

Notes on Buster Keaton's Motion

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The origin of cinema was in motion. In 1879, Eadweard Muybridge completed his "zoopraxiscope," named from "zoo" (a combining form meaning 'living being' or 'animal'), "praxis" (the Greek *práxis*, meaning 'action'), and "scope" (from the Greek *skopion*, meaning 'to look at carefully'). Muybridge built his contraption at the behest of railroad baron Leland Stanford (founder of Stanford University), who took an active interest in the then-emerging scientific field of Motion Studies. In essence, Stanford challenged Muybridge with a bet as to whether or not he could answer the mystery of whether a horse removes all four legs off the ground at some point while galloping.

Using a battery of twelve cameras, Muybridge captured a running horse and projected said images from a rotating glass disk in rapid succession to give the impression of motion: he found a horse does, in fact, lift all four feet off the ground. Yet, jumping forward over forty years in cinematic history, I would ask: do Buster Keaton's legs leave the ground whilst running? Keaton is an automaton of motion, a relic of silent-era physical comedy in which the body's acrobatics take centre-stage. In short, *Keaton's body is a study of impossible motion*.

1. Keaton's body was a foil to the environment

In *Buster Keaton: Interviews*, Christopher Bishop asks Keaton "How do you conceive of the screen character you usually played?" (59). Keaton explains using Doughboys⁽¹⁾ as an example:

We start in the office with a very rich character, well dressed and everything else. Now when you give me an army outfit that I was too small for - everything was big that they gave me in the army - I'm a misfit, and come to living in the barracks and eating in the mess hall, that was a hardship to me. But if I'd have been a bum in the first place, it would have been an improvement. Well, then you lay out your character according to the situations you're going to get into (60).

Keaton was not a character in the usual sense but a *body* defined by contrast to the environment in which he was placed.

The result of this was that the *physical* world was central to Keaton's films. As a symbolic nexus of contradiction, Keaton's *body* (which is to say, Keaton) was the thematic centrality of all conflict. Thus, the plot orbited the body and its hijinks (mis)tailored to it as much as Keaton's army outfit.

2. Keaton's body is a paradox

However, not only did Keaton's body oppose his environment, it was a contradiction itself. Film theorist James Agee notes that "[Keaton] was by his whole style and nature so much the most deeply 'silent' of the silent comedians that even a smile was as deafeningly out of key as a yell" (30). When we imagine a "deafening" smile, we are considering the dynamic of expression vs. immobility. This is less than objecthood - for objects can move. It is a question of willed stasis.

Reportedly, very early in his movie career friends asked him why he would never smile on screen. His only response was that he didn't realize he didn't (Agee 30). If Keaton had a thousand motions, he only had one expression in nearly every frame of his films. Or, in Luis Buñuel's terms, Keaton's "expression is as unpretentious as a bottle's" (61). Hence, the immobility of Keaton's face foiled the excessive mobility of his body, which is not to claim the face is not a part of this body.

What is the affect of this dualism? Du Pasquier claims the vaudeville style from which Keaton emerged was defined by streamlining. A show was typically stripped down to those components most likely to provoke emotion, ultimately seeking a "wow climax" at the pinnacle of the spectacle (which would receive a grand burst of final applause). Hence, vaudeville seeks *reaction*.

All of the "wow" moments of Keaton's physicality in his films are too numerous to list, but in nearly every instance he retains his deadpan face, which neither confirms nor denies the spectacular stunts we have just

seen. Thus, *Keaton's face is a deferment.*

While Keaton's body is constantly reactive to the wild shenanigans impacting it, his face is a void of nothingness causing his body to reflexively foil itself. This function works particularly well in silent film format as even a breath could shatter this nothingness. This contradiction in his body only directs our affective response of shock back onto ourselves, and we gain a certain identification with the body that causes his (read: our) emotions. Affectively, his body becomes our own.

