

Buster Keaton's "The General" (1927)

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The history of film in the early decades of the 1900s was marked by fundamental and sweeping changes in what kinds of films were made, the way they were produced, and how they were shown. Moviegoers were exposed to new and exciting developments beginning with vaudeville and slapstick, and developing into various types of short and feature silent films shown in nickelodeons (so named for their five cent admission fee). As camera and other techniques became more sophisticated, action films dominated by the chase became widespread in both shorts and features. Feature films, shown in large "movie palaces" built exclusively for the purpose of exhibiting movies, took over as the main mode of exhibition. They included action, drama, romance, and, beginning in the 1920s, comedy films.

The present study takes up the comedy feature film by looking specifically at one of Buster Keaton's last silent pictures, *The General* (1927). This discussion will examine the film's importance in terms of the development of the comedy genre while considering the contemporary social and industrial demands on film aesthetics, production and exhibition. The first part of this paper outlines these three issues, and is followed by a number of examples to show how the comedy in this film addresses the demands of the time. In the last part of the paper, public response to *The General* will be considered in order to shed light on its merit according to contemporary critics and audiences. The concluding remarks will show that, although the film met the cultural and industrial requirements for a feature film in the comedy genre of the 1920s, both

it and the filmmaker were considered failures.

Aesthetic, Social, and Industrial Issues

To meet the aesthetic demand for the feature-length films that were a driving force in the film industry of the early 1920s, Keaton built on his previous work as a vaudeville artist and short comic filmmaker. He took styles and devices from his short films and live theatre experience, including gags, slapstick, and elements from the vaudeville tradition, and expanded and blended them with a clear storyline in a narrative structure. Together, the story and the comedy aimed to sustain interest for a feature-length film, which, in the case of *The General* (Schenck, Keaton, & Bruckman, 1927) was 77 minutes long.

When the leading comic artists of the early 1900s, Harry Langdon, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton turned to the feature film in the 1920s, they were under pressure from critics and the public to meet the standards of other types of story-based feature films, which had been the norm since 1915. For comedy, this required them to revise the purely visual gag and slapstick ("pie in the face") elements, which relied primarily on physical pratfalls, in order to make them more sophisticated and realistic (Neale & Krutnik, 2003).

Furthermore, pressure from certain social groups from around 1905 called for "genteel" comedy in feature films to better suit the tastes of middle-class audiences (Neale & Krutnik, 2003, p. 59; Krutnick, 1995, p. 19). These groups condemned slapstick as a low and vulgar form of humour and demanded they be replaced with longer, more stylized comic narratives. Thus, Keaton and his comic contemporaries all strove to deliver genteel comedy in their feature films, leaving more traditional forms of slapstick comedy for short films, which continued to be made for at least 30 more years (Krutnick, 1995, p. 351, note 8).

Comic filmmakers were also under pressure from industry demand for feature-length films (rather than shorts), since features were cheaper to make,

producers could charge exhibitors higher rental fees, and they could show them in longer runs than they could short films (Knopf, 1999, pp. 31-32; Neale, 1990, p. 5).

Examples from *The General*: Narrative structure, genteel comedy, realism

The film is based on a true U.S. Civil War story (Knopf, 1999, p. 87), which helped create its clear story line. It unfolds chronologically over a two-day period, with a short prologue of one year earlier to set the stage. In today's critical terms, *The General* subscribes to the Classical Hollywood cinema format: it follows chronological time; there is a clear plot progression based on "cause-and-effect actions that advance the central character toward a goal..." (Knopf, (1999, p. 83); and the film has a double plot structure (romance and chase).

The plot structure takes the form of a symmetrical chase (Moews, 1977, p. 21). During the first half of the film, train engineer Johnnie Gray (Buster Keaton), travels from southern to northern war territories in pursuit of The General, his train, which was hijacked by the Northern army. In the second half, he recovers his train, but is chased by the north back to the south. A second plot line, one of romance, is superimposed on the first: Johnnie is first rejected by Annabelle, the girl he is courting, because he does not enlist in the army to fight for the South (despite his wish to do so, the army refuses him); then, he inadvertently saves her, and finally, he is accepted by her. The love affair rests on Johnnie getting a Confederate uniform, which he does thanks to a heroic deed near the end of the film. The film closes happily with him succeeding in getting the "two loves in his life," to quote the words that appear on an intertitle at the beginning of the movie.

