L.G.H. St-Pierre
M.A.
English

BUSTER KEATON AND THINGS

BUSTER KEATON AND THINGS: AN ANALYSIS OF KEATON AS A UNIQUELY TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARTIST.

by

Leopold Saint-Pierre

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

McGill University,
August 1976.

Abstract

The primary material of this thesis is the work of Buster Keaton's 'solo' silent period between 1920 and 1929. A concentration on the 19 two-reelers and 10 features made under Keaton's exclusive control in these years brings his unique qualities as an artist into the sharpest focus possible.

Detailed examination of the Keaton gag reveals the richness and complexity of the relation between man and the physical universe in his comic vision. The conventional presentation of the material world as an ordered set of obstacles to human intent is replaced in Keaton's films by a universe which can operate without regard to logic, reason, or the 'real' time-continuum. A fascinated student of the technology with which the heroes in his films are so often in conflict, Keaton infuses it with the potential for fantasy and benevolent action as well as opposition to the human. In this way, the individual is integrated into a universal machinery peculiar to modern industrialized societies.

Keaton was an intuitive artist, who realized in his work a clearly twentieth century consciousness the principles of which would be amplified by the theorists of important broad modern artistic movements. A connection of Buster Keaton's cinema to the initiatives of Surrealism and Absurdism will fully bring out his brilliant contributions to the revolutionized perceptions of space, time, motion and logic that mark cultural evolution in this century.

Cette these se concentre en particulier avec l'oeuvre de Buster Keaton entre 1920 et 1929- son époque "solo." Par une concentration sur les 19 courts-métrages et les 10 longs-métrages réalisés sous le controle exclusif de Keaton pendant cette période, ses uniques qualités artistiques seront illuminées.

Une étude des gags de Keaton démontre la richesse et la complexité de la relation entre l'homme et l'univers physique dans sa vision comique. La vue conventionnelle du monde matériel comme structure ordonnée des obstacles aux tentatives humaines est remplacée chez Keaton par un univers qui peut opérer sans regard a la logique, a la raison, ou au temps "réel." Fasciné par la technologie avec laquelle les héros de ses films se retrouvent si souvent en combat, Keaton l'infuse avec la potentialité de la fantaisie et l'action bénevole aussi que l'opposition a l'humanité. L'individu est donc integré dans une universelle machinerie propre aux sociétés industrialisées de l'age modern.

Keaton realisa par intuition une conscience clairement du vingtieme siecle qui serait amplifié par les théoriciens des importants mouvements contemporains. La conjunction du cinéma de Buster Keaton et les initiatives du surréalisme et de l'absurdisme révélera ses brillantes contributions aux nouvelles perceptions de l'espace, du temps, du mouvement, et de la logique qui marquent L'évolution culturelle au vingtieme siecle.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Clyde Bruckman, co-director in several of Buster Keaton's more noteworthy shorts, once tried to explain Keaton's strange relationship with the inanimate:

> "He can take a ladder, a pail -hell, a stick! - and have you rolling on the ground. He does something -he makes the thing alive!"[1]

Indeed, in the vicinity of Buster Keaton, inanimate things often seem to possess a venomous life and will of their own. The importance of this union between Keaton and inanimate things is twofold. Firstly there is the basic complexity of Keaton's response to things. Secondly, and directly related to the involved nature of Keaton's initial response, we note the vitality of our altered perception of these "new" things upon which life has "mysteriously" been bestowed.[2] This shift in perception which Keaton brings about may be labelled COMEDY. It may also be related to many other things which will be discussed, some in detail and some in brief, further on: included will be Surrealism, The Optical Illusion of Perception, Pop Art, The Absurd, et cetera.

Things for Keaton range from the tiny toy cannon which pursues him in <u>The Navigator</u> to the automatic rooms in <u>The Scarecrow</u> and <u>The Electric House</u>, to the huge steam engines in <u>The General</u>. Machines, ranging from this toy cannon to the giant locomotive, within the Keaton context are simply a multi-faceted "thing" and their importance is

evidenced by the frequent status they occupy as co-stars: witness such titles as The General (which refers to a train by that name), The Electric House, The Boat, and The Playhouse.

As one looks closely at Keaton's work, several distinct patterns become apparent. Yet again and again, at the core of these centripetal patterns, we find things. We always find things because Keaton has left them in our path. Keaton has selected things to serve as his central image, as a simple metaphor within the context of a more elaborate system of intuitive philosophical and physiological beliefs. Buster Keaton's highly original use of the inanimate as material for artistic creation places him in a distinctive and intriguing relationship with important broad twentieth-century movements in the arts.

Perhaps we find the closest link with Andre Breton's Surrealists. The Surrealists strove to transcend, and thus eliminate, the arbitrary limitations which stiffle human potential. They adopted, as means to this end, a confrontation with the object, or the thing. Through the object they stressed the importance of chance associations, and the existence of relative modes of "reality". They sought to free things from preconceived notions of use, context, purpose, and hence, reality. They did so by placing the thing in new and free space, and thus liberating its endless possibilities of meaning. This approach raised many questions

on the nature of perception, on the role of time, movement and logic, on the nature of things themselves, and ultimately, on the nature of man and his universe.

Keaton also bears more than a passing resemblance to other modern movements from Absurdism to Andy Warhol's Pop Art, and comparison is often as revealing as it is rewarding.

A close examination of Buster Keaton's comic temperament reveals three principal strains:

1 His responses to the challenges of the physical world become ever more canny and ever more daring. Conversely, the gag props, the things, become ever more elaborate and ever more perilous, culminating perhaps in the bridge in The Paleface, or in The Electric House where, as the title implies, the entire physical environment looks quietly forward to the undoing of mere human agents.[3]

11 A strange melancholy, bordering on morbidity, makes itself felt most inescapably in the last scene of Cops: Buster, mistaken for a criminal, has just outwitted a small army of police; but then his girl rejects him; whereupon he simply turns back into the station house, and THE END is seen printed across a tombstone on which sits the Keaton pork-pie hat.[4]

111 Disorienting dream-like images are introduced, sometimes dwelt upon, as in The Playhouse, where nearly all the characters, including every last member of a theatre orchestra, are played by Keaton; or, in a different vein, in

One Week, where the assembling of a prefabricated house brings forth upon the earth a monster-building whose parts are identifiable and functional but whose overall misshapenness shares something with the vision of a nightmare.[5]

Within these three variations, then, we observe the full scope of Buster's deep interest in the exceedingly strange relationships between men and things. Things may take many forms ranging from the fantasy vision of such films as The Playhouse and Sherlock Junior, to a representation of The Establishment as witnessed in the relentless police in Cops and The Goat. Things are often disruptive or harmful forces in Keaton's work. It is a misinterpretation, however, to take "Man at the Mercy of Malevolent Things" as Keaton's central theme. In the interest of a fascinating theory, the overzealous viewer often overlooks that, in Buster Keaton's universe, things are NOT invariably hostile. After all, it is the engine of his locomotive in The General which rocks him gently on its cross-bar, consoling, soothing the pain of a girl's rejection. Similarly, the kitchen equipment which plagues him in the opening scenes of The Navigator, later comes beautifully under Buster's control. Things are by no means invariably hostile. They are invariably VARIABLE. They may do you in, or they may do you a favour. At times, the best thing to do is simply match things in their ultimate neutrality. After all, the building falling

in Steamboat Bill,Jr. was kind enough to provide Buster with a convenient window.[6] As Blesh writes,it is no wonder that things

> " - both the contrary, frustrating, plan-upsetting kind and the miraculous, benevolent kind - are the basic stuff of the famous Keaton comedy. They are the warp of his life, the BASSO OSTINATO of his career."[7]

Things remain the central Keaton metaphor. His careful exploration of the many variations within the context of man's relation to these things offers many revelations. But Keaton remains an intuitive artist, not a philosopher or an intellectual. His basic working principle was simply "to get a laugh without being too ridiculous". Keaton's films are marvels of structure, yet even within so cohesive a framework, the intricacies of his intuitive vision are often difficult to decipher. It is our aim that in placing Keaton within the context of several related twentieth-century artistic and intellectual movements, we may gain insight into his intuitive motives through an examination of theirs. Buster Keaton, the Surrealists, the Pop Artists and the absurdists all share common-ground in their origin as a reaction against certain uniquely twentieth-century phenomena. They also share, to a lesser extent, certain strains in the method of their reaction. For this reason it is our hope that, in placing Keaton as a part of an overall twentieth-century movement, we may ultimately penetrate the layers of significance beneath the surface of the Great Stone Face.

FOOTNOTES, Chapter 1

1. Rudi Blesh, Keaton (New York: Collier Books,1971),p.252.

2. E. Rubinstein, Filmguide to "The General" (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1973),p.11.

3. Ibid.,p.12.

4. Ibid.,p.13.

5. Ibid.

6. Walter Kerr, The Silent Clowns (New York:Alfred A.Knopf,Inc., 1975), p.144.

7. Blesh,p.4.

Chapter 2

BUSTER KEATON AND THE ABSURD

The essence of Buster Keaton as a comic figure is founded on his ability to incorporate the characteristics of impassivity, serenity, and invulnerability. Keaton's Great Stone Face is quite naturally without sensation, not susceptible to physical impression or injury, insensible - in fact, almost unconscious. His unshakeable "apartness" is seen in sharp contrast to the outrageous situations which seem to forever enfold him as their unwitting, if not exactly unwilling, victim. In fact, we find in this one of the main keys to an appreciation of Keaton's art.

The alienation of man from his world becomes in many of Keaton's films a dichotomy between the stoic comedian and his hectic environment. To illustrate: in Blesh's Keaton, Seldes is quoted (on the subject of Cops) as follows:

> "...thousands of policemen rushed down one street; equal thousands rushed up another; and before them fled this small, serious figure, bent on self-justification, caught in a series of absurd accidents, wholly law-abiding, a little distracted." 1

James Agee takes this concept of comic separation one step further to imply an interaction between Keaton and his world which is its hidden essence. The dependence lying behind and beyond the superficial dichotomy between these two seeming foes is the mainspring of their existence and binds them to constant conflict. In this light, the following analogy can be seen as truly surreal:

> "In a way his(Keaton's)pictures are like a transcendent juggling act in which it seems that the whole universe is in exquisite flying motion and the one

> point of repose is the juggler's effortless,uninterested face.....When he ran from a cop his transitions from accelerating walk to easy jogtrot to brisk canter to headlong gallop to flogged-piston sprint -always floating above this frenzy, the untroubled, untouchable face...."[2]

The famous deadpan, while in one sense setting Keaton apart from the utter absurdity of his situation, becomes on a higher level the focal point standing beyond the reality of appearance. The stone-face is of necessity juxtaposed with the frenetic hustle-bustle of cops, things,or whatever. The result is a <u>total</u> cinematic image, blending all apparent contradictions into a dynamic antinomy; its energy spills over again from the static heights of philosophic paradox down to the plane of meaningless activity. Absurdity is thus carried to its outer limits.

Agee ranks Keaton's face alongside Lincoln's "as an early American archetype."[3] "Archetype", in its widest sense, implies an organic symbolic whole, so fruitful as to be continually re-born in an infinite paradox of multi-faceted images.

> "He (Keaton) used this great, sad, motionless face to suggest various related things: a one-track mind near the track's end of pure insanity; mulish imperturbability under the wildest of circumstances; how dead a human being can get and still be alive; an awe-inspiring sort of patience and power to endure,proper to granite but uncanny in flesh and blood."[4]

So skillfully does Keaton weave the threads of absurdity into the fabric of his films, that their unseen presence can always be sensed. One is clearly reminded, in watching almost any Keaton film, or even any still from

a Keaton film, of Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus. By such a comparison there is no intention of suggesting direct influence of Camus on Keaton, for the bulk of Keaton's major work was completed ten years before Camus emerged as a literary figure. Given Keaton's legendary attribute of naivete, the fact that a link between the comic and philosopher does exist speaks eloquently of the force of twentieth-century alienation. Indeed, Camus' writings, which stem from forty years experience of twentieth-century angst, serve to delineate the Keatonian dilemma with a sharper poignancy born of increased familiarity.

The parallels between the two are in fact so strong as to warrant a brief analysis of the latter, for Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus is a manifesto of the absurdist anti-credo, offering one of the most extensive and precise definitions of the absurd.[5] Its application to Buster Keaton grows, upon closer examination, all the more apt.

The sense of absurdity is born in a man, Camus states, when he no longer takes his mechanical life of routine for granted, when mere habit is replaced by awareness, when he begins to ask "why?" . Such thoughtfulness, introspection, and questioning cannot help but give rise to a series of disquieting revelations.[6] Man awakes, The Myth tells us, to three potentially shattering epiphanies:

First, a man comes to realize that he himself is inescapably headed towards death. He has long known that

death is, that one dies, but he now recognizes that even he will be death's victim, that time, the sine qua non of mortality, is his fatal enemy. A man's first step into consciousness of the absurd is the realization that he, who has taken life for granted and perhaps enjoyed some of its pleasures, will die. Life is a process of dying.[7] Time is not an accumulation of years but a second by second countdown to death.

If man's first discovery is his true relationship to time, his second is his relationship to nature. The innocent and the young often see their natural world in terms of personal kinship and compatibility. Gradually, however, this illusion vanishes and they come to realize that nature is indifferent, with neither heed nor care for mankind:

> "A step lower and strangeness creeps in:
> perceiving that the world is "dense",
> sensing to what a degree a stone is
> foreign and irreducible to (man)...."
> [8]

The fear spawned by the loss of participation mystique (to borrow a term from Piaget) leads them to interpret indifference as disdain, or what is worse, as hostility, since the emotionality of human self-concern finds total indifference so difficult as to become impossible to conceive. The natural world thus comes to be viewed no longer as a home but as a chilling, unfeeling complex oblivious to its human and transient dwellers. The Keaton film which comes foremost to mind in this respect is surely The General, particularly the outdoor scenes immediately following Keaton's rescue of Annabelle from the Union Headquarters - the long-take long shot of the two

huddled in the wilderness is a brutally poignant comment on the true nature of their relationship to the world around them. It is indeed a sobering scene to witness. In bold terms, then, at this stage of the absurdist's awakening he is faced with two powerful enemies - time and nature.

Once aware of time's destructiveness and nature's indifference, a man may turn with some hope to himself; only to find even there no solace. Where before he was confident of his humanity, of his freedom to choose his way and guide his acts gracefully in a constant flow of motion, he has now come to see himself as a mere machine, bound to repetitive and fatuous gestures that deny his human essence.[9]

To come to believe that time is his destroyer, that the natural world turns a blind eye to him, and that he is brother to the machine - such is the path by which a man first arrives at a knowledge of the absurdity of this world, an absurdity born of the juxtaposition of all he would wish life to be, with the way that life actually seems to be. Man yearns to defy time, to feel at home in the world, to rest confident in his humanity, but he comes to know his mortality, his loneliness, his mechanistic rigidity and impotence. The absurd is, Camus claims, a divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints.[10]

Jean-Paul Sartre expresses it as such:

"Primary absurdity manifests a cleavage, the cleavage

> between man's aspirations to unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, between man's drive toward the eternal and the FINITE character of his existence....Chance, death, the irreducible pluralism of life and of truth, the unintelligibility of the real - all these are extremes of the absurd." [11]

Camus presents an expository definition of absurdity; Keaton transports us into the fabric of absurdity itself. Yet, while Keaton and The Myth hold certain (and by no means all) perspectives in common, they nevertheless part company in the final analysis, for Keaton, the human being, ultimately manages to transcent the absurd creature's dilemma. To trace his escape from the very trap of nonsense he so humourously expounds is extremely complex. To begin it, one must examine the nature of absurdity in greater depth, for in it lies the essential clue: the absurdity of absurdity itself.