3. His body can do the impossible

In *A Hard Act to Follow*, the documentary on his life by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, Keaton suggests that *Sherlock Jr.* originated from his desire to exploit "some of these tricks I knew from the stage...some of them are clown gags, some Houdini, some Shung Li Fou.." Yet, an object does not simply disappear a la a classic Méliès number; rather Keaton must make the object disappear (including himself) through active bodily interaction. He is a magician who not only has sleight of hand, but sleight of shoulder, arms, legs, and torso.

During the dream sequence in *Sherlock Jr.*, for example, we can see Keaton use his body for such impossible purposes. Whilst running from a duo of thugs, Keaton finds himself trapped by a wooden wall between two houses. His entire body shakes as one connected unit as he turns, runs, and spins looking for an exit. We then see a man in a dress holding an opened suitcase of ties back up to the wooden wall; in a medium shot, he points at his open suitcase to Keaton. When the two thugs appear on scene, Keaton jumps through the man's suitcase and body, disappearing completely as the man in a dress steps forward to reveal nothing behind him. Keaton certainly brings his vaudeville background to the screen - his body the source of physical magic.

The physicality of Keaton's body takes on an extra dimension. He effectively collapses the wall between the physical and the mental, operating as a kind of nexus point for plot progression. He does not merely physically move to propel the plot forward but can effectively operate as a *deus ex machina* to overcome an impasse.

4. Keaton's body is heterogeneous

Working with the famed magician Harry Houdini, "The Three Keatons" epitomized the vaudeville tradition: "the underlying logic of the variety show rested on the assumption that *heterogeneous* entertainment was essential to attract and satisfy a mass audience," and it is this "heterogeneity" which Keaton literally embodies in his motion (du Pasquier 35). Thus, something as pedestrian as sitting down in a chair can be an acrobatic feat for Keaton.

As James Agee notes, Keaton's multitude of gestures "were ferociously emphatic; not a line or motion of the body was wasted or inarticulate" (20). I would note Keaton's body operates like a Rube Goldberg Machine⁽²⁾; it is a continual line of causality: to move his neck, he needs to move his elbow; to move that, he needs to move his leg (and so on...). For Keaton, motion is never simple. It is excessive, and it is funny.

As such, his body seems to define "causality" in unique terms. For instance, in the aforementioned scene, Keaton cannot simply run away. Rather, he must move in a choreographed acrobatic pattern to escape. The line of causality is not that he is being chased and escapes through a greater physical ability (say, running). Instead, he is being chased, and therefore he must prove physical prowess by *redefining* physical possibility.

5. The body is continuous

For example, when Keaton passes through the movie screen into the film-within-a-film "Hearts and Pearls" in *Sherlock Jr.*, Coover notes, "the background then goes through a series of rapid cuts while he suffers continuity" (70). The scene proceeds:

After knocking at the house's front door, he goes down the front steps only to find himself falling off of a stone bench in front of high garden walls. He walks down a city sidewalk to find himself nearly walking off a cliff. Surrounded by lions, he is suddenly stuck in a sand dune. After being threatened by a train in this background, he sits down in a sand heap turned ocean rock and is drenched by a wave. He then dives into the water, only to land headfirst into a snow bank. After getting up, he moves to lean on a tree only to find the tree gone as his body falls back into the garden. Keaton's body *is* the continuity between these cuts.

With this in mind, we can turn to Gladfelder's idea of the oppositional force between *narration* and *gag*: the former is "integration, continuity, goal orientation and containment;" the latter is "rupture, discontinuity, interruption, and excess" (146). If the body is continuous, it is thus the story; Keaton's body is the narrative force. *He moves the film along with his motion.*

Additionally, du Pasquier notes that in vaudeville, "[p]erformers often directly addressed the audience or crossed beyond the floodlights. Making little attempt to preserve the invisible fourth wall that characterized theatrical realism....vaudeville performers foregrounded the process of performance, often in highly reflexive ways" a la *Sherlock Jr.* in which Keaton effortlessly crosses the screen (36).

