

(Ebook pdf) The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton

The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton

Robert Knopf

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#2129423 in Books Princeton University Press 1999-08-02 1999-08-22 Original language: English PDF # 1
9.00 x .52 x 6.00l, .74 #File Name: 0691004420232 pages | File size: 49.Mb

Robert Knopf : The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Three Stars By toonrog99 If anyone loves the longwinded explanations of the buster, then this is the book for you 7 of 9 people found the following review helpful. This consideration of Keaton's humor is an engaging read. By A Customer Though intellectually intriguing, The Theatre and Cinema of Buster Keaton is anything but a dry read. Knopf presents Keaton's films in a context not previously considered in film history and he does so in a manner both intelligent and engaging. The two great assets of Knopf's

thesis are his comparison between Keaton's films and his earlier work in vaudeville theatre and the connection between Keaton's comic gags and the ideals of the surrealist filmmakers. Knopf's detailed and colorful history into Keaton's vaudeville deepens one's appreciation for Keaton's great gags by suggesting the exaggeration made from the limits of the stage to the freedom of film. Knopf's inquiry into the appropriation by the surrealists suggests a new vision of Keaton's films. Given this new context Keaton's films surpass their conventional genre of Hollywood humor, but rather are reflective of an American (albeit unwitting) avant-garde. Not only are the ideas in this text compelling and well documented, but they are presented in a writing style which is engaging for both the serious film scholar and the fan of Keaton humor. This investigation into Keaton's humor only serves to embellish the effect of his gags and comic brilliance. This analysis only elevates its subject.

4 of 19 people found the following review helpful. At last. A serious analysis of the art of Buster Keaton. By Rick Levinson

Knopf sees three aspects of classic Keaton analysis: 1. Classical H'wood narrative branch, as represented by Moews, Bordwell and most film historians. 2. Vaudeville entertainer approach. What Knopf means by this is the emphasis of gags as gags instead of narrative emphasis as represented by branch #1. Branches #1 and #2 follow the route trod by many a film comedy theorist, and consist of the [to them] all-important narrative? Knopf recognizes a continuum in film comedy theory from 'gags/performance integrate with narrative' to 'gags/performance have no relation whatsoever to narrative'. The gag/narrative dichotomy seems 'cutting edge' because, presumably, gags over narrative represents a transgression, and any transgression is sexy to academic theorists. The gag comedian who 'subverts' narrative is seen as rebelling against the status quo, and is, in the academic's scheme of things, more worthy of appreciation than the comedian who, in the academic's opinion, is more faithful to narrative tradition. Whether the high cultural referent is the Surrealists or Brecht or Beckett, the idea is that 'rebel' comedians are more in tune with the celestial spheres of high art than those who are perceived as hugging the status quo narrative line. The third branch of Surrealist muse. The main importance of branch # 3, as far as I can tell, is that it allows Knopf to play the 'famous artists and intellectuals my guy influenced or who adored my guy' game, which is as inexhaustible a game as the 'who stole what gag from whom?' game, and about as instructive in terms of appreciating the art of film comedy. In the 'Keaton and the Surrealists' chapter, Knopf gets to reel off the actual, probable and possible influences Keaton had on the Surrealists. It's a fun game if you're in the mood. The all-time champ among comedians in the 'famous artists who were influenced by my guy/who adored my guy', game, by the way, is Chaplin. Hands down. Well, what is Knopf's conception of these three branches, the classical narrative, the vaudeville entertainer, the surrealist muse? Knopf doesn't have much to say about the classical narrative approach. He merely mentions in passing that Keaton is often cited as a superb exemplar of classical narrative filmmaking. Actually, most successful Hollywood filmmakers are superb exemplars of classical narrative filmmaking. That's why it's called classical narrative filmmaking. The vaudeville entertainer approach seems to be the main thrust of the book. Knopf appears, unwittingly, to confuse two mutually film comedy to vaudeville roots, particularly the roots of Keaton's own performing family; and the 'gags over narrative' approach most closely associated with Prof. Henry Jenkins at MIT, which emphasizes how non-linear gags/spectacle disrupt traditional narrative. These analyses are mutually exclusive because the historical approach is a 'bottom up' approach, which demands a scrupulous study of early film comedy and late 19th century/turn of the century stage traditions; and the 'gags over narrative' approach is a 'top down' approach which ignores actual history, and focuses instead on the theorist's theories about narrative [boo, hiss] v. non-linear gags [hooray]. Knopf, who leans toward high theory, as his favourable citations of Jenkins and other academic comedy theorists suggest, does a less-than-half-assed job on the historical side of things. He makes an effort, anyway, which is more than can be said of most film comedy theorists. Knopf rounds out his book with Keaton's influence on the New Vaudeville and Performance Art, which is one more tack at 'artists my guy influenced or who adored my guy'. Another fun game. Theatrical pantomimist/comedian Bill Irwin is mentioned frequently. Irwin, by the way, wears, as a stage prop, round, black-framed glasses. Which suggests the influence of another prominent silent comedian. But Knopf doesn't bother mentioning this. It gets in the way of how much Irwin admires/pays homage to Keaton. As with most Keaton admirers, Knopf mentions Arbuckle Arbuckle didn't have much influence on Keaton's work. Keaton only made nearly 20 short-reelers with Arbuckle. Clyde Bruckman, like Eddie Cline, worked with Buster from the short-reel days. Bruckman is cited for his quote, in Rudi Blesch's book on Keaton, that Keaton was responsible for virtually all the gags and filmmaking on his films. This quote is treated as dogma by Keaton admirers. You wonder what Cline, Havez, Mitchell, St. Clair, Lex Neal and others [including, after his scandal, Arbuckle] were doing on Joe Schenck's payroll ~ Joe Schenck produced the Keaton solo shorts and features ~ if they were contributing 10% to the production. Perhaps they were all agents instead of talented gagwriters and scenarists. Knopf, like most film comedy theorists, has absolutely no use for the likes of Cline, Bruckman, etc. Although Knopf does mention that Elgin Lessley, Keaton's supremely talented cameraman, suggested the 'Keaton enters a film in a dream' bit in SHERLOCK, JR., which only happens to be the most admired sequence in all of Keaton. And that Lessley was critical to the conception and filming of the 'multiple Keatons' bit in 'The Playhouse', which is one of the most admired sequences in Keaton's short films. And Clyde Bruckman co-directed THE GENERAL, one of the most admired films in the Keaton canon. narrative filmmaker, Keaton as vaudeville entertainer, Keaton as Surrealist muse? Who cares, as long as it's Keaton? Keaton, the brand preferred by four out of five film comedy theorists. Maybe it's time for academic comedy theorists to lay off