In Camus', The Outsider, written before The Myth of Sisyphus, we find the complete embodiment of absurd man. The outsider, on the day after his mother's death, "went swimming, started a liaison with a girl and went to see a comic film".[12] Shortly thereafter, he killed a man "because of the sun" [13] - yet claimed, on the eve of his execution, that he "had been happy and still was".[14] Such a man may not be viewed in terms of "good" or "evil". As Sartre points out, he is neither moral nor immoral; but part of what Sartre calls - the absurd.[15] Sartre states that the "absurd, to be pure, resides neither in man nor in the world, if you consider each separately. But since man's dominant characteristic is 'being-in-the-world', the absurd is, in the end, an inseparable part of the human condition.... The reason is that man is NOT the

world."[16] Quoting The Myth itself,

> "If I were a tree among other trees... this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would have none, for I would be part of this world. I WOULD BE this world against which I set myself with my entire mind. ...It is preposterous reason which sets me against all creation."[17]

The stranger is, ultimately, myself in relation to myself, that is, natural man in relation to mind:[18] "The stranger who, at certain moments, confronts us in a mirror."[19]

We are confronted with similar attitudes in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, where Godot's coming is the eagerly awaited event expected to salvage the "absurd" situation in an unspecifically miraculous way. Yet whether the figure is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or stands for a mythical human being whose entrance is expected to transform the situation (or some combination of both hopes), his exact nature is of secondary importance. The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as a deterministic aspect of the human condition.[20] Godot the separate entity is immaterial. Throughout his life man always waits for something, and Godot simply represents the object of his waiting, be it an event, a thing, a person, a deity or death. Were man active, he would tend to become oblivious to the passage of time, time would pass of itself. Thus, it is in the very act of waiting that he experiences the flow of TIME in its purest, most evident form.[21] Man simply and passively waits if his whole self-concept is no longer that of the external "doer", but turns inwards, and divested of subjectivity, he is confronted with

the action of time itself. In turn, the pure flow of time brings him to confront the basic problem of being - and he is forced to seek out the nature of the self. The search, however, can only be fruitless, for the self is subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and is therefore ever outside his grasp.

> "Personality is a concept whose permanent reality can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time to the vessel containing the fluid of past time." 22

If the <u>self</u> is seen as a static entity, it is of the past, and man who clings to this concept is thereby thrown both out of the present and out of the future. He is alienated by and of his self: his precious personality is the illusory agent of his solitude.

- To recapitulate in brief: Camus' principles of the absurd are based on the following. Man yearns:

- To defy time
- To be one with nature
- To rest confident in his humanity. 23

In so yearning, he comes to know his mortality, his loneliness and his rigidity. For the absurd man the only answer to this dilemma seems to lie in "waiting", in existing.

At first glance, Keaton would seem to have followed this same path, step by downhill step to the absurdists' trap. His Stone Face clearly embodies the basic human

longings, - unchangeable, it defies time, impassive it matches the indifferent stare of nature, and emotionless it masks despair. What could be more stoically passive than stone? Yet somehow Keaton is not swallowed up by his philosophic stance and the stone stays in the mask without grabbing the innards. For somehow he has managed to turn their effects around so as to make them work for, rather than against, him. The key to this, his ability to twist despair around into the comic, to turn the "absurd" away from the futile and hellish into the futile but funny, can be seen in his unique rapport with the world of things.

Nature has been previously discussed as a world of Things, and man as a Machine, or a rather complex Thing. It seems valid at this point to shift the focus away from man to examine the true nature of these objects, or Things. C.H.Lewis writes,

> "In 20th century theoretical thought, it has been found that, ultimately, an Object - a table, a chair or a handkerchief - becomes as troublesome and suspect as a 'soul' or 'psyche'." 24

An object's apparent unruliness stems from man's dual process of PERCEPTION: namely his divisive recognition that separates <u>sensation</u>, a purely physical operation, from <u>knowing</u>, which presupposes an unknowable knower. Caught in the trap of his own logic, unable to comprehend anything without the filtering mediary of his own incomprehensible nature, man is confronted by not one but two potential objects:

the object as "sensual" and the object as he hopes he knows it. This vague knowing he defines as "common sense".

In the first place, what man loosely defines as objective reality is composed of much more than the immediate object of perception; his memory of past perceptions of similar objects conditions his way of seeing. Fleshing out the bare perception of each single object presently before him. To use Lewis' analogy, in looking at an orange he knows it is spherical; this notion is derived from having in the past looked at the round object from many more angles than at present. Moreover he knows without peeling, pulling apart and eating what the centents of this particular orange will be, from having handled similar objects in the past. "It is memory that gives that depth and fullness to our present, and makes our abstract, ideal world of objects for us."[25]

The other possible way of perceiving the object entails an acknowledgement of the flux of time; the world is viewed not as a picture but as a moving picture. "In this no Object would appear, but only the states of an Object. The picture of the physical world is cut down to what we see whatwe know should be excluded."[26] The precise moment is substituted for subjectively contaminated memory.

To inject "common-sense" back into this new and disturbingly unfamiliar order of events, man would have to move around the object and as far as possible get inside it. With the thousand successive pictures he thus obtains he will

have - only successively, as nothing is totally encompassed all at once - the perceptual picture of common-sence. Having walked all around, picked up, smelt, cut, and then eaten, the orange, he will have SUCCESSIVELY reached the all-at-once perceptive picture of common-sense. 27

Thought, perception, and indeed all the stationary acts of the observer of "common-sense" realism, must, however, be turned into movement. Lewis maintains that man must move and act, if he wishes to apprehend anything.

> "We must move and physically function before we can say that we have 'thought' or 'seen'. Indeed, following this logic, there is no need to think at all, or even to see. For the action IS the thought, or the vision: just as a THING <u>is</u> its successive 'effects'." 28

What he is discussing is the philosophy of the object in terms of MOVEMENT. It is a world according to the optic sense of successive, flat images - direct sensations unassociated with any component of memory. Each "optical" impression, fragment as it is, and unassisted by "thought" is more <u>real</u> in one sense than the ideal "fleshed-out" abstract-perceptual object. It gains in sensational and temporal intensity what it loses in so-called completeness. 29

The two objects of perception under discussion, then, are the "common-sense" and the "optical". Their major points of difference stem from a dissimilar approach to the time-space flux. The "common-sense object" is made up of several correlated constituent objects of many

kinds, all occupying a different place in the spatio-temporal continuum. It is part "optical", part memory. Existing as a mixture of non-homogeneous constituents, it becomes something of a problem. In terms of the orthodox philosophical system centered on the tenets of Relativity, this "common-sense object" possesses a certain timelessness.

> "Perception, indeed, has no 'date', (no point in time) only sensation has that. Thus, for accurate dating, perception has in a sense to be abandoned in favour of sensation...Perception, in short, with its element of timelessness smacks of contemplation, suggests leisure: only sensation guarantees action."[30]

"Common-sense" perception thus overrules time to grant the "common-sense object" a kind of static timelessness. Lewis writes, "While we were looking at the front of the house, if we had ever seen its back, we saw that back along with the front, as though we were in two places at once, and hence two TIMES."[31] This method of perception only serves to abstract the object itself, to buffer its immediate impact upon he who perceives it as such, and ultimately to dull the vitality of perceiver-object interaction. To view the object through "common-sense" perception is to endow it with a false wholeness, a wholeness composed in part of (static)memory-inflated properties. In this, one may safely claim that, to a degree, the "common-sense object" becomes the Subject, since it has been accorded the dubious honour of an anomalous position in the space-time continuum.

The "optical" object is by far the more REAL of the two objects of perception for the nature of its existence

acknowledges the time-movement flux. It holds no pretensions to the completeness of the inflated object of "commonsense" but exists only as a series of connected constituent effects. It is divorced from subjectivity and relies for the whole of its impact entirely on itself. Lewis, writing on the ultimate intensity and reality of the immediate "optical" sensation, claims that,

> "even though it gives you no ideal whole, though it is dogmatically a creature of the moment, even though it conveys the objects of life only as strictly experienced in <u>time</u> (momentary), not even existing outside of their proper time, ideally having no prolongations in memory, confined to the 'continuous present' of their temporal appearance, consumed as 'events', one with <u>action</u>, incompatible with reflection, impossible of contemplation - the sensation is nevertheless the REAL THING." 32

What must be maintained, then, is the ultimate objectivity of the perception of the object if one wishes to grasp its reality. No subjective input to perception can be tolerated. The real object must be seen in terms of time-movement, unfettered by static perceptual impulses from within.

In terms of our discussion of Buster Keaton and the absurd, such a differentiation is highly relevant. For what we have just discussed is the dual nature of SEEING, an act which plays a vital role in solving the riddle of the absurd Buster Keaton.

From the various arguments advanced above, and the general insights outlined, it now remains to examine their relevance to Keaton as a comic artist, and especially to Keaton as an enduring 20th century figure - in the final analysis, just why does Buster survive?

The absurdist, according to Camus, sets himself three tasks: to defy time, to be one with nature, and to be totally human. These tasks become the albatross around his neck. Keaton, on the other hand, is confronted by the same three tasks, and thrives on them - or perhaps even because of them. The explanation of such an apparent incongruity lies, in part, in an extension of the absurd state of being itself, what Sartre calls "the passion of the absurd".[33] He explains it as such: "Since God does not exist and man dies, everything is permissible ... all values collapse. For this man, EVERYTHING is lawful... He experiences the 'divine irresponsibility' of the condemned man." [34]

Within this context, we may more clearly comprehend the specific causes for Keaton's survival. Firstly, Keaton is not human - or not entirely human. Agee describes him as an example of "how dead a man can be and still be alive".[35] Given his situation, however, as a half-thing living in a world of Things, this is perhaps the best of all possible states to be in, in terms of Darwinian survival of the fittest. Darwin's words seem remarkably a propos in describing Keaton's survival tactics:

> "This principle of preservation, or the survival of the fittest, I have called Natural Selection. It leads to the improvement of each creature in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life; and consequently, in most cases, to what must be regarded as an advance of organisation. Nevertheless, low and simple forms will long endure if well fitted for their simple conditions of life." [36]

Keaton's world is one of movement. Since movement

implies change, his world become a series of states of being all locked in the constant flux of movement-time. "Movement" itself becomes essential. In such a world, there is no place for thought, perception, or any other stationary observer-acts.

In that sense Keaton's relationship with this world is a unique one. Kerr describes it as a "pact that Keaton has long since made with the not entirely sane universe - his plea of NOLO CONTENDERE, his willingness to go along and let it ride."[37] Since Keaton on the one hand accepts the absurd alienation of man from the world, he does not seek to grasp onto anything, be it object, event, "the absurdist" dilemma, or even his own self - concept. To all he pleads supreme indifference. It is from this profound detachment that his ability to perceive objects in their pure transitory states so naively stems. It is from the depth and naivete of his indifference that his grace within this to - us strange world stems, since to him, all things have always been familiar, nothing has ever been contaminated by subjectivity.

Kerr takes <u>The Navigator</u> as an example of the ever-so tentative, ever-so delicate harmony of Keaton's "laissez-faire" politics:

> "Whatever goes wrong in <u>The Navigator</u> goes wrong because the girl (Keaton's alter-ego) is thinking. Her thinking does not have to be unintelligent; it need only be inopportune. In a world composed of matter - a world that Keaton has mastered by surrendering to its laws until they are ready to turn in his favour - (thinking unleashes) a kind of anti-matter..."[38]

In short, Keaton trusts, accepts, adapts, takes advantage of the regular-irregular behavour of forces greater than

he. He does not need to KNOW since he does not assume the subjective status of KNOWER. He is truly impassive since he does not submit passively to his environment, but interacts with it, responding precisely and spontaneously to the situation of the moment. Once more, movement is crucial. Thought must be turned into movement. In order to apprehend any given thing man must move, he must physically act (and naively interact), before he can claim to have 'thought' or 'seen'. In a world of endless movement, it is the machine in Keaton that guarantees his survival, it is his motor-reflexes that provide the spontaneity which enabled him to always bounce back.

Yet Keaton is machine only in part; his humanity is always present, and the duality is obvious. As Agee describes it,

> "when he ran from a cop his transitions from accelaraing walk to easy jogtrot to brisk canter ... to flogged piston sprint - always floating, above this frenzy, the untroubled, untouchable face - were as distinct and as soberly in order as an automatic gearshift." 39

Buster Keaton the man-machine may easily be divided into separate components. Buster's body becomes the machine, the eyes in his beautiful deadpan face, the humanity. As a man he survives, not because of his mind or his ability to understand, but because of his AWARENESS. Awareness means the capacity to see the world in one's own way and to accept it as such, without trying to either distort or understand it.

One needs only look at the very first film in which Keaton appears, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle's The Butcher Boy, to see his strange truce with the world of Things already fully developed. He enters the frame, as he would so often, being cautious, testing, experimenting; being aware - always aware of his surroundings. Buster Keaton's body, after all, is of this world, and it is enough of a machine to endure all of the world's implacable absurdities. Yet Buster Keaton's face will always remain "apart" from his world as a testament of his impenetrable humanity.

Keaton goes beyond the absurd to expose its own absurdity. He accomplishes this by means of his core - deep implacability and, most importantly, by means of his own total spontaneity. He has carried perception to its ultimate fluidity, to the total objectivity of thought itself. Only his eyes speak of the struggle to maintain so staunch a position; for the rest he is indifferent even unto himself. Where Camus, with forty years experience of the century of alienation and absurdity, rendered man's wretched position in a hostile count-down clock world particularly relevant to the present ambience of cynicism, Keaton gave shape to the same grievances an art-form that was to become the voice of the same era. With consummate ease, he wiggles out of the very traps both he and Camus set up.

The same despair, the same principles of absurdity and yet the great Stone Face, so unconscious of his own grasp-

ing ego as to be totally in tune with an objectivity in motion, transcends this dilemma. Keaton is apart from his world, and yet no stranger to it. He is outside its chaos and thus untouched by it.

FOOTNOTES, Chapter 2

1. Blesh,p.199.

2. James Agee, Agee on Film (New York:Grosset and Dunlap,1969), p.15.

3.Ibid.

4.Ibid.

5. Martin Esslin,The Theater of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Co.,1961),p.16.

6. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays trans. Justin O'Brien (New York : Alfred A. Knopf,1969), pp.12-16.

7. Ibid.,p.15.

8. Ibid.,p.14.

9. Ibid.,p.15.

10. Ibid.,pp.29-30.

11. Jean-Paul Sartre, Literary Essays (New York: Philosophical Library,Inc.,1957), p.25.

12. Albert Camus, The Outsider, trans.Stuart Gilbert (Markhan, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada,Ltd.,1976),p.95.

13. Ibid.,p.64.

14. Ibid.,p.120.

15. Sartre,p.24.

16. Ibid.,pp.26-27.

17. Camus, The Myth, p.15.

18. Sartre,p.27.

19. Camus,The Myth,p.15.

20. Esslin,p.17.

21. Ibid.,pp.20-24.

22. Samuel Beckett, Proust (new York: Grove Press,Inc.,n.d.), pp.4-5.

23. Camus, The Myth, pp.12-16.

24. Wyndham Lewis, Time and Western Man (Boston:Beacon Press, 1957), p.394.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.,p.395.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.,pp.394-7.