More than just a film about a film, this self-reflexivity in *Sherlock Jr.* inverts cause-and-effect with respect to the body. As a narrative Rube-Goldberg machine with a steady line of causality, Keaton's bodily movement is the focal point of (redefining) causality itself. A "meta" movement (the movement of movement) would study movement itself, which must be done from some outside source. Hence, the first images we have of the dream sequence are those mentioned above in which *the environment acts upon Keaton, not vice versa.*

6. The world is understood and affirmed through the body

That is to say, the body *understands this space*. Gladfelder notes that Keaton's (and crew's) wound-up movements within the frame "emphasize the three-dimensionality of film space" (149). Even if Keaton's body is an object, no prop can give meaning to spatial qualities like distance and dimensionality as his body can. But how can a body understand over and beyond a mind? Is not that alone an impossibility? Perhaps, but consider the aforementioned scene of Keaton jumping through the man in a dress. The man's double-handed pointing at his chest means no particular thing to us - the viewers - or the narrative. But it is Keaton's body that knows how to act as if upon instinct when threatened by the two thugs by understanding (or perhaps making) an impossible space.

This brings us to Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily motor-intentionality, which states the body has a kind of understanding which is engaged by the cultivation of *habit*. Keaton's "habit" is to be Keaton. We might ask why this vaudevillian style of acrobatic chaos works so well in Keaton's *silent films*. As stated, I suggest it is because Keaton is more of a symbol (on himself as object) than a character. Building on Buñuel's comparative choice, Jannings' character is a tragic hotel porter, Mephisto, and Othello. However, Keaton is Keaton who is a body reflective unto itself.

More so, bodily-motor intentionality is intentional and directed, but not mediated by reflection; it presents actions above thoughts. In this sense, *Keaton-as-object* overlapped with *Keaton-as-symbol* presents him to us as a kind of mechanism - the reconciliation of his bodily functioning in accordance with its reflexive signified functionality. This mechanism is a focal point of his comedy, of which Agee notes "Keaton was a wonderfully resourceful inventor of mechanistic gags" (31). Take any moment hitherto discussed.

Thus, it is Keaton's bodily acrobatics that affirm the world, as in the conclusion of *College*. The basic plot is as follows: Keaton is a bookworm dubbed his school's "most brilliant scholar" who is rejected by his girlfriend Mary for his failings at athletics (as discussed, he is a foil to his environment). Following Mary to a Southern California college, Keaton humorously attempts to excel in athletics with absolutely no success in any event. That is, until the conclusion when Jeff - Mary's jock boyfriend - gets kicked out of college and takes her hostage in her room.

Carroll explains "in films, such as *College*, the Keaton character often remains quite inept until a critical moment in the film when his beloved is somehow endangered. At that moment, the character seems to be endowed with a superhuman burst of energy and ingenuity" (20). In *College*, specifically, Keaton dashes to Mary's rescue succeeding at all the "sporting" events he previously failed:

In this scene, we first see Keaton running, his legs and arms out of focus due to his immense speed. I will reiterate that we never know if Keaton ever has both legs off the ground at the same time; he makes another art on film - the beauty of the blur. He dashes through an obstacle course of people, does a massive leap over a large hedge, performs an amazing hurdle performance over more hedges, and achieves a successful long-jump over a stone pond. The scene climaxes with Keaton grabbing a pole resting on a laundry line and vaulting up to the second story where his love is being held.⁽³⁾ The world is affirmed and resolved when

Keaton's body achieves the "impossible." However, I feel it necessary to delve further into how this cerebral impossibility emerges through the collapse of the physical and mental distinction.

7. The body links us to the unconscious

It might appear rather straightforward that *Sherlock Jr.* "links the experience of viewing films to dreams and the unconscious" (Gladfelder 145). But we must not forget that it is through the "meta-ness" that this is achieved. Gladfelder describes Keaton's entry into the screen as follows:

The essence of the effect is its simplicity: there is no "shimmer," nothing signals the moment of the boy's crossing and recrossing of the divide between the two worlds. In fact, for the dream boy, there seems to be no boundary separating them. Like the "mirror" in the later scene in front of which the famous detective, Sherlock Jr., checks his outfit, only to then walk through it, the film screen is penetrable, immaterial, invisible - paradoxically so, of course, for as the surface on which images are projected the screen is in a sense nothing *but* visibility (151).

