method of increasing its effect would be artfully to delay informing him of it, and first to excite his curiosity and impatience before you let him into the secret."[2] What Hume calls "the secret" I am calling the question. The unity and sense of completeness a film like *The General* maintains are a function of the question/answer structure. The parts of the film fit together either because they are involved in setting forth the presiding narrative questions, or because they are answering them or, at least, supplying information that will be relevant to answering them. The film appears complete, as though there are no parts missing, because all the questions it has saliently posed have been answered. There is nothing else about the world of the fiction that the narrative has encouraged or predisposed the viewer to ask. This form of narration is very common in popular narratives, both verbal and imagistic. I call it erotetic narration. *The General* is a lovely example of it.

In an erotetic narrative the rhetorical glue that enables the story to cohere is the relation between a question and its answer. This relationship can occur locally, serving to unify as few as two events in a story, or it may serve globally to organize large chunks of the plot. An example of the former type – what we may call micro-questions – occurs in *The General* when Annabelle unravels the rope on the top of the boxcar which Johnnie had used to tear down the telegraph wires. When we see Annabelle doing this, we ask

ourselves "why?" This question is soon answered when we see her tying together two small pine trees on opposite sides of the tracks. Johnnie appears to have little faith that this stratagem will impede the pursuing Northerners, but his very skepticism makes us curious about what will happen when the Union train reaches Annabelle's barrier. Then, shortly afterwards, as their engine becomes entangled in the rope and pine trees, we get our answer. The sequence of actions seems of a perfectly unified piece to us because it presents situations which engage our curiosity about how they will unfold, engendering micro-questions about the trajectory the action will take, and then subsequently answers those self-generated questions. *The General* is unified from end to end by micro-questions: every time debris is cast on the tracks, for example, the question arises whether or not there is a derailment in the offing.[3]

Of course, these micro-questions themselves are hierarchically subordinate to certain larger questions, macro-questions, that govern large portions of plot, questions such as: will Johnnie retrieve The General and rescue Annabelle? Every time that Johnnie is not derailed by the debris on the track, for instance, that contributes to the possibility that Johnnie may succeed in his quests.[4]

The micro-questions in *The General* are all connected to the four, previously enumerated, presiding macro-questions by way of providing information toward answering those larger questions. The question/answer structure is what makes a story like *The General* intelligible to the audience; the audience understands why subsequent events appear in the story, since those events most frequently answer some question raised by earlier events.[5]

It may seem strange to describe a narrative in terms of questions and answers. Written stories are made up mostly of declarative sentences that describe actions, while visual narratives depict them. Where are the questions in the relevant texts? They are, so to speak, suggested by the action. If a character forms an intention, as Johnnie does when he lights out after his hijacked locomotive, we will be prone to track his intentional action in terms of whether it will succeed or fail. When a character has a plan or an aim, we will naturally follow his activity in terms of its possible outcomes.

Many of the causes that animate narratives are the intentions, desires, motives, and problems that characters face. Comprehending these states involves virtually automatically the formation of a set of expectations about their possible outcomes, expectations that we may most naturally characterize as questions. For example, will a character's intention to win the heart of the heroine succeed or fail or will the intention mutate; will he become smitten

by the heroine's older, more deserving sister, for instance? Furthermore, we have certain scripts or schemas for various situations. And applying these scripts or schemas to a situation in order to understand a situation mobilizes built-in expectations about the possible sequences of events that will follow once the situation is initiated. For example, if a woman sits down at a table in a restaurant, we expect a waiter to take her order or, if not, we expect an account of why this does not happen. When a fire alarm is sounded, we expect the fire department to arrive. We may ask ourselves, "will it arrive on time, or not?"[6]

Likewise, dramatic situations always carry a penumbra of possible eventualities that audiences use to follow the evolving story events with understanding. If the characters are caught up in a disaster, we watch to see if they will escape, that is, we watch with that question in mind, if only subliminally. If it is a revenge plot, we ask: will the avenger be successful? If two lonely, but attractive people are thrown together, we want to know whether they will become romantically involved. In *The General*, Annabelle's abduction, like all abductions at least since Helen's, prompts us to question whether or not she will be recovered.