30. Ibid.,p.397.

31. Ibid.,p.398.

32. Ibid.,pp.396-7.

33. Sartre,p.27.

34. Ibid.

35. Agee,p.15.

36. Charles Darwin, The Origin of Species and the Descent of Man (New York: Random House,no date),p.98.

37. Kerr,p.237.

38. Ibid.

39. Agee,p.15.

Chapter 3

THE SURREALIST OBJECT

A characteristic definitive of twentieth-century man is his difficulty in adjusting to the enormous technological strides of which he himself has been the cause. As science progressed, the machine usurped great power and status from its creator, a development the latter found perplexing and almost intolerable. On a rational level, man could comprehend the benefits his mechanical progeny afforded him, yet at the same time, he felt emotionally threatened. This uneasy awe stemmed largely from the utterly implacable nature of the machine: operating exclusively through logic, it is beyond the appeal of gentler considerations. All feeling, and any leeway for emotional factors, has no part in the rigid mechanical process. A man is thereby considered as all men, a position which is in itself potentially dehumanizing and clearly terrifying. Since man is endowed with both reason and feeling, his mistrust of something as powerful and as logically perfect as a machine is understandable. The basic fear of losing one's humanity or feeling through the impact of the machine - a fear exploited in countless science-fiction films -is, indeed, so deeply ingrained in twentieth-century man as to be basic to his psyche.

Under the guise of logical efficiency, society became progressively more streamlined, ordered, classified and ultimately dehumanized. Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1926), a film made after his first trip to New York , portrays the city as a huge machine.[1] Man became uneasy, almost out of place in his world. In Man and his Symbols, Carl Jung claims

that man feels isolated in his environment. He has lost his contact with nature, his 'primitive psyche',as Jung calls it, and with it has lost the profound psychic energy that this symbolic union provided.[2]

Man became obsessed with the desire to extricate himself from the constraint of pure mechanics, a constraint his own reason (and its tools, the machines) had established. As the order of modern efficiency loomed evermore restrictive, so did man's longing for escape from the fruits of his reason grow. In the ensuing tension,he began to discover a new relationship between his mortal self and the infinite reality within which he confronts himself in daily context. This concept crystallized in the early 1920's, and a new movement, Surrealism, emerged to give it voice,

The Surrealists put forth a new approach to their environment: their view was dualistic. They looked at the world both subjectively, as a mirror reflecting the inner fantasies (or emotions) and certain realities of man, and objectively, as an autonomous living organism existing on a plane parallel to man's. In this respect, the Surrealists' approach is similar to many of Buster Keaton's artistic and philosophic principles. Perhaps more than any other modern artistic movement, the Surrealists echo Keaton. Both confront the same twentieth-century 'crisis'. Both strive to transcend, and thus eliminate, the arbitrary limitations and definitions which stifle man. Both adopt, as a means to this end, a confrontation with the object.

The Surrealists stressed the importance of chance associations. They sought to free objects from pre-ordained notions of use, context, purpose, and hence, a kind of reality. Seeing their environment as a void in which any number of moving objects may, for a time, interact, The Surrealists effectively freed the object by placing it in this new and free space. They sought to thus liberate the object's endless possibilities of meaning. The Surrealists' unexpected juxtaposition of objects echoed the poetic chords of a previous generation, struck by Lautreamont:

> Beautiful like the fortuitous meeting, on a dissection table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella.
> 4

The object assumes a new importance. Freed from pre-conceived formulae, it is left to seek out new relations and meanings other than the familiar ones. In no way does this approach imply that the 'pre-established definitions' of an object are wrong; instead it emphasizes that it is intrinsically wrong to isolate an object in time. This concept, then, is closely related to the definition, presented above, of the 'real' (optical, according to Lewis) object as existing as a series of effects locked in the flux of movement-time. The possibilities for every moving object being endless, this most certainly does not exclude the probability that the object might return (for a time) to its original 'closed meaning'.

This Surrealist concept of the object as freely existing within a time-space sphere generated a wholesale questioning of the 'accepted' nature of reality. If, as the Surrealists maintained, their universe was in constant motion, then it was, of necessity, a universe whose fundamental principles are Law (order) and Hazard (chaos). The joint-rule is necessitated by the Universe's state of perpetual movement. Since movement, by its nature, gives rise to change and change, in turn, implies possible hazard. Hence, within the Surrealist persepective, the universe is one whose fundamental principle will always be Hazard, but Hazard within bounds. Hazard without bounds would be a universe without physical laws - a perpetual and total chaos.[5]

This vision of the nature of the universe forced a re-evaluation of the value of logical reality, that is, a re-definition of the 'reality' of an object in terms only of logical usage or purpose. The element of change seemed to eclipse that of logic; that is to say, in a world jointly ruled by Law (order) and Hazard (chaos), the most perfect progression of logic need not lead to a 'logically' appropriate conclusion. Order being finite, restrictive, and chaos being infinite; the latter takes precedence.

The diminished belief in the importance (or ultimate 'reality') of purely rational methods of perception led the Surrealists to greater acceptance of the irrational.[6] Their view considered 'subjective reality' (or fantasy) as existing on a plane of equal in importance to 'objective reality'

(the reality of moving objects freed from pre-conceived definition). They repeatedly stressed the value of 'irrational' thought and unconscious association.[7] John Cage, a musician ideallogically not dissimilar to the Surrealists, advised the Korean artist Nam June Pack to write as much as possible before his English improved, because, in Pack's own words 'broken English is rich in semantics'. Cage was intrigued by the unexpected, though often grammatically incorrect, linguistic associations that foreigners, computers and poets have in common.[8]

In The Road to the Absolute, Balakian discusses the impact of the Surrealist confrontation with the object:

> "..the surrealist perspective towards the object brought about an almost metaphysical leap in space, which lifted the object from nature's frame and reoriented it in the infinite."[9]

Early Surrealist painters eliminated the 'crutch' of context. They explored the endless permutations of looking at the object, freeing it from its 'pigeonholed' existence vis-a-vis man or other objects in the framework of some massive logical scheme. Di Chirico's concern with space led to his portrayal of the environment as a huge void in which objects move about unhindered. "In so doing, he altered the climate of both living and inanimate forms, denuded the frame, created a vacuum in which sparse objects pause as if in finality, shedding their known robes and acquiring new ones that must be guessed. The simplest figures become the most mystifying because of the unrestrictive character of simplicity".[10]

While Di Chirico's concern was space, Picasso's was time. He sought to change the accepted form of the object by simultaneously bringing to it different perspectives. His distortions are time-oriented comments on perception, for it can be said that to see several perspectives at once is to be in several times at once.

The later generation of Surrealists further extended these initial explorations of Picasso and Di Chirico towards a more radical mutation of the object. This endeavour was greatly aided by Andre Breton and other writers whose expirements with words induced a new consideration of the object. Together, Breton and the Surrealist painters tried to show that the human mind was able to expand and control its sense perceptions; moreover, they emphasized the importance of that phenomena.

In Genesis and Artistic Perspective of Surrealism, Breton states that the emancipation of the object is the result of the artist's release from the obsession of usage. "The important thing for the artist is not to see or hear but to recognize."[11] Inspired by Rimbaud's nostalgic antediluvian vision, unbridled by set perceptions, Breton believed that instead of seeking the actual, current appearances of objects, one must look for their latent or forgotten significance. This does not imply the pursuit of rare objects; often the simplest ones are the most enigmatic. They are most charged with possible associations with our mental activity, so that actually the things that surround us are

not really merely 'objects' but become the subjects of our spiritual environments. The intensity of the psychic stimulus they generate is judged by the vividness and richness of associations which they arouse. The artist Magritte observes that: "There is a secret affinity between certain images; it is equally valid for the objects those images represent ... We are familiar with birds in cages; interest is awakened more readily if the bird is replaced by a fish or a shoe: but though these images are strange they are unhappily accidental, arbitrary. It is possible to obtain a new image which will stand up to examination through having something final, something right about it: it's the image showing an egg in a cage."[12]

In this, the importance lay not necessarily in the object per se as much as in the circumstances of its being viewed. The Surrealists Giacometti, Dali and Max Ernst conducted an important experiment on the subject and its relation to the object entitled Research on Irrational Knowledge of the Object. Their principal purpose was to destroy the conventional value of the object and to replace it by a representative value, perhaps closer to its primitive meaning. Through questions both adroit and spontaneous they revealed the extent to which the object could be related to the psychic life of the viewer. The intensity of the psychic stimulus is judged by the vividness and richness of associations which it arouses.[13] This, it seems, was not an attempt on their part to transcend the physical world but to transmute

it, to allow for a degree of fusion between the ability to perceive and the inner hallucination that is set in motion and given concrete representation. When, therefore, the common denominator of perception is erased and replaced by a purely subjective grasp, the objects are freed from accepted standards of perspective, and become as different from each other as one individual's perception from another's.[14]

Surrealism transforms the object from its general and 'normal' role to a specialized new one. The Surrealists see the world as full of unfamiliar objects, or familiar ones that express the unknown. Consequently they were able to believe that one could be a materialist without being a determinist: one could accept the objective reality of matter but not allow it to be interpreted merely by rational faculties.[15]

The Surrealists, by expanding mental or emotional faculties and exploring latent ones established an intimate relationship between exterior reality and 'inner' ,more subjective, reality. The formerly passive viewer ceases to see passively with the blinkers of a threadbare logic and recognizes his own creatve power to transfigure the universe.

The Surrealist rapport between the object and man is most complex. The essence of their aims is as follows:

1. To liberate the object and thus accept the objective reality of matter.

2. Not to allow the objective reality of matter to be interpreted exclusively by rational faculties.

3. To give a new dimension to the concept of subjectivity : to relate the purely objective object (on a new plane of reality) to the psychic life it stimulates in the viewer. (The goal of Rimbaud in his search for antediluvian meanings.)

Three elements are essential to this process: the object, movement, and man. Surrealist 'reality' does not rise out of any single one of these elements in isolation, but rather from the endless possibilities of association between all three.

Buster Keaton shares with the Surrealists much of this broad moral and spiritual perspective. Keaton's visual imagery, its hallucinatory force, the subconscious train of thought it reveals, and its occasional basis in the Absurd, create a strong point of contact with the Surrealists. In Keaton, as in the Surrealists, one finds evidence of a deep-rooted resentment, a sense of psychic isolation within the universe at the core of his artistic expression. This sense of isolation stemmed from the twentieth-century's increasing dependence on the concept of pure logic which robbed man of what Jung calls a "profound psychic energy". It was left to man to discover a new relationship between himself and his environment, and thereby to re-establish his 'psychic' link.

Like the Surrealists, Keaton confronts the situation through a re-assessment of the object. Using the object as metaphor, he re-creates his environment by viewing it in a twofold manner: both subjectively, as an outer mirror to the inner fantasies of the viewer, and objectively, as a separate living organism existing on a parallel plane.

Subjective 'reality' concerns itself largely with joining 'illogical' ideas, hitherto unconnected in the mind, with new meanings which had been hidden, lost or forgotten through overfamiliarity. It is here that the role of the subject assumes a new relevance. The new reality - subjective reality - no longer addresses itself to the object as such, but to the relationship of the viewer to the object. It is the Reality of Situation.[16] A definition may be formulated in the following manner: OBJECTIVE REALITY + SUBJECTIVE (non-rational) PERCEPTION = REALITY OF SITUATION.

Abraham A.Moles, in Art and Cybernetics in the Supermarket writes:

> Some situations are authentic, others are not. To someone looking at a postcard (of the Mona Lisa) with great admiration, the original may eventually lose its authenticity and even be a disappointment when finally confronted. The lack of cultural alienation characterizes this authenticity of situation which relates exclusively to one individual in front of one work of art.[17]

Within such a context, the Keaton fantasy clearly holds an essential 'reality'. Rudi Blesh demonstrates the workings of the Keaton fantasy in Sherlock Junior. On Keaton's visual means of expressing the metaphysical dream, he writes:

> (Keaton) shows us exactly when the dream begins: the dreamer arises like a transparent ghost from the sleeping body ... Buster Keaton, when he chose to be, could be both complex and subtle. This visual symbol is a case in point. It shows us, to begin with, the invisible, inward transition from waking to dreaming. But it also shows us meaning: which is the more real, the nickelodeon projectionist's prosaic life or his romantic dream. Keaton makes the projectionist's dream into a picture being shown on the nickelodeon screen. He lets the projectionist (in his dream) walk straight into the screen and become a part of this inner motion picture, this picture-within-a-picture. Thus, with the greatest sublety, he makes us accept the outer story as real (and thus, in effect, all cinema), because we must accept the outer motion picture as real in order to postulate the inner one as unreal, that is, dreamed. This is more than visual semantics; it is graphic epistemology.
> 18

Objective 'reality' stimulates a re-assessment of the nature of the object itself. In establishing the object as a separate, though parallel, living unit, this second 'reality' frees it from logically preconceived and restrictive notions of usage, thus liberating the object's infinite possibilities of meaning. The primary factor behind this re-evaluation of the nature of object must be seen as movement. In establishing this 'objective object' as existing freely within time and space, as assuming new meanings with each new relationship it is free to form, Keaton makes movement its fundamental principle.

Keaton's way of coping with the object is always through movement; Action not thought is what is most important. Hence, his repetitive scanning of the horizon, his search for movement which may not necessarily be understood, but may be dealt with, is thus partly explained.

Again and again Keaton underlines the importance of movement to an understanding of the object.

Perhaps the most celebrated example of this is to be found in The Navigator. Buster, stranded on board an empty oceanliner, experiences great difficulties trying to run the galley equipment. Nothing seems to do what it is supposed to do, and disaster seems iminent. Later on in the film, we return to the galley to find all the equipment now beautifully under Buster's cool control. Very little has actually changed - still, nothing seems to be doing what it is supposed to do. The difference is that now it is doing something new. Each thing has taken on a new task, and thus a new meaning - a meaning which, in this situation is far more efficient and therefore, far more 'real'.

The change from the first scene to the second is that, in the later scene, the objects have entered the movement flux. We note a similar situation in The General. Buster and his girl, aboard a first train, are being chased by enemy soldiers aboard a second one. Seeking to slow down their pursuers, Buster litters the tracks with logs. His girl, anxious to lend a hand elects to tie a few feet of rope between two tiny trees, one on each side of the tracks. Her aim is to stop a powerful locomotive. Buster looks at the tiny trees, the few feet of rope, and finally the girl. He raises his eyes heavenward, and we easily share in his frustration with the illogical stupidity of such a device.

A short while later, however, as the enemy train reaches the 'trap', the unexpected occurs. The trees are uprooted and somehow jam into the wheels of the locomotive engine, bringing the train to an abrupt halt and tying up several enemy soldiers in one flowing motion. Movement has occurred, new relationships have been formed and the objects involved have assumed new meanings.

Like the Surrealists, Keaton sees his environment as a void in which any number of moving objects may, for a time, interact. Meaning or 'reality' must always be assessed within the context of movement. Ultimately, then, Keaton and the Surrealists have a great deal in common both in method and aim. Through their efforts, they seek to re-establish man's perspective towards, his understanding of, and ultimately what Jung refers to as his " symbolic psychic link" with, the world. For Keaton this is particularly valid. His ability to press on against seemingly insurmountable odds, the patience which Agee describes as 'proper to granite but uncanny when found in man" further testifies to Keaton's awareness of his world. Winning or losing is ultimately or relatively of little importance; for Keaton, playing the game - being aware, moving, experiencing, being alive - is what really matters.