But let us expand on this: *Sherlock Jr.* is a film about a film.⁽⁴⁾ More specifically, it shows how one "enters" a film. Thus, we have the screen showing us a screen. In this instance, cause-and-effect are reversed: the visible (the screen in Keaton's world) becomes the invisible (as Keaton walks through it) while the invisible (the film-within-a-film world) becomes visible (through our view of it on our screen once Keaton passes through the screen).

Inside the film, as well, the invisible becomes visible for Keaton as he can now *see* the true nature of being a detective. Thus, the meta-details give us the unconscious mind, specifically the wishes of Keaton. Gladfelder too sees the "inner film as a wish fulfillment" as Keaton wakes up as a dapper and suave detective, the opposite of his waking character (153).

But I would argue that *College* provides the same type of wish-fulfillment through Keaton's acrobatic accomplishments at the film's conclusion, albeit showing the unconscious mind of a thumb. In *College*, Keaton simply demonstrates *for some reason* amazing acrobatic ability. In *Sherlock Jr.*, he shows amazing control of his body as well, from his initial entry into the scene to the famed motorcycle scene to the aforementioned magic trick of jumping through the suitcase.

In other terms, du Pasquier writes "if things have a hidden side [such as a suitcase full of ties], people also are capable of conscious and unconscious duplicities; they too are 'indeterminate'" (4). An "indeterminate" body (of which Keaton is) must be determined through an ancillary "other" body, a body brought about through wish-fulfillment. In Keaton's films, this is the key resolution of collapsing the physical and mental realms.

8. In all Keaton's films the ultimate wish-fulfillment was a body free from harm

According to his mother Myra's version of the story, when Buster was six months old, he crawled out of his crib on the top floor of a boardinghouse:

Somehow he'd inched out of the room and, bang, down the stairs. Harry Houdini and his wife Bessie, who were in our [travelling vaudeville] company, got to him ahead of us. Harry grabbed him up, and the confounded kid began to laugh! "That's some buster your baby took." Joe [Keaton's father] looked down and said, "Well, Buster, looks like your Uncle Harry has named you" (Blesh 4).

The body's proneness to injury and Keaton's "magical" immunity from injury (despite his vaudeville-appropriate falls and collisions) were the heart of his comedy from the beginning of his career: "*Sherlock Jr.* is a film whose comedy is predicated on the fragility as well as the beauty of the body, and whose stunts underscore, by defying, the body's susceptibility to injury and pain" (Gladfelder 140). Thus, according to Gladfelder, Keaton could fulfill two different kinds of wish-fulfillments: "one, the fantasy of unbreakability [...] and the other, a fantasy of license to commit violence without consequences or reprisals" (142).⁽⁵⁾ Hence, even without the high unconscious thematic value of a film like *Sherlock Jr.*, Keaton's body is consistently a link to the unconscious through Freudian wish-fulfillment.

And, as I argued, this determines the entire world of Keaton's films, the physical if not the *physics* of the world. This is why stunts so important to Keaton's comedy - they allow him to effectively rewrite the

fundamental laws of his universe. Could we not buy into this act through the impossible movements of Keaton's body (which might be absurd but is entirely distinct from absurdism), the comedy would be lost.

9. Keaton's body changes reality

Luis Buñuel states "Superfilms must serve to give lessons to technicians: those of Keaton to give lessons to reality itself, with or without the technique of reality" (62). Du Pasquier notes "Keaton's gags are more philosophical than slapstick in that they test the nature of reality" (3). But I claim this would only be due to his innate ability to change it with his body.