Dramatic situations, in other words, come with implicit questions about how they might unfold, and we use these questions to comprehend and follow the story.[7] Later events in the story make sense to us and strike us as belonging to the story because they can be configured as answers to questions that the story has disposed us to make our own.[8]

Earlier events in an erotetic narrative send the viewer thinking about the kinds of things that may happen as a result of antecedent events. Will Johnnie recapture The General or not? The earlier events call forth a horizon of possibilities, a range of turns of events that might ensue. It is in virtue of this background tapestry of possibilities that new events in the narrative appear intelligible and comprehensible since in an erotetic narrative the new events actualize or contribute toward actualizing certain possibilities already in play. That is, the new events answer or provide information toward answering the narrative questions that already intrigue us.

Erotetic narratives typically strike us with their clarity. They are easy to follow, primarily because they pose leading questions. The questions they promote bring certain possibilities before the viewer's mind and, when some of those possibilities are realized in the action, they fall neatly into place, instantiating a slot in the viewer's preexisting horizon of possibilities. The narrative questions alert the viewer to the kinds of possibilities to expect. When some are realized, the viewer assimilates them readily, since the

narrative questions have previously prepared him for a certain range of possible answers to which the one selected already belongs.[9]

Of course, erotetic narration is not unique to either Keaton or *The General*; it is probably the most common form of narration, both written and visual, in popular or mass culture today. However, *The General* is an extremely well-done version of the approach, an ideal specimen with which to teach students how to write movie scripts. It possesses an admirable economy; everything is there for a reason: to advance answers to overarching questions that organize and structure film.

But the narrative structure of *The General* is not only significant as an excellent example of a fairly pervasive form of popular narration. The narrative structure also adds to and augments a quality of the film that we discussed at length in the second chapter. There it was stressed how important for Keaton, the director, was the project of rendering visually intelligible the physical-process dimension of his fictional world. Clarity, that is, may be the most prominent aesthetic quality of *The General*. Moreover, erotetic narration itself has an inherent tendency toward clarity. Admittedly, this is a different dimension of clarity than that addressed by means of the notion of visible intelligibility. Nevertheless, the two different dimensions of clarity reinforce the overall impression the film delivers of a fictional world of utter intelligibility. This impression is enhanced not only because Keaton employs erotetic narration, but because he manages it so adroitly.

Comic Plotting in *The General*

Like a number of other films by Keaton, *The General* recounts the virtually miraculous transformation of an inept into an adept: Alfred becomes a tiger when inspired by a glimpse of his adoring wife in *Battling Butler*; Ronald becomes an Olympic-class pole vaulter during final moments of *College*; Rollo Treadway masters the overpowering kitchen during an intertitle in *The Navigator*; and Johnnie Gray, after the least-promising of beginnings, becomes a high-powered, one-man train crew in *The General*, etc. This is a narrative arc that Keaton enjoys, and he returns to it again and again.[10] As a result, there are various interpretations of it, ranging from the notion that it is a vehicle for expressing Keaton's faith in the transcendent power of love to the less flattering view that it wallows in an adolescent wish-fulfillment fantasy.

On the one hand, the transcendent-love interpretation sits uneasily with the down-to-earth way in which Keaton treats many of his heroines. And there

is no more unromantic version of this tendency than *The General*, in which, at one point, Johnnie Gray grabs Annabelle by the neck as if to throttle her and instead he kisses her. Keaton is not Chaplin, and this is particularly obvious in *The General*, where Annabelle's shortcomings are acknowledged, albeit often lovingly. Keaton's sort of realism about his beloveds does not square smoothly with his alleged commitment to the transcendent power of love.[11] The inept-to-adept structure does not seem to be a rhapsodical expression of Keaton's romantic ideology, but rather a serviceable skeleton on which to flesh out his gags and stunts.

Nor does it appear accurate to reduce this structure to a manifestation of adolescent wish-fulfillment fantasy. One reason to dispute this interpretation is that Keaton himself does not seem to take these plot peripeteia very seriously. The deus ex machina, for example (the machine is a submarine), at the end of *The Navigator* is an absurdity designed to provoke surprised laughter in response to its completely unexpected appearance on the scene. It is not meant to be credible, which, I presume, is a requirement that anything worth regarding as a genuine wish-fulfillment fantasy would have to meet.