The ultimate importance of this approach which both Keaton and the Surrealists share lies in its inherent renewal of importance of man. In considering the Object in terms of perception and movement, Keaton and the Surrealists

achieved their aim of broadening the horizons of man's universe, expanding both mental and emotional faculties.

Perhaps the most immediate, and 'exaggerated' exponent of this aesthetic and philosophic process is the Pop Artist Andy Warhol. He shares with the Surrealists the same basic approach to the object, but lends to it an even greater sense of dynamism and immediacy. This may perhaps be caused from living in New York in the 1960's - in the midst of the most industrial, commercial environment imaginable. The objects of Warhol's world encompass the everyday, commonplace, or vulgar image of modern industrial America - the 'new', the 'store-bought',the idealized vulgarity of advertising, of the supermarket, of the hero, of violent action and sentimental romance. These are, of course, in many ways the same objects that confronted the Surrealists, but in Warhol, they perhaps seem more complex. Warhol's first step in confronting the object was the same as the Surrealists' - he sought (like Marcel Duchamp) to free the object from classification in terms of usage. The importance of his contribution lay in extending the Surrealist approach to include the 'Art Object' and the artist himself as well. Decroux wrote,"Artists are Gods. They want to make man all over again, but start with his hat instead of his skeleton".[19] Warhol proposed a new role for the artist - not as a God, but as a catalyst, a master-of-ceremonies. In this, he emphasized the use of mechanical silk-screen reproduction which eliminated the often overly respected and

admired artist's signature.

The Warhol process is one of almost total liberation. Juxtaposing the mass-media object, such as the Campbell's soup can, on the artistic pedestal, he creates an absurdity which effectively destroys the viewer's preconceived notions of each. Thus he ultimately affirms what Moles describes as 'the reality of situation', presenting the object free in time to form new psychic associations. Since the Warhol object is in itself a fantasy, an industrial marketing play on well-researched logic of the unconscious, the liberated object testifies, through the reality of situation, to the ultimate reality of fantasy. By isolating these cultural fantasies from the logic of the mass-media culture in which they are found, Warhol frees them to form new relationships on an uncoscious plane and thus enter the realm of time-space Reality.

Warhol's approach is neither satirical nor antagonistic. He is largely characterized through his use of repetition -endless rows of Coca-Cola bottles,literally presented, and arranged as they might be on supermarket shelves. Using this principle of monotonous repetition, which is hypnotic inits effect, Warhol reiterates the nature of his work as a dream within a dream. To cite another example, 'Marilyn' (a dream in a sense) within a painting (another dream).

Buster Keaton's approach to fantasy closely parallels Warhol's dream-within-a-dream concept. They differ in their means but not in their ends; Warhol faces advertising art as Keaton does the theater. Ultimately they affirm the reality of fantasy, for in similar ways,random, unconscious, and dreamlike associations exist within the quasi-real framework of both mass-culture and the theater.

Two Keaton films outstanding in their exploration of fantasy are Sherlock Junior and The Playhouse. As we have earlier discussed, in Sherlock Junior, as the dream-Keaton leaves the projection booth and enters the screen, a valid question is raised concerning the parallel 'reality' of fantasy. As one witnesses the screen image of Buster Keaton split into two identical images - which one is the real one? Keaton offers us a simple answer: neither, or both.20

The Playhouse is an equally excellent example of the complexity of Keaton's approach to fantasy. The Playhouse was created from memory. Blesh described it as "an inward creation from the long continuum of past and present, of then and now, in Buster Keaton's conscious and unconscious mind. It is a potent memory, fertile and patient. Keaton's past has always upstaged his present."[21] As such, it is a film swarming with Keatons.

Buster buys a ticket to a minstrel show and goes in. The scene cuts to the orchestra: Buster as drummer,bassist, fiddler,trombonist, bassist,and clarinetist. In the wings,

Buster as stagehand raises the curtain. On the stage itself, nine Buster Keatons begin a dance routine. In the all-Keaton audience one spectator observes that "This fellow Keaton seems to be the whole show." The program concurs:

KEATON'S OPERA HOUSE
*** PROGRAM ***
Buster Keaton Presents
BUSTER KEATON'S MINSTRELS

Interlocutor	Buster Keaton
Bones	Buster Keaton
Sambo	Buster Keaton
Tenor Solo	Buster Keaton
Asleep in the Deep	Buster Keaton
Comic Effusion	Buster Keaton
Song and Dance	Buster Keaton
Quartette	Buster Keaton
Clarionette Solo	Buster Keaton
Finale	Buster Keaton

STAFF FOR BUSTER KEATON

Manager	Buster Keaton
Stage Director	Buster Keaton
Musical Director	Buster Keaton
Electrician	Buster Keaton
Property Man	Buster Keaton
Theatre Transportation	Buster Keaton
Advance Agent	Buster Keaton
Dances Arranged by	Buster Keaton
Special Instructor	Buster Keaton
Original Songs & Music by	Buster Keaton
Scenery Painted by	Buster Keaton
Mechanical Effect by	Buster Keaton
Marches Arranges by	Buster Keaton
Tableaux by	Buster Keaton

Albert Lewin describes its atmosphere: "An altogether extrordinary emotional effect," he observed, "came from the dreamlike, obsessive, hallucinatory repetition of that strange frozen face. It was almost nightmarish - a phantasmagoria of masks."[22] Keaton heightens the impact of

The Playhouse by sinking deeper into the fantasy of his medium.

Though we shall discuss the ontology of Keaton's medium -the cinema- in greater depth further on, we must examine it here briefly for the purposes of our present discussion. In What is Cinema?, Andre Bazin asserts that in "photography, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent..."[23] This production by automatic means greatly affects the psychology of the photographed image, lending it a kind of innate believability through a transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.[24]

In The Playhouse Keaton uses this 'believability' to raise questions on fantasy. Are nine simultaneous Keatons on the screen any less believable - any less REAL - than one? This brings us back to A.A. Moles' view of authenticity as being not concerned with the object as such, but with the relationship involved between the viewer and this object.[25]

The Playhouse offers enormous insight into Buster Keaton. In its exploration of reality-fantasy, another important question is raised concerning the new relevance of the copy, of the fantasy. This results in the copy assuming a new value. The 'originals' become nothing more than models for the copies from which they are made. This does not mean that the 'original' - the 'real' - should be dispensed with, it simply assumes a new role. Keaton's ability to use

his medium as a means to establishing his thematic ends emerges. It seems appropriate to ask if Keaton's being sectioned across the screen in The Playhouse with hypnotic repetition is really greatly different from Andy Warhol's endless rows of supermarket Coke bottles?

Keaton has, in effect, objectified himself. Furthermore, by forcing his multiple objectified self to the attention of the spectator, he creates an ambience in which the bounds of reality are stretched to their utmost. Interchanging the concepts of 'object' and 'subject' almost at will, Keaton - like the Surrealists - effectively necessitates a re-assessment of the role of each in terms of an overall scheme of viable reality. Returning to Jung, it is the 'psychic energy released' through such an upheaval that lends it such vital importance.[26]

Footnotes, Chapter 3

1. Tom Hutchinson, Horror and Fantasy in the Movies (New York:Crescent Books, 1974), pp.114-7.

2. Carl Jung, Approaching the Unconscious, part I, Man and his Symbols (New York: Dell, 1964), pp.87-91.

3. Anna Balakian, Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co.), p.172.

4. Comte de Lautréamont, as quoted in Balakian, p.191.

5. John Fowles, The Aristos (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p.17.

6. Balakian, p.172.

7. Ibid.

8. Jasia Reichardt, Cybernetics, Art and Ideas, chapter 1 of Cybernetics, Art and Ideas, ed. Jasia Reichardt (Norwich: Fletcher and Sons, 1971), p.16.

9. Balakian, p.170.

10. Ibid., p.171.

11. André Breton, as quoted in Balakian, p.172.

12. René Magritte, as quoted in Louis Scutenaire, René Magritte (Brussels: Librairie Sélection, 1947), p.75.

13. Balakian, p.173.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., p.172.

16. Abraham A. Moles, Art and Cybernetics in the Supermarket, chapter 13 of Cybernetics, Art and Ideas, ed. Reichardt, p.61.

17. Ibid., p.62.

18. Blesh, p.243.

19. Decroux, as quoted in Moles, p.61.

20. Blesh, p.243.

21. Ibid., p.164

22. Albert Lewin, as quoted in Blesh, p.168.

23. André Bazin, What is Cinema? (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p.14.

24. Ibid.

25. Moles, p.61.

26. Jung, p.89.

Chapter 4

COMEDY AND PERCEPTION

Perhaps surprisingly, we find in the comic approach many similarities to that of the Surrealists. In broadest terms, both offer a similar critical view of the optical illusion of perception, the discrepancy existing between what actually is, and what simply appears to be. We have previously described the surrealist approach in terms of adopting a particular confrontation with the object as a means of reinforcing the above theory. Comedy, in its concern with the object, functions to a large extent under a similar format.

Bergson writes, "The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is actually HUMAN."[1] If we consider the object as a means towards comedy, the latent discrepancy existing between it as what is and what appears to be emerges. This is, of course, directly related to the very nature of perception per se. Perception, or what Bergson calls the "human" element, remains the common denominator of all comedy. In terms of the object itself, the result of the confrontation of the two inherent concepts or perceptions of the object as what is and appears to be is, almost by definition, in fact Comedy.

Schopenhauer, in The World as Will and Idea, discusses the comic in the following terms.

"The cause of laughter ... is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the

tion

> real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. It often occurs in this way: two or more real objects are thought through ONE concept, and the identity of the concept is transfered to the objects; it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view."
> [2]

According to this view, the phenomenon of laughter, then, always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between a conception and the "real object" thought under it, thus between the "abstract" and the "concrete" object of perception. Therefore in everything that excites laughter it must always be possible to show a conception and a "particular".
[3]

Albert Cook, in The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean, discusses a synonymous confrontation in terms of Reason versus Imagination:

> "Reason, the logical faculty, attempting to synthesize a multitude of facts which are similar in some respects and dissimilar in others, will resolve upon the typical and probable as meaningful for life. But imagination enshrines the ideal, the wonderful, supra-logical insight into the true nature of reality."
> [4]

In clarifying his argument on the relative levels of perception, Cook cites Plato's three planes: "name (onoma), reason (logos), and form (eidos) - the last, which equals imagination is the truth. Reason, the second, is only a step on the way to the grasp of form."
[5]

Ralph Waldo Emerson relates Cook's principles more directly to the comic mode, describing the comic as that

which incessantly compares the sublime idea with the bloated 'nothing' which pretends to be it. In The Comic he cites an interesting example to substantiate this position:

> "The lie is in the surrender of a man to his appearance;...It affects us oddly, as to see things turned upside down, or to see a man in a high wind run after his hat, which is always droll. The relation of the parties is inverted - hat being for the moment master...The majesty of man is violated. He whom all things should serve, serves some of his own tools."[6]

In comedy, then,we continually witness a clash between the 'general' and the 'particular', the 'concept' of the object and the 'object' itself. Theodor Lipps discusses this within the context of the PERCEPTION of the object, describing the comical as the "surprisingly insignificant".[7] For Lipps, there are two successive motives in the comical: first bewilderment, then enlightenment. "The bewilderment consists in the fact that the comical at first claims for itself an excess of the powers of conception. The enlightenment consists in its appearing insignificant, so that it cannot, on the other hand, lay claim to such powers of conception."[8]

This comic process of bewilderment followed by enlightenment generates a kind of 'psychic oscillation'. The attention turns from that which met the expectation and yet did not satisfy it back again to that which originally gave

rise to this expectation; the energy of the dammed-up wave of appreception flows back, and laughter results.[9]

We have hitherto considered various descriptions of the comic process. Though they may be cloaked in different terminology, the essence of comedy as a clash in modes of perception concerning the object remains unchanged in each.

The emphasis of our analysis has thus far been on the subject itself, and 'man' or 'the nature of man' has more or less been excluded. It seems appropriate, therefore, that we should presently focus our attention on him.

As Emerson writes,

> "the essence of all comedy....seems to be an honest or well-intended halfness.....there is no seeming, no halfness in Nature, until the appearance of man. Unconscious creatures do the whole will of wisdom. But man, through his access to Reason, is capable of the perception of a whole and a part."[10]

Our discussion of the comic principles now shifts its perspective, placing man rather prominently in the foreground. A "halfness" which Emerson has noted, and which Bergson in Laughter emphasizes is not restricted to man's sense of perception - it is very much a part of man himself. This stems directly from man's unique position as the only creature possessing the somewhat contradictory elements of body and soul. The soul, according to Bergson, "is infinitely supple and perpetually in motion". Not so, however,[11]

in the case of the body. This latter possesses instead the obstinate recalcitrance characteristic of all matter.

Man, then, unlike anything else, possesses within himself, the primary elements of all comedy - body and soul, the concrete and the abstract, the general and the particular, in a word, the comic dichotomy. It is important to recognize that the simple possession of these contrasting components does not make man a laughing matter. Man is simply something of a "walking contradiction". The contradiction is not funny <u>in itself</u>, for the dual elements which create it also encompass within them a tendency to balance out, but not to negate, one another. Thus, man is not comic, he is merely POTENTIALLY comic. The balance is a very delicate one, however, and may, at the slightest provocation, topple to either side. It is precisely at this point that comedy can occur.

As Bergson notes,

> "Where matter succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of a body, an effect that is comic. The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine."[12]

That man possesses a dual nature is, in this case, the accepted premise. The comedy which results within such a scheme emerges only when the delicate balance which joins the two facets is upset. Bergson cites an interesting example in a bashful man who "rather gives the impression of a person embarrassed by his body, looking around for some

convenient cloak-room in which to deposit it".[13] In this case, clearly, the balance has been disrupted.

We find this disproportionate balance in a wide variety of situations. Bergson mentions <u>two</u> in particular, society and ceremonies, as equally representative variations on his comic theme of "the mechanical encrusted on the living."[14] As he describes the starched formality of any ceremonial, he notes that "as soon as we forget the serious object of a solemnity or a ceremony, those taking part in it give us the impression of puppets in motion."[15]

This same image is found throughout all forms of society, in which endless bureaucracies, "role playing", self-deception, "commercialized needs and desires" are created and geared towards promoting the fallacy that life can easily be defined, packaged and accepted. In a close examination of one fundamental social principle - the law, for example - Bergson's mechanical/spiritual image is in its most vivid state. It is fundamentally the function of the law to contain man's basic irrationality behind walls of rationally conceived rules. Mack Sennett built an empire on this simple contradiction. The underlying comic contradiction within his <u>Keystone Kops</u> was one of the general versus the particular. Through the Kops (obviously representing the Law), then, Sennett offered a valid comment on those who pursue their goals with too much zeal and not enough thought about ultimate values or specific situations.

This is not, of course, to imply that Sennett was something of a perceptua-comic theorist. He was not. His Keystone Kops simply tapped a very basic human feeling of hostility towards forms of unnatural authority, in this case represented by policemen. Social law, for example, is unnatural in its attempts to confine the laws of Nature into a cohesive unit geared towards the good of the abstract whole, not of the individual. It is indeed the "general", and almost never the "particular", that is normally considered. The law exists as an artificial reconstruction, removed from the very stream of life which it seeks to direct. It is, then, precisely the artificially reconstructed which becomes ultimately comic.