The symmetry of the film is viewed by Robert Knopf (1999) as working on two levels, one for the gags, and the other for the narrative:

the reincorporation of gags [that are presented in one part of the film and

repeated with variations later on] reflects the influence of vaudeville structure, while the symmetry of the chase itself, first going north and then south along the same tracks, dictates the film's narrative shape. (p. 88)

Gags do not just play alongside the narrative, according to Knopf: "...almost all of the gags in *The General* serve similar double duty as gag and narrative element" (1999, p. 90). Besides embellishing the narrative, gags are *part* of the narrative, and this integration gives the story its cohesiveness, without which a comedy film of this length could sustain itself. Besides this structural achievement, the incorporation of gags into the narrative was necessary to satisfy the aesthetic demands of audiences, who were looking for more sophisticated entertainment than short comedies and vaudeville could offer. Filmmakers recognized this need for a tighter narrative if they were to achieve any success in the feature comedy genre (Neale & Krutnik, 1990 p. 57), particularly since a strong narrative was a precedent for other types of films from as early as 1909 (Hulfish, 1909). And, as demonstrated above, *The General* achieved these goals completely.

Besides the gags and the story structure of the film, further analysis of *The General* reveals character development that supports the narrative and helps further unify the story. For example, Noel Carroll identifies character development in Johnnie, stating that "the various tasks he performs [on the return to the south] are ones that he failed dismally to accomplish just one day before [on his pursuit northward]" (Carroll, 2007, p. 166). The narrative structure remains tight while Johnnie's character develops as he turns his failures around to bring him success.

In response to the demand for greater realism in the stories of full-length features, Keaton "avoided fantastic gags that were not believable within the context of his plots" (Knopf, 1999, p. 15). According to Keaton, he would never use "impossible" or "cartoon" gags which were common in short films and on the

stage in a full-length film, "because it could not happen in real life, it was an impossible gag" (Keaton, 1982, pp. 173-174). Some examples of various types of "possible" gags and slapstick antics in *The General* will help illustrate Keaton's point.

Genteel comic gags are first displayed when Johnnie goes to court Annabelle in the opening prologue. For example, to rid himself of the two boys who tag along behind Johnnie mimicking him on the way to her house and then follow him inside, he opens the door, pretending to leave. The boys unthinkingly walk out, leaving Johnnie alone at last with Annabelle. Their privacy is short-lived, however, as they are soon interrupted by Annabelle's father and brother, who come in with news of the war and their plans to enlist, and disrupt the potentially romantic mood Johnnie had hoped to create. The gag here is Johnnie's failure to get a moment alone with Annabelle despite his earnest attempts. Spectators can sympathize or even empathize with him, and this is what makes the above gag realistic. Without a clear storyline, gags like this would be impossible.

Another example of story-driven genteel comedy appears near the end of the film, when Johnnie brings General Thatcher, whom he has unintentionally "captured," in for arrest. The comedy lies in the moment when he brushes the general's uniform off to make him presentable to the Confederates before handing him over: this unexpected action is ridiculous. A third brief comic instance that speaks to the decorum of genteel comedy occurs when Annabelle attempts to tidy up the train cab by sweeping away the woodchips in front of the boiler. The way she tries to exercise her domesticity in a nondomestic setting is humorous. The above examples thus show how Keaton succeeds in incorporating genteel comedy and reality into his gags, while preserving a tight narrative structure.

Keaton shows his vaudeville roots in many of the gags that pay careful attention to the display of his acrobatic skills. Through his use of long shots

(where the subjects and actions are shown in the distance so they are relatively small) and long takes (shots of lengthy durations without stops or cuts), he is able to show that the stunts are authentic and not the result of camera tricks or editing (Knopf, 1999, p. 9). Thus, the stunts give reality to the gags/slapstick antics.

For example, there is a long shot sight gag at the end of the first segment of the film where Johnnie rides on the drive rod of his train, deep in thought about Annabelle, who has just rejected him. He is apparently unaware that the train is moving until it begins to enter a tunnel, when he quickly jumps off. This long take in a long shot shows the danger involved in this stunt and that it was an authentic performance (Carroll, 2007, p. 77). Thus, the use of the long shot and long take give the film a heightened realism and excitement for the viewer by showing "the real thing" (Carroll, 2007, p. 78).

Another realistic sight gag appears in a scene from the beginning of the chase northward in which Johnnie, with the help of Confederate troops, uses another train to go after The General. As he rides off in The Texas, he does not realize that the car in which the troops are riding behind him is not connected to the rest of the train, and therefore goes off alone (Carroll, 2007, p. 35).

Realistic slapstick occurs in a pratfall (an act causing physical harm, most often one in which someone falls on their behind) at the beginning of the film when Johnnie falls off Annabelle's doorstep as he says goodbye to her. Another example of a pratfall occurs in a scene in the second half of the film, where Johnnie smuggles Annabelle in a potato sack and dumps her into a train car of The General. Northern troops heave heavy sacks and crates on top of her as they load the train for departure. This gag is sealed by the shot of Johnnie as he walks away from the train, wincing at the thought of Annabelle's potential suffering, at his hand no less.

Despite all of these attempts to make a successful full-length comedy satisfying contemporary demands, the verdict was left in the hands of audiences

and critics. A look at the public response to *The General* will round out this essay by examining how Keaton's intentions were evaluated by spectators and the press.