Likewise, many of Johnnie Gray's martial achievements at the end of *The General* are played for laughs. He kills the Union sniper and blows up the Rock River Dam through clumsiness. When he strikes a heroic pose with the Confederate colors unfurled, he is spilled head over heels off the back of a fellow soldier upon whom he has inadvertently trod. There is no unalloyed fantasy fulfillment here. Keaton the director is still having fun at the expense of the Johnnie Gray character. He can still serve as a comic butt. He is not someone a normal viewer would wish to be. For he remains a clown in many respects.

Nevertheless, the inept-to-adept plot is important to Keaton's *The General*. However, rather than attempting to fathom its importance by thematically decoding it, it may be more profitable to think about its comic function. That is, let us try to interpret its function rather than its meaning: specifically, let us ask how it contributes functionally to the comic effect of the film.

My own hypothesis is that this plot structure itself is comic. That is, the plot is intended to be funny on its own terms. Or, in other words, it is a *funny* story. And the transformation of Johnnie Gray from an inept to an adept is, to a large degree, what makes it a funny story. It is a funny story, that is, because it has a comic plot structure.

Elsewhere I have attempted to identify some comic plot structures.[12] The inept-to-adept narrative found in *The General*, as well as in other films by Keaton and many other directors, is an example of one of those plot structures. It

is what I call the improbable plot or, more accurately, the *wildly* improbable plot. Described schematically, this is a plot in which the causal conditions that give rise to action absurdly mismatch the causal outcomes the film recounts: for example, that someone as uncoordinated as Ronald in *College* could perform the gymnastics called for in order to rescue Mary Haines.

Though comic narratives are traditionally thought to be identifiable in virtue of their possession of happy endings, this is clearly not what makes a plot comic. *Dr. Strangelove* has the unhappiest of all endings, but it is a comedy; *Master and Commander* has a happy ending, but it is anything but a comedy, in the standard usage of that term. But if a happy ending is not the mark of a comic plot, what is?

Let me suggest that, if a narrative structure is comic, then it must in some way be connected to the well-springs of humor. But what might they be? At present, I think the closest we can get to answering this question is to conjecture that humor appears to be intimately connected to the perception of incongruity.[13]

The range of perceived incongruities that may be material to comic amusement can be quite diverse. Generally speaking, the object of comic amusement is perceived to be incongruous relative to our expectations, either our specific expectations of what is to come next, or our generic expectations, that is, our expectations as rooted in our standing cognitive stock and its default assumptions inasmuch as these constrain what we are likely to imagine as possibly coming next. One such category of incongruity is logical absurdity or self-contradiction, as in Mark Twain's observation that "Wagner's music is better than it sounds," or Debussy's that "In opera, there is always too much singing." Or incongruity may involve physical impossibility, as when in answer to the charge that a soloist would need six fingers to play his concerto, Arnold Schoenberg replied, "I can wait." In these instances, the humor employed in the preceding turns of phrase is grounded in violating those of our expectations that are based on our operating assumptions about logic or nature. But the pertinent type of incongruity can also obtain when norms of morality or proper social behavior are breached; that is why adultery and rude table manners are such staples of comedy.[14]

Among the sources of comic amusement are not merely physical impossibilities, but also extreme implausibilities or improbabilities. In the joke, "How do morons form a firing squad? They stand in a circle," the humor is not only based on our recognition that this behavior is self-defeating, but also on the implausibility or improbability that any group could be so stupid. That such a state of affairs could occur is not impossible in the terminology of a

logician or a natural scientist; but it is so wildly improbable that we would be tempted to dismiss the prospect of such a firing squad as impossible in the ordinary language sense of the term.

Many jokes proceed by initiating stories that appear to abide by the canons of everyday realism, that is, in accordance with our default expectations about how the world works, only to end in punch-lines that fly off into such effectively impossible conclusions. This sort of incongruity, so evident in many jokes, is particularly relevant to the wildly improbable comic plot structure.

Because narrative is a way of charting causal relations, a way of relating causal conditions and their consequences, narration is characteristically, by its very nature, involved with expectation. Typically an audience processes incoming information about the evolving situations in a story and their causal potentials, and, as a result, anticipates the possible effects of the actions and events already in motion. To follow a narrative with understanding is to have some apprehension of where it is headed, some conception, if only subliminal, of the range of possibilities that might be likely to ensue given the story as evolved so far.