In order to fully understand this comic process, however, we must go behind the theories we have discussed to examine certain aspects of the metaphysics upon which they rest. From this new perspective, we acknowledge Time as the primary reality within the comic equation. In fact, we may define comedy as a break in the logic of the Time continuum. The living, that which is most immersed in Time, will change the most. Now, according to Bergson, comedy is the mistaking of the mechanical for the living - the assumption that living forms can be held as they are in TIME, just as though they were mechanical, just as though a man were a store mannequin.[16]

The metaphysical basis on which much of Bergson's work rests is that time is, so to speak, the essence of the

contract, that what fluxes is more real than what is saved from the flux.[17] Looking back, however, over the theories we have discussed thus far, we see time emerging as the common denominator of them all. In discussing the "mechanical", the "rigid" the "stereotyped", the reference is to the previously mentioned limitations of actuality, what Emerson calls '"halfness". Comedy is one example of the dictum that nothing actual or real is wholly logical. Bergson is correct in his observation that there is an animus in all humour; and that it is directed against the limitations of actuality, or of time.[18]

Comedy is indeed a critical process, but its criticism of all things is aimed at their artificial structure (what we have earlier described as the "common-sense object"), for it is artificial structure alone which is responsible for the paucity of actual value.

The comic process is as varied as it is elaborate. It preys on the discrepancy between what <u>is</u> and what <u>appears</u> to be, what should be, or what might be. All comedy is a ruse, a trick - but unlike the magician's trick, the comic point is directed towards an ultimate understanding of the elements which make up the trick, and of the trick itself. In this respect, we may venture to say that the more elaborate the comic trick, the more effective it becomes. And this, of course, brings us directly to the comedy of Buster Keaton.

Keaton's own words on the subject are enlightening,

but only to a point - for Keaton was an artist innocent of practically any formal artistic principle beyond "getting a laugh without being too ridiculous". The key word here is 'ridiculous'. On and off screen, Keaton constantly reiterated this conviction that comedy must never be "too ridiculous". In Buster Keaton, David Robinson sees this approach as similar to that of Billy Wilder, who explained his reasoning for starting Some Like It Hot with a realistic staging of the St.Valentine's Day Massacre as the need to give sufficient weight of motive to the comic action.[19] The meticulous care with which Keaton approached his films -particularly the period pictures (the hobby-horse in Our Hospitality was later displayed in the Smithsonian Institute as a museum-class replica) contributes to the logic and realism he sought as the basis of his comedy. The distinction of a Keaton film (with very few exceptions) is the complete dramatic logic with which it moves from beginning to end. It is constructed not as a progression of gags but as an integral adventure story in which the narrative incidents all have a comic slant. Both elements -logic and comedy- are clearly interdependent. We have discussed comedy as the product of a confrontation between what appears to be and what actually is. From this axiom, then, we may venture to say that the more believable the underlying logic is, the more relevant, effective and powerful the comic interaction with it can be.

Keaton's quest for realism, however, was not limited to conscientious period reconstructions, historical accuracy, and carefully wrought narrative. His powers extend far beyond

these limits. Watching a Keaton film,one becomes strikingly aware of the combination of his abilities as performer, as METTEUR EN SCENE and as film-maker. As Robinson states, "Naturally and instinctively, without any basis of theory, Keaton arrived at a wonderfully precise and lucid film style."[20] Keaton truly mastered his medium. In his drive toward visual truth in both action and photography, Keaton applied documentary techniques and point of view to the filming of comedy. Through the photographic realism of documentary techniques he was able to heighten the credibility of the almost incredible. In this lies the crux of the paradox of Keaton's comedy and therefore, in the interest of understanding it fully, let us digress momentarily and examine Keaton's medium - film. Andre Bazin, in <u>What is Cinema</u>?, discusses the ontology of the photographic image.He sees the act of preserving the <u>appearance</u> as a basic psychological need in man by providing a defense against the passage of time.[21] The <u>reality</u> of the cinematic image seems to be of chief concern.

> "For in photography, for the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a non-living agent. This production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other artforms. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer,we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually <u>re</u>-presented,set before us,that is to say,in time and space. A very faithful drawing may actually tell us more about the model,but despite the promptings of our critical intelligence it will never have the irrational power of the photographic reproduction to bear away our faith."[22]

There is indeed much truth in the assertion that photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of the transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. Assuming a totally mechanical reproduction process, the object represented differs from the "true" object almost only in terms of time. The photographic image, concludes Bazin, in its purest state adds no subjectivity; it merely embalms time. The photographic image is then objectivity in time.[23] But it is not the photographic image itself which interests us here - we are concerned with the cinematic image. In discussing the moving picture, not the still photograph, we are no longer dealing with the pure isolation of an object in time, but rather isolation followed by re-activation within a different time continuum. The cinematic process is as follows: the film-maker fragments what is in essence a synthesis while himself working towards a new synthesis.[24] The problem involved results from innate believability in that which is photographed (due, in Bazin's words, to "its pretension to reality on the grounds of a kind of psychic fourth dimension")[25]: the viewer, believing that he is seeing "reality", is actually looking at it through the instrumentality of an art form that profoundly changes its nature. Time and Space become most important. The sequence of a film gives the image a new unity in time. Space, as it is applied to the object, is radically destroyed by the screen. Bazin writes, "The outer edges of the screen are not the edges of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality."[26] The contrast is evident. The space of a "real"

object is self-contained - the edges of the object polarize space inwards. On the Contrary, what the screen shows us "seems to be a part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe".[27]

The cinematic medium then is characterized by the following process: synthesis, fragmentation, new synthesis. At the root of this process, however, lies the essence of the cinema, the instrumentality of the means of reproduction and hence the basic "reality" or "believability" of the cinema. Together, these two elements constitute the strange and beautiful reality-fantasy "dream-factory" nature of the medium.

Keaton's mastery of the medium is evidenced by his ability to use these cinematic elements at will, to juggle them, to play against their pre-ordained nature in such a way as to liberate his gags from the purely superficial plane and give them life in space and time as well. To this end, his basic technique consisted of the application of documentary point of view and techniques to the filming of fantasy. Rudi Blesh, in Keaton, is fascinated by the approach:

> "To combine fantasies ... with documentary photography was no small feat, though one aided greatly by Keaton's own ideas of reality, which, though pragmatic, derive from a childhood and youth lived in vaudeville. The Paleface (1921) signally proves how the photographic realism of documentary techniques can heighten the credibility of the almost incredible. It also made picture making even more dangerous for Keaton. In his visual lexicon, documentary photography, to be of intrinsic value, must show what is really taking place - no camera tricks, no half-truths, no stunt man doubling for him. Pursuing this policy would involve Buster in more and more physical hazard."[28]

Once satisfied that a gag was logical and believable, Keaton often went to great lengths to stage it, though it meant breaking his neck (Sherlock Junior) or his ankle (The Electric House) or risking drowning (in practically every film). His great gag enchainments are often extraordinary - but they are not unrealistic or impossible, not "too ridiculous", BECAUSE KEATON DOES THEM.[29]

This, of course, brings us to Keaton's much discussed MISE EN SCENE: the frequent use of the long shot. The central importance in Keaton's directorial technique of long shots satisfies several needs. In terms of Space, its purpose is twofold. Firstly, it communicates honestly in a single image the sense of a man in relation to his world. Blesh quotes Dr.Jermayne Mac Agy on this uniquely Keaton visual symbol: "Buster Keaton's portrait is not a close-up. It is Buster in a great empty space, facing you from far far away. There he stands motionless for that one moment, waiting for his fate."[30]

The second function of the spatial long shot is to define the Keaton environment, that is, the importance of the Keaton environment. The cinematic close-up tends to polarize space inwards. The long shot does the opposite, stressing that for Keaton his environment is one without limits: beyond the four edges of the screen (for dangers not only proceed from all corners of the land but can swell from underground, can fall from the skies) lie desserts of vast omnious actuality.[31] Keaton's use of cinematic space

then both defines his character and his environment, and provides each with that validity essential for their resultant comic interplay.

While the long shot was an important element of the Keaton repertoire, it shares this status with another device which has practically become synonymous with Buster Keaton - the long-take long shot. What the long shot is to space, the long-take long shot is to time. This practice started, presumably, with Keaton's natural pride in letting the audience see that the dangerous falls he took were his own work. Coupled with the great comedian's need for reality, the long-take long shot shatters the contemporary concepts of cinematic time. We have discussed the film medium as one of fragmentation (isolating the object in time) followed by synthesis (reactivating the object in a new time-continuum). This process does not fully negate the 'reality' of the moving photographic images, but it surely does, to a degree, set them apart. Their ultimate reality or believability is perhaps as equally valid as the photograph's but it is indeed distinct, existing in a seperate, if parallel, space and time. Keaton parts in this respect in his confrontation with cinematic time. His use of the long-take long shot, the objective documentary technique, reveals honest, continuous action and REAL-LIFE danger which instantly shatters the cinematic time illusion. The viewer is no longer confronted with isolated filmic reality - safe involvement in a fantasy world, real but set apart - but with a 'gut' awareness of real life. Keaton brilliantly uses this device to step outside the cinematic

time continuum. It is difficult to forget the rescue in College, the climaxes of the modern story in The Three Ages, of Our Hospitality, of Sherlock Junior and Steamboat Bill,Jr.. This process, certainly, does not digress from Keaton's first principle, "to get laughs". It reinforces our definition of comedy, in which the greater the reality of the elements at play are, the greater is the resultant comedy.

Keaton's use of the long-take long shot serves other needs as well. His films as a whole were set apart from those of his contemporaries because of the small number of sub-titles they needed to explain their action. Blesh explains,

> "With Keaton,action alone is almost complete communication. There are times,in fact, when it is complete. With him,action can also be almost incredibly beautiful,in a very pure kinetic sense - that is to say,not action FOR something but action in itself."
> 32

(This, of course,coincides exactly with our description in a previous chapter on the true nature of the object as a certain series of effects looked in a forever moving time-space continuum.) Blesh continues to discuss Keaton's going beyond the boundries of documentary clarity and verisimilitude, reaching for kinetic line.

> "He sought it for expressiveness. In bringing that, it also added aesthetic value. In The Paleface (a sadly underrated Keaton film) we see Keaton's first use of large masses of people in long swirling lines of action,beautifully activated rhythms that,within five years,would culminate with the sweep of armies in The General."
> 33

The kinetic process here described was not new - Quo Vadis

(Enrico Guazzoni,1912), The Birth of a Nation (D.W. Griffith,1915) and several other serious dramatic films had previously employed it - but Keaton was the first and the only one to apply the method to comedy. It is somewhat remarkable to have done so at all. It underlines Keaton's ineradicable sense of comedy as being serious.[34]

The long-take long shot then serves many purposes, lending integrity and reality to the cinematic image, offering deep insight into the nature of the character and his mysterious relationship with his environment, and ultimately increasing the potential range of gags (merely using the long-take long shot is clearly a gag dealing with cinematic time) to encompass the spheres of space and time. All of these elements come into play in the climax of his second feature, Our Hospitality. Perhaps nowhere else in all Keaton's work are we so aware of the combination of his gifts as performer, as director and as film-maker. The gags are all the funnier because they are sprung out of a realistic situation and tried against the touchstone of reality.[35] The scene is perhaps one of the most spectacular 'bona fide' scenes ever photographed. It is beautiful action, set apart from any other moment on film in that it was done without 'fakery' by Buster Keaton himself. Blesh describes it as "A desperately dangerous,wildly exciting feat done in the full dynamic dimension of one continuous filmed sequence, it leaves audiences, today as yesterday, limp and

breathless."[36] The sequence is accomplished in under fifty shots, each of which is far more revealing than any critic might aspire to be:

1. L.S. River. Willie sails down in tender, is tipped out into rapids.

2. M.L.S. Willie, standing in the rapids, tries to pull loose the rope around his waist, which has caught in the rocks. Jerks himself over on his back.

3.- M.L.S. River; reverse of 2. Willie falling backwards into water.

4. L.S. River. Bank in foreground, with girl sitting on it. Willie floats by. Girl up and runs off in panic.

5. Pan shot of Willie as he floats down the river.

6. M.S. River. Willie shoots over rock.

7. M.S. River. Willie shoots over rock.

8. M.S. River. Willie is shot up out of the water and falls back again.

9. L.S. River Bank. Girl gets into canoe and pushes off into stream.

10. L.S. River. Girl is swept in canoe downstream.

11. M.S. River. Willie, as he is swept downstream, grabs foliage on bank and begins to pull himself up; but the foliage breaks off.

12. L.S. River. Girl in canoe is swept downstream towards rapids.

13. L.S. River. Girl is thrown out of canoe which sweeps on without her.

14. L.S. River. Empty canoe is swept by, followed by the helpless girl.

15. M.S. River. Willie, swept along by the tide, comes to a log to which he attaches the rope, still tied around his waist. He sits astride the log which is swept loose and floats off downstream.

16. M.S. River. Willie is swept downstream, clinging to his log.

17. L.S. Brink of waterfall. Willie and the log are swept to the edge. The log catches in the rocks while Willie is swept over the edge and hangs swinging at the end of the rope.

18. M.L.S. Falls seen from reverse view, looking downstream over the brink. Beyond the falls a distant forest can be seen. Willie swings for a moment, then climbs up over the rocky edge and on to the ledge at the top.

19. L.S. The falls, seen from Willie's viewpoint: a veritable Niagara crashing on the rocks below.

20. M.L.S. Top of falls. Willie, clinging to his log, looks down again.

21. As 19.

22. As 20. Willie climbs on top of his log and thence to the ledge. He tries to pull the rope loose from the log; then to dislodge the log.

23. M.L.S. River. Girl being swept downstream.

24. M.L.S. As 22. Willie still struggling with rope looks down.

25. L.S. Falls. Willie struggles.

26. L.S. Falls. The girl's boat goes over the brink, watched by Willie.

27. As 19, 21. The boat crashes on the rocks below.

28. M.S. Top of falls. Willie, more agitated than ever, struggles to free himself.

29. M.S. River. Girl is helpless in the water.

30. M.S. Top of falls. Willie is by now frantic.

31. M.S. Same as 29.

32. M.S. Willie attacks rope with stone.

33. M.S. Girl, swept downstream, snatches hopelessly at foliage on bank.

34. L.S. Falls. Girl approaches the edge as Willie ineffectually signals her to go back. He scrambles to the edge.

35. M.S. Edge of falls. The girl approaches the brink.

36. L.S. Falls. Willie swings down over the edge of the falls on his rope and snatches the girl from the brink. They swing in the air.

37. Closer shot of Willie and the girl swinging on the rope. Willie deposits the girl on a ledge a little below the top of the falls and continues to swing.

38. MS. Ledge. Girl crouches on ledge.

39. M.S. Willie swinging on rope. He climbs on to the upper ledge.

40. Closer shot. Willie gets on to the ledge and tries to release himself from the rope.

41. C.U. Water's edge. The logbbreaks loose.

42. As 40. The log breaks loose. Frantically, Willie pulls in rope.

43. L.S. Falls. The log goes over the edge; breaking the rope.

44. M.S. Ledge on which the girl is waiting. Willie joins her.

45. C.U. Willie and the girl going into a clinch.

46. M.S. A road. The parson gets out of his chaise and goes toward the river.

47. As 45. Willie and the girl look up.

48. As 47 but longer shot. The parson comes down the path towards Willie and the girl. Willie and the parson support the girl between them and go off up path.