For example, consider the "umbrella scene" from *College*. A sad sack, Keaton, is walking on a path with his head down as he walks into four athletic types. As Keaton tries to move to a different side of the path, they - as one unit - sidestep so as to block his way. When he turns to go, the four grab him, and a whole crowd comes in to join the fray. The group throws Keaton onto a giant blanket, moves towards a house, and begins throwing him up to a second story window. We cut to an interior shot of the second-story room, Keaton's head impossibly bobbing up and down in the window. Cutting back outside, the woman throws an umbrella at Keaton, who proceeds to open it at the amplitude of his flight. When he does, the film slows down so as to give the effect of Keaton slowly descending towards the blanket. Keaton's body is able to modify the physical reality of this world for comic effect.

Moreover, I'd like to point out the frame is the threshold that Keaton breaks to enter into (comic) absurdity.⁽⁶⁾ In *Jokes and their Relations to the Unconscious*, Freud argues the passing over of a wall, of a limit, will lead to comedy. Keaton's body achieves this in his unconscious world by breaking a physical limit as the umbrella - slightly opened *off-frame* - modifies the very reality he inhabits through the superseding of the frame that confines him.

This, too, is self-referential on a macro level, "film being essentially a gestural medium, a kind of shadow play, suggestive of life itself and thus most poignant and convincing in silent black-and-white, at best absurdist comedy" (Coover 69). *Film suggests its life as a shadow*, not as life outside the frame. Thus, film redefines reality at the focal point of Keaton's body.

Additionally, speaking of *Sherlock Jr.*'s frame-within-a-frame sequence, Coover continues:

A film, unlike a painting does not hang in the light. It does not even hang but appears out of the darkness and disappears into it again. [...], Keaton does hang the frame in the light, and moreover he disturbs its integrity, jumping in and out of it, challenging not only its reality but the reality of the world in which it, in another frame, exists (69).

As stated, Keaton's comedy breaks frames. It is through Keaton's *impossible motion* that the frame - the very confines of the filmic world - is broken. Thus, Keaton's bodily motion interrupts not only the reality of the inner film world but the reality of film itself. He does this to ultimately to achieve his comedic goals.

As Muybridge built his first camera to capture a horse's motion for the purposes of motion studies, what, then, can be said of the motion of the cerebral Keaton? I contend that motion is still as fundamental a principle of film theory as in Muybridge's day and studying Keaton allows us to see how our perception of motion is inherently linked with our perception of the film as a whole - is this a physical space or a mental space? What are the consequences of viewing it as both? Keaton's motion is an impossibility that is directly reflective of the impossibility of film motion itself.

Notes

1. Doughboy is an informal term for an American soldier, especially members of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in World War I.
2. Rube Goldberg machine is a deliberately over-engineered machine executing a simple task in a very complex way. It is named after American cartoonist and inventor Rube Goldberg (1883-1970).
3. Reportedly, the only instance in which Keaton used a stuntman - an Olympic athlete to be precise.
4. Gladfelder has an extended discussion upon the "double-revelation" of Keaton as Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.*'s



Figure 1: Buster Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924)

opening scene. He further provides examples of Keaton learning how to be a detective (and failing) in this film through the tropes and stereotypes of other films - for example, the highly cliché expectation he has of the banana peel making the sheik slip, a thought which only comes back to harm him.

5. Although, in reality, Keaton evidently broke his neck performing the stunt in *Sherlock Jr.* involving a railroad water-tank spout when the water pouring from said spout threw a hanging Buster down onto the tracks such that the back of his neck smashed against a rail. He did the unheard of act of calling off filming for the day. At the time Keaton was not aware of the fracture. As he reports, years later a fracture was found on his neck and this was the only thing he could imagine causing it.

6. Another example of this can be found in his film *Seven Chances* when the mass of brides-to-be chase after him. In the first frame, the group of marching suitors seems large, but manageable. As the scene progressively cuts to larger and larger frames, we see a veritable army of brides-to-be surpassing the maximum amount of people each previous frame could have held. The effect is a clear comic effect of increasing the number into absurdity.

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