In order to form this narrative horizon of possibilities, the audience member, for the most part, relies upon mobilizing her default presuppositions about how the real world operates.[15] That is, given her standing sense of the way in which the type of events portrayed in the narrative usually unfold or fail to unfold in the world as she knows it, the audience member has a rough intuition of the range of which narrative eventualities are practically possible and practically impossible. She has, in other words, an expectation set.

Therefore, since narratives, and especially erotetic narratives, are intimately related to the promotion of expectations, it should come as no surprise that narration has a latent comic potential. For inasmuch as narrative has the power to elicit a default range of expectations, it equally possesses the power to subvert those expectations in a way that can abet the kind of incongruity favored by humor. This is the secret of the wildly improbable comic plot.

That is, insofar as raising expectations is a typical function of narration, especially of erotetic narration, and insofar as upsetting expectations is the business of humor, erotetic narration and comedy are naturally suited for each other, notably in terms of the capability of narrative to elaborate causal chains that, with respect to our default assumptions about how things happen, result in practically impossible – a.k.a. wildly improbable – states of affairs. That Friendless, a.k.a. Buster, in Keaton's film *Go West* could save the day – that his clueless leadership of the cattle herd could solve the problem – is

a lucky series of events, bordering on the ridiculous. That all's well by the end of the film is a palpable absurdity. It is so unlikely that anything good could come from the efforts of the likes of Friendless that it is, as we say in ordinary language, a joke, that is, funny, absurd.

The capacity of narratives to function as comic vehicles, of course, should be predictable, since, in all probability, the largest number of jokes are narrative. And, in certain respects, what I am calling improbable plot structure resembles certain narrative jokes. The joke, "Did you hear that a taxi overturned in Edinburgh? Thirty people were injured," rides, in part, on the improbability of packing 30 people, even 30 penny-pinching Scotsmen, into a normal-sized cab.[16] The practical impossibility of it rattles our standing expectations.

Similarly, the comically improbable plot winds up in a place that our standing assumptions about the normal course of events would ordinarily rule out. After witnessing Johnnie Gray's fumbling incompetence in the chase to Chattanooga, a fair estimate of his successful return to Marietta is pretty close to zero. That it happens against the odds is, in part, what makes us giddy. The plot itself amounts to a stupendous violation of our realistic default expectations about what is practicable in the fictional world of *The General*.[17]

In the wildly improbable plot, the relevant incongruity is the outlandish improbability of the consequences in contrast to the causal conditions that give rise to them. That a character like Elle Wood in *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White, and Blonde* is able successfully to pass a bill in Congress, given her naive, not to say skewed, understanding of the world, is so imponderable that its probability gets as close to nil as conceivable without utterly dissolving into it. As a logical possibility, it has a conceptual niche on our horizon of expectations, but only barely so. And yet, in improbable scene after improbable scene, Elle Wood advances her cause until the impossible achieves actuality in the fiction; and, thereby, the tension between this happening and our presumption that this is all supposedly occurring in something like the world as we understand it evokes mirth.[18]

Though in some ways like a narrative joke, the improbable plot also diverges from it in certain respects. In the typical narrative joke, the incongruous punchline is puzzling, invoking an incongruous interpretation in the mind of the listener which appears to make sense out of the nonsensical punch-line. For example, the reader explains to herself the crazy punch-line, "30 were injured," by inferring that they were 30 notoriously cheap Scotsmen. That is, a narrative joke ends with a puzzle which the audience must solve, albeit by resorting to some further absurdity. However, the finale of the improbable narrative is itself an explanation of a wildly unlikely chain of

events. The narrative "explains" how causally we have gotten from the beginning to the end of story. There is no residual puzzle to be solved. So unlike the punch-line of a joke, the end of an improbable plot is not a puzzle that can only be managed cognitively by adverting to some absurd hypothesis. Yet, despite this difference, the conclusion still produces merriment because it is so unlikely, even supposing the world of the fiction (which putatively resembles our own), that this denouement could ever transpire: that Johnnie could ever retrieve his train, rescue his beloved, reach Marietta, warn the Confederates of the impending attack, and save the day by accidentally bombarding the Rock River Dam.