The above sequence is entirely pictorial (it contains no inter-titles). Of his approach, Keaton told John Gillett:

> "When I've got a gag that spreads out, I hate to jump a camera into close-ups. So I do everything in the world I can to hold it in that long-shot and keep the action rolling. When I do use cuts I still won't go right into a close-up: I'll just go in maybe to a full figure, but that's about as close as I'll come. Close-ups are too passing on the screen, and this type of cut

can stop an audience from laughing."[37]

The essence of Keaton's comedy might be justifiably summed up as "true to life" honesty and a mastery of his medium. As Robinson points out, "The gags are all the funnier because they are sprung out of a realistic situation and tried against the touchstone of reality."[38] Similarly, as we have witnessed, the gags are so diverse and powerful because of Keaton's ability to deliberately transcend the limitations of his medium - space and time, to endow his work with a powerful immediacy.

Keaton's reliance on the long-take long shot as a means to convey uninterrupted (hence "un - faked)" action and thereby heighten the impression of reality contributed in no small measure to the impact of his humour. Cinematic devotion to visual truth, from meticulous attention to prop detail, to risking his neck while shooting, gives his work a power unique indeed. Expanding upon the innate believability of the photographic image, giving it full play both spatially (long shot) and temporally (long-take) he strives to create a picture so apparently realistic as to be all the funnier when exposed as actually fallow. Keaton's comic discrepancy is of necessity wide for he is inescapably funny. He is also undeniably serious and takes his humour seriously. One must, after all get a laugh without being too ridiculous, so all efforts must be bent towards heightening the credibility of the almost incredible. A narrow escape from death, a perilous escapade with plunging boats and torrentuous waterfalls

must be presented as realistically as possible. If not, the gag would be "too ridiculous", the delicate balance between ridiculous but credible would be destroyed, and the comic play of appearance and reality would be clumsily ineffective.

Ultimately, however, the rescue sequence in Our Hospitality stands as something of a monument to certain attitudes even more basic to Keaton's artistic and philosophic stance. It is a sequence of pure and uninterrupted movement - and herein lies its real significance. We have previously discussed Keaton's use of movement "for movement's sake" ; that is, action not as a means towards some specific end, but as a valid end in itself. The rescue sequence in Our Hospitality serves to extend this line of thought even further. Movement ceases to be merely representative of Keaton - movement becomes Keaton. The implications herein are potent. That which moves is subject to change; that which moves is immersed in time; that which moves is alive.

We must acknowledge this concept of movement as inescapably linked with Keaton in that it joins the many threads of his character into a cohesive artistic unit. It is movement which somehow gets Keaton caught up in the absurdity of some situation where he doesn't belong (such as,in this particular case, on top of a waterfall). On the other hand, however, it is through this same 'absurd geometry of movement' that Keaton ultimately manages to extricate himself. In Keaton's world, movement functions as both cause and effect, both problem and solution.

Footnotes, Chapter 4

1. Henri Bergson, Laughter, part I of Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), p.62.

2. Arthur Schopenhauer, as quoted in Theories of Comedy, ed. Paul Lauter (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), p.355.

3. Ibid., p.359.

4. Albert Cook, The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean (New York: Norton and Co., 1966),p.12.

5. Ibid.

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Comic, chapter in Theories of Comedy, pp.384-5.

7. Theodor Lipps, as quoted in Theories of Comedy, p.394.

8. Ibid., p.396.

9. Ibid., pp.396-7.

10. Emerson, p.376.

11. Bergson, p.78.

12. Ibid., p.79.

13. Ibid., p.94.

14. Ibid., p.92.

15. Ibid., p.90.

16. Ibid., p.91.

17. James Feibleman, In Praise of Comedy (New York: Russel and Russel, 1939), p.127.

18. Ibid.

19. David Robinson, Buster Keaton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp.82-3.

20. Ibid., p.184

21. Bazin, p.9.

22. Ibid., p.14.

23. Ibid., p.14.
24. Ibid., p.14.
25. Ibid., p.11
26. Ibid., p.166.
27. Ibid., p.166.
28. Blesh, p.197.
29. Robinson, p.185.
30. Blesh, p.200.
31. Rubinstein, p.67.
32. Blesh, p.198.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Robinson, p.90.
36. Blesh, p.231.
37. Buster Keaton, as quoted in Robinson, p.122.
38. Robinson, p.90.

Chapter 5

THE KEATON GAG

We must now, after having looked at comedy, turn more specifically to the gag; for it is in his unique approach to the gag that Keaton's personal stamp is most obvious. His use of the gag structure is as varied as it is personal, and it is of primary importance in providing some of the most important insights into the nature of his 'vision'.

A gag, in essence, consists of a structural reversal, a break in the logic of the time-continuum - an exemplification that nothing actual or 'real' is wholly logical. Considering the scope of Keaton's gags, we can, for the sake of clarity, divide them into three major categories:

A) "Gags with Things", revealing the nature of man and his environment.

B) "Harmony" gags, which contain more fantasy than humour.

C) "Cinematic" gags, which are a combination of the first two varieties, within the strict context of the film medium.

The first type of gag uses the principle of reversal primarily to reveal the nature of things in Keaton's universe, (with which Keaton has a far more complex relationship than is generally assumed). As Kerr claims,

> "Keaton did cooperate with the universe, a trait that continues to distinguish him from his fellow comedians. Most clowns regarded the physical world as an obstacle to be overcome or evaded, by ingenuity or by grit. Keaton felt otherwise. He knew all about obstacles, of course. But treacherous as the universe might be, Keaton trusted it."[1]

Kerr further describes the nature of Keaton's unique relationship with the ominous as

> "a wary cease-fire, a watching and waiting with some confidence in the opposition's intentions. The physical universe is violent,no question about that. It MAY do a man in. Then again, just as violently, it may do him a favour. What Keaton understands - and what he bases his bargain on - is the essential NEUTRALITY of its behaviour."
> [2]

John Fowles, in The Aristos, describes a universe similar to Keaton's, in which Law and Chaos are the two processes that dominate existence.

> "Law seeks to tame Chaos; Chaos sometimes destroys the structure created by Law. Both are equally indifferent to the individual, and equally create, dictate to, and destroy him. "
> [3]

In such a universe, a fundamental principle will always be hazard, but one within limits. "A hazard without bounds would be a universe without physical laws: that is, a perpetual and total chaos."[4] The elements at play, it seems, then become logic and hazard; it is the interaction of these two elements which undermine Keaton's relationships in the world of things.

We may again sub-divide Keaton's relationship with things into those based on Logic versus Logic, and those on Logic versus Hazard. This first sub-division, Logic versus Logic, is significantly Keatonian, for it demonstrates that the logic of one particular situation or thing is not necessarily logical in all situations. Our example is the boxing glove from Cops.[5]

Problem: Buster driving his cartload of furniture extends his arm to signal a left turn. A dog is unexpectedly in

perfect position to bite the protruding hand, and does so. Solution: From the pile of things in the cart, Buster fishes out a boxing glove - an apparent ally. He places it on his hand and repeats the signal without canine interference. Later, he improves the device by attaching an extension to the glove, the better to signal. He tests it at a deserted crossing: perfect.

Shortly afterwards, however, he arrives at a crossing in the middle of which a cop is directing traffic. Having reached the crossing, Keaton, about to make a left turn, uses his new signal. The boxing glove and the cop's jaw connect squarely, sending the latter to the ground. Meanwhile, Buster partially completes his turn and, just as the cop has regained his footing, he's in the way of the second "signal". The cart moves on and Keaton, turning around, notices with a shock that the cop has been knocked out.

This gag would be near stereotype if the elements that constitute it were not presented in so logical a fashion; and it is important to note that Keaton's solution to the situation may be, at another time, thoroughly appropriate and logical. This logical simplicity - or is it hidden duality - is the dominant principle in the construction of the gag. Again, Keaton's original solution does seem appropriate. When we break the action into two sequences, we are compelled to wonder at the myopic logic of it all: extend hand/bitten by dog; bitten by dog/wear boxing glove. Nothing more. Keaton has accepted the bite (no doubt symbolic of hazard in the universe) so naturally, in fact, that

we almost miss the central significance of the action which immediately follows - an action to which the original logic can, but does not apply. The "chance" incidents with the cop, or what we might consider "uncontrollable" change in situation, alters the viability of a seemingly appropriate logical response. The situation, or the gags themselves, thereby offer a perfect illustration of the dichotomy between "general" and "particular".

This second sequence - a boxing glove protects the hand from a dog bite - makes us follow the changes of the logic of a given situation coping with the logic of the use of a given object or thing. For at this moment, the boxing glove (by its very nature an aggressive thing) here becomes a means of protection. We intuitively realize that the reversal is but a preface for another reversal during the course of which the boxing glove will return to its original, aggressive purpose. From a structural point of view, the gag is significant. It demonstrates that the logic of one particular situation or thing is not necessarily the right logic or the logic that works at all times. This concept is repeatedly encountered in Keaton Films as disaster results whenever Buster establishes himself as AGENT in attempting ACTION, trying to dominate both things and situations, in general and particular contexts, and winding up snared in the trap of their duality.

This same principle of logic, in exaggerated form, is at work in the gag, also in Cops, of the suitcase and the vase. Buster is loading his cart. He places a vase in a suitcase. Problem: the vase is too big; the suitcase won't close. Solution: He steps on the vase, crushes it, and closes the suitcase. The gag is the exaggeratted use of "mechanical" logic - fit the thing into its assigned space, even if this means breaking it. This simple non-objectivity of the logic of the gag is important in that it resolves itself entirely in the apparent simplicity - or, again, the hidden duality - of the objects used. A suitcase is, after all, made to protect that which it contains, not just to contain it, regardless of the consequences. It is the consequences of the particular situation that have been disregarded, and thereby result in a logic which is inappropriate.[7]

The two above gags, described as LOGIC versus LOGIC, testify to both the duality of all things, and the equal duality of logic. As Blesh writes of Keaton, "He did the Right Things. He thought the Right Thoughts, Wha'Happen?"[8] The second sub-division of gags on the nature of things, is labelled LOGIC versus HAZARD and constituently completes the underlying laws of Buster Keaton's universe. This second principle may be found in the "gag of the second vase". Buster, having just smashed the first vase to fit it in the suitcase, approaches the second vase. He picks it up and elects to hang it on the side of the cart. Noticing a suitable

protrusion, he hangs it carefully. As he turns around, however, the vase falls to the ground and shatters. First vase (in suitcase): Problem; Solution; Shattered vase.

Second vase: Problem; Solution: Shattered vase. Between the two gags, however, we may easily perceive one important qualifying difference in the manner of their demise. In the first case, Keaton is completely in control, and is completely responsible for the breaking of the first vase. In the case of the second vase, however, Keaton the agent is betrayed by a logic totally outside himself, totally beyond his realm of control.

The nature of the world of things is most strongly exemplified by the gags in Cops which, in themselves, confirm the world of things as an infinitely variable one. It is not man's role to oppose or to try and alter "the flux", but simply to be aware of it. Indeed, Keaton is often seen as simply "being aware".

> "It is no accident that what is probably our most familiar image of Keaton is of him scanning the horizon, hand at his brow to keep the sun from his eyes, body arched forward, feet hooked perilously into the rigging of a ship. He doesn't have to be at sea to adopt the posture...it is, in fact, his essential posture: he is an explorer." 9

This approach, according to Kerr, also offers an explanation of the Keaton deadpan:

> "Deep interest, however, is a sober state of mind, and the essential sobriety is there. It stems from an awareness that the world about one is intensely present and has tricks up its sleeve." 10

This, of course, is not to imply a world of invariable hostility, for the world is not such a place. Blesh

rightly describes the basic principle of Keaton's world as "The Miracle" and "The Accident" and in such a world the unexpected runs equal chances of being good or bad.

Man, of course, is an integral element of the process. Blesh describes his predicament as such:

> "It is man against fate; it is fate worked out through the machinelike hostility of man toward his fellow man; and it is fate inside the individual, in the ineradicable patterns of his own stupidity, so that it is man against himself." 11

This concept is perhaps most beautifully illustrated in a gag from The Goat. Buster's picture accidently winds up on a wanted poster which is circulated across the country. Buster is surrounded - in newspapers, on billboards, by his own face. He carries his nemesis with him. 12

Indeed, in the Keaton universe, man and things are at times interchangeable. In The Balloonatic, Buster accidently goes up in an ascension balloon, while perched on the top of it. He climbs down to the basket only to slip right through it since it has no bottom. He saves himself at the last minute by gripping its rim. The resultant visual metaphor is highly expressive:

> "His legs are spread open, in full view, below. What we are now looking at, in long-shot; is that surreal 'he-it' that carries Keaton deepest into nightmare. We are looking at a monstrous man-balloon: Keaton's legs, the basket as torso, the balloon itself as head. The image could be Bosch, all too easily Dali; it is simply Keaton behaving normally in his very special milieu, availing himself of the probable absurdities of a form in which men and matter merge." 13

This is more than visual metaphor; it offers a valid statement

on man and the nature of his relationship with a world of things. It does not seem too pretentious to view such an image as representative of the following principle of the human condition: Due to the nature of his universe, a man is helpless unless he can help himself to the laws and habits of the universe, taking advantage of them by tucking himself into them.[14] Man, if he is to survive in such a universe, must constantly adapt.

Keaton's use of metaphor always served this end; his alterations were always of a functional nature. In One Week he needs a ladder so he removes the porch railing and stands it on end. In need of snowshoes in The Frozen North, he uses two guitars. Keaton is aware that the identity or role of an object can lie largely in the attitude one takes towards it, and in the particular situation in which it (the object) is found. To survive in the "orderly disorder" of a world of things this adaptability is essential. Thus, we have dealt largely with the first type of gag (A), "gags with things", by examining and elaborating upon the very orderly disorder of the world of things; we have seen that things take on different meanings in different situations, and that what is logical in one situation need not be logical in all. Man himself is seen as having less control over his life or environment than is generally considered possible. As I earlier mentioned, the world can quite arbitrarily and just as easily "do him in" or "do him a favour".

The second type of gag Keaton uses quite extensively, the "Harmony" gag (B), is of a somewhat more ethereal nature.

The concern here shifts away from man towards a celebration of the universe itself. It is perhaps symbolic of times when the world does "do man a favour", when everything does, for a very precious and fragile time being, work smoothly and well. The gags involved do not so much create laughter as a feeling of comic joy, of harmony, and of fantasy. They reveal another side of Keaton's world, lending it fullness and depth.

An example of this "Harmony" gag is found, once again, in The Balloonatic. Buster has gone hunting, unaware that he is being followed at alarmingly close range by a grizzly bear. Suddenly, a second grizzly jumps out in front of him. Buster quickly grips the barrel of his rifle between both hands, raises the butt end high, and brings it down mightily on the bear's head, with the barrel of the shotgun slipping between his legs as he does. The impact causes the gun to fire, killing in the process the other grizzly bear behind him. Both bears meet an untimely end - all in one beautifully flowing arc. Buster is unaware that he has killed the bear behind him; he never knew it was there. He finds out when, relieved at having disposed of the second, he sits on the first. This episode is representative of Keaton in many of the ways we have discussed, but it also seems to extend beyond them. It is more pleasing than funny -though it is indeed funny- because of the perfect beauty of its movement. As Blesh writes, with Keaton,"action can also be almost incredibly beautiful, in a very pure kinetic sense - that is to say, not action FOR something but action in itself."