Keaton for a while. It's been a long, long time since they've championed anyone else. Perhaps they should write exhaustively about someone else for a change. Jerry Lewis, maybe. *****
Rick Levinson

Famous for their stunts, gags, and images, Buster Keaton's silent films have enticed everyone from Hollywood movie fans to the surrealists, such as Dal and Buuel. Here Robert Knopf offers an unprecedented look at the wide-ranging appeal of Keaton's genius, considering his vaudeville roots and his ability to integrate this aesthetic into the techniques of classical Hollywood cinema in the 1920s. When young Buster was being hurled about the stage by his comically irate father in the family's vaudeville act, *The Three Keatons*, he was perfecting his acrobatic skills, timing, visual humor, and trademark "stone face." As Knopf demonstrates, such theatrics would serve Keaton well as a film director and star. By isolating elements of vaudeville within works that have previously been considered "classical," Knopf reevaluates Keaton's films and how they function. The book combines vivid visual descriptions and illustrations that enable us to see Keaton at work staging his memorable images and gags, such as a three-story wall collapsing on him (*Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, 1928) and an avalanche of boulders chasing him down a mountainside (*Seven Chances*, 1925). Knopf explains how Keaton's stunts and gags served as fanciful departures from his films' storylines and how they nonetheless reinforced a strange sense of reality, that of a machine-like world with a mind of its own. In comparison to Chaplin and Lloyd, Keaton made more elaborate use of natural locations. The scene in *The Navigator*, for example, where Buster brandishes a swordfish to fend off another swordfish derives much of its power from actually being shot under water. Such "hyper-literalism" was but one element of Keaton's films that inspired the surrealists. Exploring Keaton's influence on Salvador Dal, Luis Buuel, Federico Garca Lorca, and Robert Desnos, Knopf suggests that Keaton's achievement extends beyond Hollywood into the avant-garde. The book concludes with an examination of Keaton's late-career performances in Gerald Potterton's *The Railrodder* and Samuel Beckett's *Film*, and locates his legacy in the work of Jackie Chan, Blue Man Group, and Bill Irwin.