Like many narrative jokes, the wildly improbable plot rests on an opposition between what is plausible and what is vastly implausible, with the latter taking prize. But, unlike the joke, this resolution of affairs does not call for a further explanation. The triumph of the deliriously improbable is simply given by the narrative, which presents improbabilities in the fiction as true that are so extreme that in normal speech we would be inclined to call them impossibilities. The object of comic amusement with regard to the improbable plot is the incongruous outcome(s) of a chain of events, given their causal antecedents.[19]

In *The General*, the symmetrical structure of the plot underscores the improbability of Johnnie's success the second time around as he races his engine home to Marietta. The various tasks he performs are ones that he failed dismally to accomplish just one day before. He also becomes acutely sensitive to his environment, whereas 24 hours earlier he seemed to be in a daze as if his mind were inescapably trapped in the past, fixated on how affairs stood moments or minutes before he is called upon to act. In short, Johnnie enacts a breathtaking learning curve as the story evolves, one that defies any plausible explanation based on real-world expectancies. His transition from inept to adept is spectacularly at odds with anything we might imagine to be practically feasible. It subverts our expectations about what is possible and this perception of incongruity is what grounds our amusement at the very trajectory of the plot structure itself.

In the previous section, we contended that *The General* is an exemplary case of erotetic narration. In this section, we have argued that erotetic narration itself is a very functional vehicle for comedy. Erotetic narration prompts audiences to formulate a range of future possibilities and, thus, provides the opportunity for the narrator to undercut those expectations by opting for those possibilities that are immensely unlikely, even, practically speaking, impossible. The all but miraculous transformation of the inept Johnnie

Gray into the adept Johnnie Gray in *The General* is a solid instance of this sort of comic narrative structure.

Commentators who have pointed to the inept-to-adept plot configuration in *The General* and other films by Keaton have been right in suspecting that it is important to his project. They have, however, been mistaken in attempting to locate its significance as either an expression of a belief in transcendent love or a deplorably immature, adolescent wish-fulfillment fantasy. For its significance is neither thematic nor moral. Its significance is comic.

Conclusion

Deciphering films like *The General* for their allegorical message is an unpromising strategy. In terms of its main movements, the plot – boy courts girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl – is so recurrent that the themes one is able to alchemize from it, such as, the transcendent power of love, hardly pertain to what is distinctive about Keaton and are anyway apt to be too solemn to capture Keaton's levity. This is so because themes like "Love Conquers All" and "Man Versus Nature" can be telegraphed by farces and melodramas alike. Nevertheless, the low yield on exegetical investment afforded by the allegorical interpretation of such genre comedies should not foreclose ventures in narrative analysis. One merely needs to rethink the terms of such analysis. Instead of concentrating on the meaning implied or presupposed by the plot, focus may be reoriented toward questions of construction. How is the plot put together; what makes it coherent and complete? And, furthermore, why is that mode of construction itself humorous? I have tried to account for the narrative unity of *The General* by contending that it is an exemplary case of erotetic narration. The plot itself is funny because it is wildly, incongruously improbable that someone as benighted and bemused as Johnnie Gray could survive his travails, let alone triumph.

One of the many things that I have learned about film since I first wrote on Keaton is not to underestimate the importance of narrative structure. It is too easy to shirk this responsibility by stressing the visual nature of film, as I once did. This appendix, then, is partial penance for my youthful arrogance.

NOTES

1 In an earlier article I complained that the uniform issue was not as sustained as it might have been. Upon reviewing the film recently, I realize that I was

mistaken. See: Noël Carroll, "Toward a Theory of Film Suspense," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 115.

2 David Hume, "Of Tragedy," in *David Hume: Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 130.

3 Not all film narratives are erotetic. In some films, the connection may be merely that of spatiotemporal contiguity. Keaton's *The Playhouse*, for example, seems to be primarily a succession of routines in which the same character, Keaton, appears. There is little to connect the content of one act to the next. Some effort is made to secure closure through Keaton's brief romance with and then marriage to the twin. But it gives every appearance of being tacked on to lend an otherwise simple collection of vaudeville turns the impression of greater unity.

4 There is a view, advanced by Steve Seidman and Frank Krutnik, that argues that there is a tension between the star comic's routines and the progression of the narrative. I, like Peter Kramer, do not think that this generalization fits Keaton very well. Especially in features such as *The General* virtually every gag contributes to the narrative, either by advancing the action or by emphasizing narratively significant character traits. See: Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1981); Frank Krutnik, "The Clown-Prints of Comedy," *Screen*, 25(4–5); Peter Kramer, "Derailing the Honeymoon Express: Comicality and Narrative Closure in Buster Keaton's *The Blacksmith*," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 23 (Spring 1989), pp. 101–16.