This sort of gag is effective on two distinct planes, and Keaton uses it repeatedly throughout his films. In The Navigator, as the boat rocks from side to side, all the doors in a long corridor open and close with frightening precision. In The General, the perfect choreography of the engines and the cars behind them (which sometimes wind up in front of them), the split-second timing of the episode involving the cannon which miraculously misses first The Texas and then The General, each by the barest fraction of a second, courtesy of an opportune curve in the tracks - these are surely much more than simple visual gags. Filmed in classic Keaton long-take long-shot they become breathtaking testaments of the harmony and beauty of movement. This second type of gag, then, serves to extend our awareness of the properties of Keaton's universe. The breathtaking comic-joy these gags stimulate functions as a reiteration of one of the two basic principles - harmony or law - of his world, lest it be forgotten amid the chaos.

The third type of gag (C) which we find in Keaton films is perhaps that which is most uniquely his own creation - the "cinematic" gag. This type of gag springs directly from the natural peculiarities of the cinematic universe - a universe composed, in part, of the incontestable reality of the photographic image (which we have previously discussed) and, in equal measure, of the inherent "un-reality" or fantasy of the film medium itself. Film may be said to create a mirror-image of the universe, altering it in certain subtle but significant ways - creating, between the mirror-image and the fact, an

exhilarating no-man's land in which fantastic but not necessarily "un-real" events might occur. There was indeed a gap there; Keaton, in establishing himself as iconographic occupant of the frame, meant to live in it.

This is not to imply that Keaton tried to "play tricks" on the camera, to falsify the fundamental purpose of the camera as a factual instrument, for quite the opposite is true. Keaton firmly believed that the vitality of film depends to a great extent on the honour that is paid to the camera as a recorder of fact. Nevertheless the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of the medium were there. The camera and screen together had, to a degree, falsified reality; Buster would be that false and no more. In certain respects, camera and screen together had also "improved" on reality, offered it certain loopholes; again, Keaton would capitalize on these loose ends with a placid confidence. He did not so much use the camera as join it on his journey.[16] Walter Kerr describes the phenomena:

> "Buster Keaton was the man who entered the shooting gallery in which he worked, picked up a paintpot and brush, painted a hook on the wall, and hung his hat on the hook. Buster Keaton was the man who, chased by thugs and trapped in a room offering no available exit, spied a seascape on the wall and dived into it... Buster Keaton was the man for whom the physical universe was exactly as flat, as falsely dismensional, as the screen on which film was shown."[17]

This "apartness" of the cinematic universe is reiterated again and again in several aspects of Keaton's approach. Even the famous deadpan adds to the feeling - Keaton asks for

no emotional response whatever: no sorrow, no joy, no pleasure even in triumph, no smile, no intimacy. Whereas Chaplin thrived on extending himself beyond the screen to relate with the viewer, Keaton constantly made us aware of the lens which separates the film from the viewer. We are never really part of his world because we are not inside the screen, as he is.[18] For what Keaton wanted was a specific cinematic comedy, he "wanted ALL of the comedy that could be derived from the camera's unique properties, wanted the native, idiosyncratic, NECESSARY humor of this unprecedented world of film."[19]

Dimension is one such cinematic alteration. The flatness of an image recorded by the camera nonetheless stems from a world which in itself is not flat. Dimension is recorded without dimension, but both are still there - hence the cinematic deception on which, to a degree, the cinematic gag is based. For, after all, Keaton exists within the frame and is therefore free to use either property as he wishes - without being accused of "falsifying" for he is merely operating under the laws of his medium.

This flatness compresses our vision to the extent that "all the time we are looking at the screen we are uncertain of what we are seeing, enmeshed in an instability. There is a world up there that can contract or expand without warning."[20] At the close of <u>One Week</u>, Buster and his bride have

accidentally deposited their house in the middle of a set of railway tracks - and a train is rapidly approaching. At what should be the exact moment of contact, the train misses the house entirely - it is travelling on a different set of tracks. We are as shocked as Buster and his bride, for the train's direction seemed so DEFINITE. The essential comedy has been made of our terrible uncertainty of vision in this elusive cinematic world.[21]

Countless examples of this cinematic gag are to be found in Keaton's work. In The High Sign, Buster paints a hook on the wall and then hangs his hat on it. In The Paleface, trying to escape from a pack of hostile Indians, Buster spies a horse behind a nearby bush. He rushes over behind the shrub and hops aboard. He now gallops out, backwards, leaving the horse standing exactly as it was. He has climbed aboard a second horse, hidden behind the first and pointing the opposite way. In Backstage (dating back to the Arbuckle period), we see Buster as he appears to be walking down a flight of stairs, coming back, and walking down again. But we soon discover that there is no flight of stairs - the bannister he has been "using" is merely a painted backstage prop, and what he has really been doing is getting to his knees to hammer something to the floor. The gag we have earlier described in another context from The Balloonatic in which Buster rids himself of two troublesome bears in one swoop is an equally valid example of this collapsed dimensionality of the screen. The gag depends very strongly on the fact that Buster, the first bear, and the second bear all occupy the same narrow linear plane.

The cinematic gag was very much a Keaton trademark. While a few other minor comedians used it from time to time - such as Fatty Arbuckle's habit of grinning into the camera and demanding a pan up before taking off his pants - they did so without either the grace or the motivation of Buster Keaton. Keaton went to great lengths to carefully define the visual properties of his world. We may see the screen on only the one plane available to us - yet dimension does exist. The gag consists of laying bare the simultaneity, the contradiction while all the while remaining entirely plausible. Kerr writes that, between the camera and the world it records, there is a gap.

> "and the clown can topple into it or escape through it. Specifically cinematic comedy never apologizes for this gap. Neither does it attempt to conceal it. Rather, it thrives on it. All the comedian has to do is remain alert to the everlasting slipperiness of the only environment he knows." 22

This approach closely parallels that of the Surrealists, which we have previously discussed. Both share a common view of the cencept of reality as being inseparably linked to that of context. That which is true, that which is real, that which is, can only claim to be so within a given set of variable circumstances. The cinematic situation is only one instance of a limitless set of possibilities.

These, then, are the basic types of gag which Keaton consistently favours. Together with his corresponding thematic preoccupations, they extend and clarify the basic principles of his intuitive philosophy. The strains of each element are often interwoven to create the impact of a simultaneous

statement. For instance, the "logical gag" and the "cinematic" one make similar and closely related statements on the basic duality of things, as well as on the often deceptive nature of our perception of them. Similarly, Keaton's preoccupation with establishing a well-defined "cinematic" universe where peculiarities and contradictions are par for the course closely parallels - admittedly on a separate plane - his views on the nature of the actual universe: Both contain potentially "knowable" properties, but function in such a way as to presuppose an ultimately "knowable" whole.

Structure, too, plays an important role. There is no mistaking that the careful structure of a Keaton "logic" gag (such as the boxing glove gag we discussed earlier) bears a very close resemblance to the meticulous chain-of-fate structure of his overall films. We have quoted John Fowles' description of the universe as one in which there exists "an infinite situation of finite hazard"[23] and, indeed, Keaton exercises great care in constructing such a universe.

Through his use of gags, then, Buster Keaton is able to bring all the elements of his situation into play: he raises many questions on the dualistic nature of perception, of things, of man, and of the world which he inhabits. Although Keaton is often quoted as describing the character he portrayed as "a working man, and honest" - as opposed to Chaplin's occasionally larcenous "Little Tramp" - Keaton was never preoccupied to any extent with such restrictive

moral concepts of "Good" or "Bad". Rather, he displays a far greater concern with the more immediate concepts of Law and Chaos, or rather with the endless gradatory degrees - the duality, the contradiction, the harmony, the nightmare - which exist between these two poles. Given the situation in which he finds himself, this seems only natural for, after all, his primary concern is survival.

FOOTNOTES, Chapter 5

1. Kerr,p.143.
2. Ibid.,p.144.
3. Fowles,p.15.
4. Ibid.,p.17.
5. Sylvain Du Pasquier, "Les gags de Buster Keaton," Communications 15 (1970) : 137.
6. Ibid.,pp.137-9 .
7. Ibid.,pp.134-6.
8. Blesh,p.202.
9. kerr,p.142.
10. Ibid.,p.122.
11. Blesh,p.199.
12. Kerr,p.128.
13. Ibid.,p.139.
14. Ibid.,p.148.
15. Blesh,p.198.
16. Kerr,p.117.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.,p.129.
20. Ibid.,p.138.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.,p.142.
23. Fowles,p.17.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

With the growth of Keaton's popularity, the Great Stone Face gathered to himself a truly international collection of affectionate nicknames. In Spain he came to be known as "Palplinas", in Poland "Zybsko", in Iceland "Glo Glo", and to the French he was alternately "Malec" and "Zero". As is frequently the case with nicknames, these sobriquets carry with them a strange appropriateness unmarred by complexity or intellectuality, an intuitive sort of truth. The French nicknames are, in this respect, the most strikingly direct: their aptness immediate, for "Zero" and "Malec" hark to the same elusive characteristic, to what one critic happily terms, "the hole in the doughnut".[1] Zero. A zero that nonetheless functions on many levels, a zero with allusions beyond Keaton's sober bearing; it is in fact the Great Stone Face's emotional zero. This nought is more than the cancellation of masses and stresses, horizontals and verticals, by the equalizing solemnity of his presence.[2] Zero is much more than individual strains within Keaton; Zero is Keaton. The Zero-Keaton's presence is felt even in the plots director-Keaton selects and in the gags with which comic-Keaton expresses himself.

In his second feature, Our Hospitality, Buster finds himself in a sticky predicament: he is the dinner-guest of a family sworn to kill him. There is a catch, however, and a particularly Keaton catch, at that. The ethics of Southern hospitality preclude the murder of a dinner-guest under one's own roof. "Normally" when murder is in the offing, the best tactic is escape - the sooner the

better. Keaton's situation demands, of course, precisely the opposite strategy. Buster is safe only as long as he does not leave his hosts' table; his life is secure only in the immediate presence of death. A stalemate ensues, a Zero in terms of possible exits from an impossible situation.

Many Keaton gags follow the same pattern, always returning to the nothingness, the void purpose at centre.

In The Navigator, Buster takes to underwater ship repairs. After a short interval on the job, he notices that his hands are dirty, picks up a pail from the ocean floor, pulls it through the water to "fill" it, washes his hands in it, and finally empties the "dirty" water, Zero.

In Seven Chances, a great deal (seven million dollars, to be precise) depends on Buster's meeting a wedding deadline, on his kissing the bride at the altar before the stroke of seven. As he dashes towards his fiancee's house, it is more or less that time, or perhaps even later - but what time is it? Fortunately, Buster passes a clock store with hundreds of clocks in the window. Unfortunately, however, each and everyone of them shows a different time. Universal negation, Nothingness in its absolute state, seems to leer at him. Zero.

As Kerr writes,

> "Each of these zeroes breeds its own odd silence, takes on the quiet and weightlessness of outer space ... (Keaton) is capable, when he wishes, of turning visible space itself into a momentary void. Faceless, he moves through the nameless. In fact, it wouldn't be stretching things a bit to call Keaton not so much silent comedy's first surrealist

as silent comedy's first existentialist. Existentialism posits that existence precedes essence, which means that no man is born into the world with an essential nature already given him, with an identity on tap and an instinctive set of rules to guide him. He is born more nearly a blank and with no established relationship to any other thing on this planet" [4]

This state of nothingness, this "blank" as Kerr calls it, into which existential man is born does not, however, prevent him from making an identity for himself. Such an identity would stem from those relationships he forms with the things encountered on his travels through nothingness. Kerr goes on to cite Sartre in stating that "unidentified man making his way through the unknowable void is CONDEMNED to action (whereas) existential man must move in a universe that moves perpetually"[5]. Like Alice and the Red Queen, running twice as fast just to keep in the same spot - action is reduced to non-action, or rather, action with preconceived purpose is revealed as fruitless. Accepting his own nothingness, the existential man is able to survive the vacuum of existence.

Buster Keaton accepts this state of affairs, fueling his being with his uncontrollable urge to ferret out the function of things, as opposed to the illusory meaning. In Our Hospitality, the coal car of a runaway train to which Buster is clinging is suddenly derailed and plunges into the water below. Literally without blinking an eye, Buster takes the coal shovel and begins to paddle. He always makes his adaption to the existentially unforseeable without reflection, without transition, and without comment.[6] This is not to imply, however, that Keaton's docility is of a passive nature.

On the contrary, his seeming passivity is in essence active, for it stems directly from a willingness to accept a totally random universe, in which the windfalls of accident are far more substantial than the sterile fruits of effort. The zero is by no means unintentional; its value is infinitely higher than valueless infinity.

Keaton arrived at this philosophical position intuitively. He neither read Kierkegaard nor solemnly anticipated Jean-Paul Sartre. Rather, "his simple intuitions about the nature of man in the universe were as breathtakingly perceptive as they were, in fact, simple".[7] This naivist theory applies equally well to Keaton's much-discussed role as surrealist. The parallels here are many, and often of a complex nature for, while Keaton and the Surrealists do not always share common means, they do share overall ends. Both confront the same twentieth- century "crisis," a crisis which is known by many names: Absurdist, Machine-Age, Existentialist. Both strive to transcend, and thus eliminate, the product of this crisis: the arbitrary limitations and definitions with which man tries to disguise nothingness, the ciphers which eventually stifle him. Both adopt, as a means to this end, a confrontation with the object.

The nature of the "true" object has been described above as a perpetually moving series of EFFECTS in time. Thus the only means towards the object as an end is movement. Both Keaton and the Surrealists acknowledge the higher reality of movement (and hence, the CHANGE it brings with it), an acknowledgement which endows their respective universes with

a common unreliability. The Surrealists stressed the importance of chance associations, a relevance which Keaton admits. Both view their environment as a void (hence another significance of the Keaton long shot) in which any number of moving objects may, for a time, interact.

The Surrealists sought to free objects from preconceived notions of use, context, purpose, and hence, reality. Such liberation was to be achieved by placing the object in a fresh uncluttered (i.e. empty) setting, thereby releasing its endless possibilities of meaning. This same principle can be observed in Keaton's films, though at times it is illustrated by an inverse method. Instances of the latter are to be found in situations to which Keaton reacts with uncharacteristic aggression. When Keaton tries too hard, when he thinks, when he asserts himself too strongly against his universe, <u>then</u> disaster is imminent. Surface effort and action imply a false orientation based on perception through preconception; an aggressive Keaton is out of tune with his universe, for he has counted himself as more than Zero. The Surrealist attempt to abolish <u>meaning</u> as precoception is not an assertion that an object's pre-established defintion per se is wrong, but merely that it is intrinsically wrong to isolate the object in <u>time</u>. The overall possibilities for every object being infinite, the particular possibility that the object MIGHT RETURN (for a while) to its basic "meaning" is certainly not excluded. Keato demonstrates this somewhat remote philosophic concept in terms that are (typically) painfully close.

In Cops, a boxing glove (aggressive 'meaning') is first used as protection, later resumes its 'original' identity-function, rendering a nearby policeman unconscious.