.com Readers of James Agee's agile and marvelously brief essay from 1949, "Comedy's Greatest Era," remember the lyric forcefulness of the paragraphs on Buster Keaton, their acute sense of his harrowing acrobatics and ennui. In contrast, Robert Knopf's sober study of the Great Stone Face, for all its scrupulousness, looks like a footnote to Agee. His argument is not uninteresting: in Knopf's view, the family vaudeville act (called *The Three Keatons*) affected Buster's work forever. Out of it Keaton developed his hallmark style, an original combination of the high and the low reminiscent of Samuel Beckett and embraced by Salvador Dal and Luis Buuel. Knopf also maintains that a generation of commentators mugged Keaton's movies when they falsely celebrated his "classical Hollywood style." Keaton--the virtuoso acrobat, master of long shots, and ransacker of vaudeville rhythms and routines--pursues anti-narrative impulses that belong to a pre-1917 "cinema of attractions," to absurd theater and surrealism. These styles deflect attention from the plot to Buster's wringing stillness, his flat hat and flap shoes, his elaborately rigged Rube Goldberg stunts. Knopf's thesis is a narrow one, but it is solidly researched and probably true. His prose is another matter. Almost immaculately arid and inflexible, it utterly fails the improvisatory comic who could do so much with so little--for example, love: in a crowd scene in *The Cameraman*, Keaton leans his body so far leftward toward a girl that you wonder at his pact with gravity. --Lyll Bush
From *Library Journal*
Buster Keaton ranks as one of the foremost clown princes of Hollywood. As a child, Keaton learned his craft as one of vaudeville's *Three Keatons*, where he was the target of knockabout comedy so rough many observers considered it a form of child abuse. Sadly, personal problems, alcoholism, and a lack of business acumen caused Buster to lose artistic control over the making of his films in later years, and he was reduced to taking bit roles in "Beach Party" films. Knopf (theater, Univ. of Michigan) offers a timely, academic appreciation of the great stoneface, examining why Keaton's films intrigued surrealists and intellectuals such as Salvador Dal!, Federico Garc!a Lorca, and Luis Bu?uel. (One of Keaton's final appearances was in a short film scripted by Samuel Beckett.) Knopf also does an excellent job of tracing the vaudevillian roots of Keaton's stunts and gags. On the other hand, Bengtson's *Silent Echoes* shows more than 100 sites from early Keaton films, comparing the film view with the scene as it exists today. (Unlike other silent film figures, Keaton preferred natural settings for his pratfalls. As a result, his early films offer a wonderful view of early Hollywood landmarks that are, like some of Keaton's films, now lost to posterity.) This dedicated bit of detective work will be of great interest to Hollywood and urban historians. Although the definitive history of Keaton's life and career has yet to be written, both books will nicely supplement the collections of libraries that already own earlier studies, like Keaton's *Wonderful World of Slapstick*, Marion Meade's *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase* or Tom Dardis's *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down* A not to mention Kino on Video's ten-volume *The Art of Buster Keaton*. Recommended for all academic and large public libraries and specialized film collections. A
Stephen Rees, Levittown Regional Lib., PA
Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. "Knopf offers a timely, academic appreciation of the great stoneface, examining why Keaton's films intrigued surrealists and intellectuals. . . . Knopf also does an excellent job of tracing the vaudevillian roots of Keaton's stunts and gags."--*Library Journal*"The remarkable thing about Buster Keaton is that within the world of film he could do anything. [The book] is a concise synthesis of critical opinions on Keaton which

is most useful and insightful in its attention to the tension between vaudeville-based gags and classical narrative structure in Keaton's films."--Marc A. Mamigonian, *The Boston Book* "With apt photographs, complete filmography, and heuristic bibliography, Knopf reanimates the delightfully improvised cinema of a truly great comic film artist."--Choice