5 Or they introduce material relevant to the formation of a new question or questions; see my "Toward a Theory of Film Suspense."

6 Of course, some of these scripts and schemas are derived from our experience of film-going. The expectation that if a vampire can be forced into the sunlight, he will wither and die, is probably an event-schema that most of us have learned from the movies.

7 It is an interesting exercise to look at the most frequently recurring dramatic situations and to notice how they all are pregnant with possible outcomes that incline us to regard them protentively, i.e., in terms of their future possible outcomes. Dramatic situations in popular narratives keep us interested in them because they wear their future possibilities on their face and we are curious as to which of them will eventuate. In order to test this claim, the reader might take a look at Georges Polti's *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, translated by Lucille Ray (Boston: The Writer, Inc., Publishers, 1945).

8 I prefer the categories of question and answer to the alternative problem and solution because the former seems more comprehensive. In a story about two strangers who are becoming friends as they observe each other's virtues, it does not seem appropriate to say that there is any problem that they are solving. But it does seem likely that as their recognition of each other grows, we will begin to wonder whether they will become friends. There is no problem here; but there are still narrative questions.

9 All narration involves causal connections of some sort, however weak. What happens in erotetic narration is that earlier events are presented in such a way that questions naturally arise about the possible outcomes of the earlier situations. If a man plans to fly around the world in 80 days, we want to know whether or not he will succeed in doing it. The cause or motive of his behavior, that is, calls forth or propones a certain range of possibilities to be realized by the future. Because typically the narrative connection can be as weak as merely a causally necessary condition (and *not* a causally sufficient condition), earlier scenes generally make the viewer cognizant of only possible future outcomes, not necessary ones. The viewer anticipates these as possible answers to prevailing narrative questions. The possible answers to these questions set the range of our expectations about what is to come next. Concerning the nature of narrative, see Noël Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection," in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 118–32. On erotetic narration, see my "Narrative Closure," in *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming).

10 This structure appears in the first feature-length film in which Keaton appeared, *The Saphead*. He would return to this character often. It was important to the formation of his star persona. For further information, see: Peter Kramer, "The Making of a Comic Star: Buster Keaton and *The Saphead*," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunouska Karmick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995).

11 Arguably it would appear to be the case that Keaton's take on such saccharine views of love is satirical. See, for example, his film *Three Ages*. Also, the misplaced romance with Brown Eyes in *Go West* substantiates Keaton's altogether ironical stance toward sentimentality.

12 Noël Carroll, "Two Comic Plot Structures," in *The Monist*, 88, no. 1 (Jan. 2005), pp. 154–83.

13 I have defended the usefulness of the category of perceived incongruity as a provisionally useful heuristic concept for analyzing comic structures in "Two Comic Plot Structures," and in "Humour," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 344–65.

14 Admittedly, more needs to be said about incongruity than this. To that end, see my essays "Humour" and "Two Comic Plot Structures."

15 The qualification here – "for the most part" – acknowledges that audience understanding of genre conventions and the context of belief in which the story was constructed also play a role in its comprehension of narrative possibilities.

16 Part of the humor in this joke resembles what is in play in the sort of sight gag – found in Keaton and others – in which an endless parade of people (or clowns) pile out of a small car. Of course, this joke also has the added ethnic dimension, tweaking the stereotype of Scottish cheapness once the listener infers the significance of "Edinburgh" in the setup.

17 Which the fiction invites us to imagine is very much like the actual world in terms of the causal processes that govern it.

18 In my examples so far, events turn out far better for the protagonists than seems even vaguely probable. But the wildly improbable plot can also work in the other direction. Things can become far worse as the plot unravels than the viewer imagines likely. Think of the way in which everyday confrontations escalate into utter destruction in the tit-for-tat routines of Laurel and Hardy. Or, for a more recent example, consider how ordinary conversations deteriorate into hostile misunderstandings as a result of the character, Larry David's, lack of impulse control in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Because of his unlikely persistence and improbable obliviousness to the way others are taking his words, he consistently talks himself from ordinary conversational exchanges into tangled and unfriendly ones. Moreover, in a different vein, extremely *improbable* coincidences, for that very reason, appear to be staples of comic plotting.

19 For a discussion of the difference between comically improbable plots and suspense, see my "Two Comic Plot Structures."

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