A diminished belief in the importance (or reality) of rational methods of perception led quite naturally to an increased acceptance of the irrational. Moreover, both Keaton and the Surrealists granted "subjective reality" validity and import equal to those of "objective reality". To accept irrationality and subjectivity as being substantially real is largely dependent on the nature of perception. As discussed above, Giacometti, Dali and Max Ernst, in an experiment called Research on Irrational Knowledge of the Object, attempted to make the object's reality dependent on the intensity of psychic life it stimulated in the viewer. This new understanding of reality is not concerned with the object exclusively as such, but with the relationship of the viewer to the object.[8] Abraham Moles later called this interdependence the Reality of Situation, claiming that all questions of authenticity are relative: "To someone looking at a postcard (of the Mona Lisa) with great admiration, the original may eventually lose its authenticity and even be a disappointment when finally confronted."[9]

What Keaton and the Surrealists share, then, is a new approach to their environment, a perspective from which to view the world surrounding them, to see it both subjectively, in its capacity as a mirror which reflects the inner fantasies and realities of man, and objectively, as an autonomous living (i.e.,moving) organism which exists on a plane parallel to

man's. This approach promotes a dual concept of reality - asserting with equal force the basic reality of matter, of the object, as well as the ultimate reality of fantasy, of the inner-hallucination. Both Keaton and the Surrealists were to make extensive use of this duality.

The basic questions raised concerning the nature of perception are also closely interwoven with the concept of time-movement. Time-movement is, after all, the primary factor of their universe - and all that is "real" is so only by virtue of its existing within this movement flux.

Keaton's theories of comedy function within a similar framework, for comedy may most simply be defined as a break in the logic of the time continuum. Comedy, perhaps above all else, attests that nothing actual is wholly logical, that nothing finite is infinite. Its method is to lay bare the gap between the pure (Platonic) idea of a thing, and the thing itself. In this respect, the comic is to be found not in the object per se, but in the <u>perception</u> of the object. Comedy attacks specifically the formal structure of objects; its criticism is aimed at the awkward expectations imposed by false perception. Indeed, formal structure is largely responsible for the paucity of actual value, with its substitution of supposed value. Towards an understanding of Keaton's use of comedy, it is important to consider his specifically cinematic nature. Several issues are thereby confronted.

As Kerr has noted, Keaton "was the most silent, as

well as the most cinematic, of silent screen comedians."[10] There is no escaping the fact that Keaton's world was uniquely the world of film. He explores his cinematic world, at some points sinking deeper into its fantasy, at others coming to grips with its "bare-knuckle" reality in his deadly stunts. Buster's characteristic pose is the explorer's stance - leaning forward, hand shielding his eyes as he scans the horizon - for such is indeed his role. He is forever delving into his world that he may better grasp its scope. Accordingly, he never ceases to stress the nature, properties, peculiarities and limitations of his cinematic environment, underlining them to such an extent that his audience is drawn into the Keaton world of film.

Buster Keaton, in his quest through his cinematic world is neither its master nor its slave. He is simply aware of it and, more importantly, true to its principles. Unlike many other comedians of the Georges Melies tradition, Keaton did not play "tricks" on the camera, since that would violate the camera's basic function as recorder of fact. Nonetheless, he did inhabit a medium possessed of certain very interesting idiosyncrasies, and it was no betrayal of reality to take advantage of just such loopholes.

Silence is one such loophole. In one sequence from The General, Buster is seen atop his coal car, totally preoccupied with his task of chopping wood to keep his train, The Texas, in hot pursuit of the stolen General. The wood chopping takes place in the foreground of the frame, while

in the background hundreds of enemy troops are soon discovered, galloping in the opposite direction. The composition of this shot is as interesting as it is distinctly Keaton. Beyond the compositional parallel it creates between our perception of the situation at hand and Keaton's (to us, by virtue of the close-up, Johnnie Grey's comparatively menial task of chopping wood does seem as important as the Union cavalry's full-scale attack because we see it in close-up), it points out one of the interesting "peculiarities" of silent film. Silent film is, as the name implies, positively silent. For in a world where sound exists, it would be impossible for Keaton, absorbed in his wood-chopping or otherwise, not to hear the thundering charge of an entire army some hundred yards away. The shot retains plausibility since Keaton, engulfed in the cinematic silence, CANNOT hear a thing. (With apologies to McLuhan; the medium is the gag.)

Silence is then a basic principle of Keaton's cinematic world. Like all such principles, however, it is subject to fits of instability. Several examples can be found in Our Hospitality. When the rear wheels of the train Buster is riding accidently fall off, along with the coachman, Keaton is quick to disembark and help the latter to his feet. As he is doing so, however, the unexpected happens and the wayward wheels come rolling back into frame to send both men flying. All this occurs, of course, without a sound. The silence is in operation. In a Keaton film, what you can't see, you can't hear. (In other words, out of sight, out of sound.)

Far from claiming silence as a handicap to be exploited, Keaton was always first to insist on the qualities of his cinematic universe. In the above gag, for instance,

> "he could have made us 'hear' the onrushing wheels very simply. All he had to do was interpolate a shot of the isolated wheels still rolling along. We should then have expected them, supplying our own additional dimension, and what we might lose in surprise we would gain in heightened anticipation of the coming trouble." 11

Such an approach is simply not the Keaton way of doing things. It would contradict the basic silence of his medium and therefor contradict his pledge of fealty to the laws of his world.

A second feature of Keaton's world of film is its aspect of two-dimensionality, discussed earlier, Keaton respects all laws intrinsic to his cinematic universe - and is passionate in his insistence on their obedience. This loyalty has several important consequences. Firstly, his stressing of their scope and limitations (to the extent that one is very much aware of its existence precisely as such) closely parallels his stance on the nature of the "real" world. The two worlds, on-screen and off, may have different functional properties, but they share a common strain of instability. Both are, one might say, reliably unreliable; both represent what Fowles calls "an infinite situation of finite hazard, where hazard is always the fundamental principle, but a hazard within BOUNDS." 12

Thus, Keaton's supposedly "simplistic" approach of "getting a laugh without seeming too ridiculous" takes on a new pertinence. It states - very simply - what his films state in a more complex manner. A fundamental Keaton tenet

is that man's purpose is to explore, to experience, and at least to acknowledge (if not understand) the logically illogical nature of his universe. To be thus aware is to be alive.

The many strains of a Keaton film all ultimately focus on this same issue. Like the "thing" gag, Keaton uses the cinematic gag largely as a metaphor for the true nature of perception. In Sherlock Junior, through cinematic means (double exposure), he tackles the dilemma of relative reality, i.e., which is more real, the projectionist's dream or his prosaic life? Similarly, in The Playhouse, Keaton presents us with nine simultaneous Buster Keatons. Is accepting the "reality" of one Buster Keaton on the screen (in terms of Bazin's views on the nature of the photographed image) any different from accepting that of all nine? - if so, which of the nine is "real"?

With every means at hand - comedy, film, things - Keaton is forever probing the riddle of perception. The solution is to be sought in the riddle itself, in the actual asking. Hazard and movement come to be understood as the basic principles of a universe. And the only truths possible within such a scheme are those conforming to these principles. The scheme encompasses two kinds of reality: "Objective", where the object is not severed from its space-time continuum, remaining instead in movement to continuously form new and temporary relationships; and "Subjective", where attention is focused not on the object per se but on the nature of the

viewer's relationship to this object. Within the Keaton perspective, the concept of "reality" is of the utmost importance inasmuch as it relates directly to the concept of "man". It becomes evident that for Keaton, the nature of seeing is the nature of being. Indeed, survival, or perhaps even something intangibly beyond mere survival, is the primal question.

Keaton is then, in his own way, as meticulous as any philosopher. He establishes both the principles of man's universe and charts his survival course through such a world, in light of which the Keaton trademark becomes strangely significant. The Great Stone Face is witness to the Keaton docility, while the Keaton eyes reveal an anomalous awareness. This passivity is, in fact, active, since it stems directly from "his reluctance to insist upon a clamoring identity as he submitted to the rush of the void, his willingness to concede the void an intelligence with which he did not care to quarell." [13]

This approach leads to the understanding of Keaton's sometimes puzzling scattered appeal vis-à-vis Chaplin's more universal acceptance. Despite similarities, Keaton and Chaplin ultimately embrace totally different values, Chaplin's charisma was (and will always be) the more instantly accessible, as his comedy is built around a PERSONA. Chaplin relies quite considerably on intimacy; so much that the high points of virtually ALL of his mature films are reached while

the camera is kept at close quarters. In so doing,he placed Charlie at the center of his universe, and himself at a considerable artistic distance from Keaton, who thrived on space. Keaton was a man caught up on the outer rim of the universal orbit. Keaton and Chaplin differ accordingly in their approach to things. In Behind the Screen, Chaplin plays a xylophone made of empty pie tins, using a pair of old ham bones. In The Pawnshop, he slings a roll of dough around his neck for a lei and proceeds to serenade his girl with a cooking spoon in lieu of a ukelele. In this frolicsome using of things, Chaplin's visual metaphors differ from Keaton's. When Charlie picks up a pair of salt and pepper shakers and brings them to his eyes to form binoculars, he has no ultimate purpose, but is merely being playful. Keaton, on the other hand, is NEVER playful. A Keaton alteration, on close examination, always serves some ultimate purpose and is always functional in nature. In One Week, a front porch railing becomes, conveniently, a ladder. In The Scarecrow, a motorcycle nut is transformed conveniently into a wedding band. In Cops, a tie becomes, again conveniently, a disguise. In these and all instances, the Keaton change is functional.

The utilitarian urge coincides with an obsession to ferret out the function of things, to become acutely aware of the nature of his surroundings. This is the most significant difference between Keaton and Chaplin. Chaplin is capricious; Keaton is sombre.

"But the sombre strain in Keaton is only one half of his root response. The other is a superb serenity.

> "It is not a cheerful serenity....It is simply the other side of resignation, the unruffled calm that comes of having accepted whatever is. Keaton is always showing us, in little ways, how ready he is to accept the unthinkable as normal."
> 14

Aware of the turbulence inherent in his world, Keaton is content to float within the calm of the hurricane's eye.

In a world where accident is often more reliable than effort, where intuition proves more accurate than logical reasoning, Buster Keaton's overall approach remains strangely A PROPOS. Keaton possessed neither the gifts for, nor the inclination to formal philosophy. Yet his intuitive grasp of the nature of man in the universe is breathtakingly profound.

Keaton is unmistakably a child of the twentieth-century. He holds much in common with certain modern artistic and intellectual movements, from Surrealism to Pop Art. One aspect of the era shows an underlying feeling of deep resentment, the roots of which lie in the psychic alienation born of machine age upheavals.

A Surrealist confrontation with the object is the basic means, and the end is the revealing of perception's relativity. Perhaps the words of John Fowles are an eloquent verbal parallel to Keaton's cinematic statement. They seem equally potent:

> "To an outside observer all the special privileges we claim for our species, all the feathers in our cap, might seem as absurd as the exotic ceremonial finery of some primitive chieftain."
> 15

FOOTNOTES, Chapter 6

1. Kerr, p.219.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp.219-22.
5. Ibid., p.222.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Moles, p.61.
9. Ibid., p.62.
10. Kerr, p.117.
11. Ibid., p.216.
12. Fowles, p.17.
13. Kerr, p.222.
14. Ibid., p.149.
15. Fowles, p.25.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agee, James. Agee on Film. Vol. One. New York: The Universal Library, Grosset and Dunlap, 1969.

Agee, James. "Comedy's Greatest Era." Life, 5 September 1949, pp.70-88.

Arnason, H.H. History of Modern Art. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970.

Balakian, Anna. Surrealism The Road to the Absolute. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company, 1970.

Bazin, Andre. What is Cinema?. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.

Benayoun, Robert." Le Colosse de Silence." Positif 77-78 (ete 1966) : 18-24.

Bergson, Henri. "Laughter," in Comedy. Garden City, New Jersey : Doubleday and Company, 1956.

Bishop, Christopher. "The Great Stone Face." Film Quarterly XII,I, (Fall 1958) : 15-22

Blesh, Rudi. Keaton. New York: Macmillan, 1966.

Bowman, William Dodgson. Charlie Chaplin - His Life and Art. Toronto : The Musson Book Co.,1931.

Brownlow, Kevin. " Buster Keaton, An Interview." Film 42 (spring 1965) : 6-10.

Cahn, William. Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy. New York : Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1964.

Camus, Albert. The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays. Translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.

Camus, Albert. The Outsider. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. Harmondsworth, England : Penguin Books,1961.

Cook, Albert. The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean - A Philosophy of Comedy. New York : Norton and Co.,1966.

Corrigan, R.W.,ed. Comedy:Meaning and Form. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company,1965.

Coursodon, Jean-Pierre. "Keaton et Cie,les burlesques amercains du 'muet'." Cinema d'aujourd'hui 25 . Editions Seghers: Paris,1964.

Curtis, David. Experimental Cinema. New York :Dell Publishing Co., 1971.

Du Pasquier,Sylvain. "Les gags de Buster Keaton." Communications 15 (1970) : 132-144.

Esslin,Martin. The Theater of the Absurd. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co.,1961

Feibleman, James. In Praise of Comedy. New York: Russel and Russel, 1939.

Fowles,John. The Tristos.Boston: Little,Brown and Co.,1970.

Fowlie, Wallace. Age of Surrealism. Indiana: Indiana University Press,1960.

Gilliatt,Penelope. "Buster Keaton," Film 70/71. David Denby (ed.) New York: Simon and Schuster,1971.

Houston, Penelope. Untitled review of The General. Sight and Sound XX,4, (April-June 1953):198-199.

Hutchinson, Tom. Horror and Fantasy in the Movies. New York: Crescent Books,1974.

Jacobson,Josephine, and Mueller,W.R. Ionesco and Genet: Playwrights of Silence. New York: Hill and Wang,1968.

Jung,Carl. Man and his Symbols. New York : Dell Publishing Co., 1968.

Keaton,Buster,with Charles Samuels. My Wonderful World of Slapstick. London: George Allen and Unwin,1967.

Kerr,Walter. The Silent Clowns.New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975.

Larkin,David.ed. Magritte. New York:Ballantine Books,1974.

Lauter, Paul. ed. Theories of Comedy. Garden City,N.Y.:Anchor Books,Doubleday and Co.,1964.

Lebel,J-P. Buster Keaton. Paris: Editions Universitaires,1964.

Lewis, Wyndham. Time and Western Man. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.

Mars, Francois. "Autopsie du Gag I."Cahiers du Cinema 113 (novembre,1960):22-31; "11" Cahiers 116 (fevrier 1961) :28-38; "111" Cahiers117 (mars 1961):32-40; "IV" Cahiers 121 (juillet 1961):32-40.

Montgomery, John. Comedy Films 1894-1954. London: George Allen and Unwin,1954.

Nizan, Henriette. "Portrait de Buster Keaton." Le Magasin du Spectacle 4 (aout 1946):66-76.

Reichardt, Jasia. Cybernetics,Art and Ideas. Norwich, Norfolk: Fletcher and Son, 1971.

Robinson,David. Buster Keaton.London: Secker and Warburg, 1969.

Rubinstein,E. Filmguide to The General. Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1973.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Literary Essays. New York: The Wisdom Library, 1957.

Styan,J.L. The Dark Comedy. London: The Cambridge Press, 1962.