Public response to *The General*

Contemporary film reviews that immediately followed the American release of *The General* on February 8, 1927 (American Film Institute Catalog) were overwhelmingly unfavourable: all of the three major reviews cited below criticized it for its tiresome vaudeville antics and tedious attempts at humour. For example, the byline of *The Film Daily's* review was "The laughs are slow and scattered over a lot of territory," with "results [that] run minus rather than plus" (February 20, 1927, p. 10). The *New York Times* reviewer wrote that Keaton "appears to have bitten off more than he can chew" (Hall, February 8, 1927, p. 21) and *Variety* denounced the film as being "far from funny" and a "weak entry for the de luxe [sic] house" (Fred, February 9, 2007, p. 16).

Keaton's contemporary comic filmmakers may have fared better in the press. As a single example, the *New York Times* review of Harold Lloyd's feature comedy, *The Kid Brother*, also released in 1927, found the film favourable:

Harold Lloyd's latest adventure into the realms of laughter-making is eminently successful. It is excellent entertainment with an unusual fund of hilarious gags. It almost seems that Mr. Lloyd does not move a step without bouncing into some new stunt that has been inspired by one of the half dozen men responsible for the story and the script. (Hall, January 30, p. 15)

The reviewer for this film is the same as that for the Keaton *New York Times* review above, so presumably his criteria for judging both films were the same. More comparison is needed, however, in order to reach any conclusions about the reception of Keaton's films. Future research should include an examination

of reviews of Keaton's short comedies, his other features, and feature films of his comic contemporaries, Charles Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Harold Langdon.

Besides these reviews, Keaton was criticized in his day for his deadpan style, which was present in all of his films, but whose prominence was more problematic in the features, since it was seen as a "highly inappropriate response to the task of creating characters which were rounded and believable...." (Kramer, 1995, p. 210). Critics apparently felt that Keaton's deadpan look took the humour out of the situation. Keaton, however, felt to the contrary. He believed that his deadpan face, which he had learned from his father when he was growing up on the vaudeville stage (Knopf, 1999, p. 21), was essential to being funny because he felt that audiences laughed less when he smiled (Keaton, 1960, p. 13). So, if the public criticism cited above was in fact true, Keaton caused his own demise by sticking to his belief in his deadpan face.

Box office returns for *The General* are inconclusive as to the film's success or failure. While Keaton's feature films "cost about \$200,000 apiece and brought in an average of \$2,000,000" (MacCann, 1997, p. 163), this film had a \$750,000 budget, huge for its time (Dirks, no date), which must have cut into profits. It is not clear from these numbers alone how well the film did financially.

Peter Kramer (1995, p. 210) writes that Keaton's features were not very successful commercially, bringing the above gross into question. He attributes poor finances, which may have been in part due to Keaton's lack of interest in the business side of his films, as the reason that Keaton in 1928 gave up his status as an independent filmmaker and went to work on contract at Loew's/MGM. Keaton's career problems increased with this move, since he lost the creative control that led to his demise as a prominent filmmaker.

Today, however, *The General* is cited by *Sight and Sound* and many other best film lists as one of the greatest films of all time (Ebert, 1997). So, like many film stars and filmmakers, Keaton was not fully appreciated in his own time, and it would not be until near the end of his life that he was lauded as a

master at his craft. Keaton's fate clearly shows that as history evolves, the means of evaluation change (for better or worse), as the distance from the object of consideration becomes greater, and the effect that the distance and interim developments have. In the case of *The General*, Keaton conformed to narrative demands of the time. He conquered the challenge of using gags and slapstick comedy by placing them into his narrative and by making them more realistic and believable. He added elements of genteel comedy, and rounded out his story with a happy ending and the promise of romance. What more could audiences have asked for, one wonders, since these features were exactly what they said they wanted. In any case, his efforts were apparently not enough or not done in the right way to meet public expectations, and this film became one of Keaton's last independent projects.

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バスター キートンの『キートンの大列車追跡』 （“The General”）（1927）

ローラ・マクレガー

本稿では、バスター・キートン（Buster Keaton）が製作した無声映画の後期作品の内、『キートンの大列車追跡』（1927）を中心に、長編喜劇映画について分析を行った。まずは、映画製作と上映、さらに美意識に対する当時の社会や産業上の要求などを考慮に入れながら、喜劇ジャンルの発展という観点からこの作品の重要性について論じた。前半部では、以上のような要求について概略を述べ、多くの例を挙げながら、この作品の喜劇的要素が当時の要求に応じている点を説明した。本稿の後半部では、この作品の真価を明らかにするために、当時の批評家や観客たちの意見を通して、『キートンの大列車追跡』に対する一般的評価について考察を行った。長編喜劇映画というジャンルに対する1920年代の文化および産業上の要求をこの作品は満たしてはいるが、キートンも作品も共に、正当な評価を受けることはなかったという結論を最後に示した。