

Themes of *The General*

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

Dramatic Analysis

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

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

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

Limitation of the Dramatic Approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3



Figure 1.4



Figure 1.5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Significance of the Dramatic Conflicts

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

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

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

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

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

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

Imagistic Analysis: Problems with Structural Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Iconic Analysis

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 1.6



Figure 1.7



Figure 1.8



Figure 1.9



Figure 1.10



Figure 1.11

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

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

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

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

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

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

Automatism

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

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

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

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



Figure 1.12



Figure 1.13



Figure 1.14



Figure 1.15

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 1.16



Figure 1.17



Figure 1.18



Figure 1.19



Figure 1.20



Figure 1.21

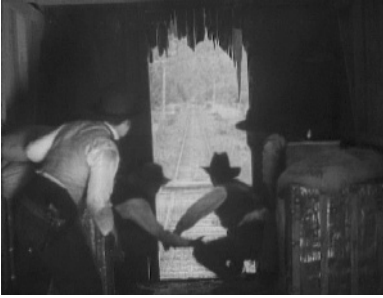


Figure 1.22

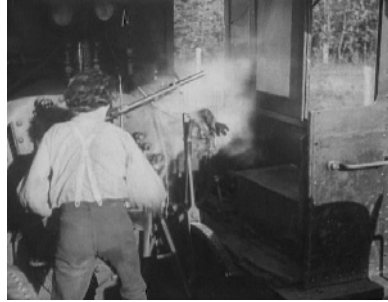


Figure 1.23



Figure 1.24



Figure 1.25



Figure 1.26

again looks behind himself, but all he sees is the lumber piled high on the tender of *The Texas*. In this gag, Johnnie's inattention is certainly more excusable than in many of the other automatism gags in that this gag finds

singles out a piece of debris strewn on the track. The wayward boxcar strikes the debris and derails, piling the boxcar to one side of the track. Keaton then cuts back to the cab. Johnnie has managed to choke the steaming valve. Keaton cuts back to the medium close-shot of Johnnie looking out of the cab. Again, that forlorn look overcomes him. He closes his eyes and, then shocked, he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keaton and Bergson

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adaptability in Keaton's Other Films

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

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

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

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

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

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

Successful Adaptation Gags

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fixation and Insight

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intelligence in Keaton's Other Films

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concrete Intelligence in *The General*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concrete Intelligence and Skilled Labor

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

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

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

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

The basic craft²⁹ that had greatly diminished by the twenties was farming. Because the domestic markets slowed down, due to the stabilization of American population growth (large-scale immigration was slackening³⁰) and because the international agricultural market was narrowing, due to stiff competition from new grain producing centers, American farming contracted. According to C. Wright Mills, "[i]n 1820, almost three-quarters of the nation's labor force was engaged in agricultural production. In the century and a

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

- 1 William Pittenger, *Daring and Suffering: A History of the Great Railroad Adventure* (Philadelphia: J. W. Daughaday, 1864).
- 2 For those who feel that the position attacked here is a totally fabricated straw man, let me say that Rudi Blesh, in his study *Keaton* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), holds that the miraculous transformation of the individual in the face of fate is Keaton's central theme. Hence, at least part of the analysis, attacked above, is evident in the more eminent literature in the field. Hence, my romantic love proponent is not a completely invented straw man; rather, elements of this interpretation are found in esteemed works in the field.
- 3 Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 131.
- 4 Tom Gunning interprets this scene as symbolizing the dehumanization that comes with industrialization. He finds the imagery uneasy, as Keaton is alleged to take over the rhythm of his locomotive. But this account hardly suits the affect of the situation which is one of joyous, triumphant hilarity. There is nothing uneasy about the moment at all. See: Tom Gunning "Buster Keaton or The Work of Comedy in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Cineaste*, 21(3) (1995), p. 16.
- 5 George Adam Wead, *Buster Keaton and the Dynamics of Visual Wit* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University doctoral dissertation, 1973; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 73-30755 1 594816), p. 253.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

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

The second humorous effect in the film involves two shots. The first is an intertitle about Johnnie that reads "There were two loves in his life. His engine." Then follows a shot of a photo of Annabelle in a circular frame. This effect may, on the face of it, appear to be a gag insofar as it seems that one might expect that the loves of Johnnie's life will be listed according to priorities and, that under that kind of listing, one expects that Annabelle should be first. However, this explanation of the shot interpolation does not seem right to me; instead this shot interpolation is more of an allusion to a popular sort of verbal cliché than a gag. That is, folklore has it that a cowboy loves his horse and his girl, in that order. Indeed, weren't English squires held to value their property, their horses, their dogs and their wives, in that order? In short, the "in that order" joke is virtually a cliché rather than a gag which subverts expectations. In this context, Keaton's use of this cliché is predicated on eliciting humor through recognition rather than through surprise. Here, what is to be recognized is the "in that order" cliché and, through that cliché, the audience is to further recognize the particularly obsessive, male personality type that the cliché describes. Undoubtedly, at one time, the "in that order" cliché was a full-blooded joke. This may be the reason why an analysis of it in terms of subverted expectations may seem initially appropriate. However, time and use have sapped the strategy of its energy and what remains is an epithet rather than a joke.

- 14 Of course, in this gag, it is not Johnnie but the boys who behave automatically; Johnnie, in fact, is quite clever here. Later in this chapter I will comment on Johnnie's cleverness at length.
- 15 John Dewey comments on such a mentality in his "Having an Experience" in *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1908 [1934]) and "Education as Growth" in *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan 1916). This correspondence between Keaton's approach to intelligence and a noted pragmatist's is highly suggestive.
- 16 Aaron Smuts has reminded me that this sort of behavior recalls Dewey's notion of intellectualism.

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

- 43 The loss of the feature of work that involves the practice of concrete intelligence was a result of the successful attempt of factory management to take control of the workshop from the workers. This makes business much less vulnerable to strikes. In the traditional workshop, knowledge of materials and knowledge of production processes were in the hands of the worker. A strike was paralyzing. Such workers could not be replaced easily. Management knew little of production and even less of the peculiarities of the machines in their own shops; all that was in the hands and minds of the laborer. The assembly-line with its segmentation of work and its absolute specification of tasks with work cards involves divesting the worker of mastery over the processes of production. The unskilled worker can easily be replaced by other unskilled workers. Strikes can be easily broken by the use of scabs. Assembly-lines mean the centralization of all knowledge of production in management. Frederick Taylor, the major theoretician of this tendency, wrote, "The managers assume, for instance, the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen, and then classifying, tabulating and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulas." Also Taylor writes, "As far as possible, the workmen as well as the gang bosses and foremen, should be entirely relieved of planning. . . . All possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying-out department." Here, we see that the very *raison d'être* of the assembly line is predicated on divesting factory work of the opportunity for the exercise of concrete intelligence. See: Frederick Winslow Taylor, "The Principles of Scientific Management" in *Scientific Management* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1911), p. 36; also *Shop Management* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1919), pp. 98–9.
- 44 With respect to Keaton's use of sports imagery, it may be that the rise of sports in America is a compensatory response to the population's waning experience of the intelligent interaction with things.
- 45 Gunning, pp. 14–17.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 17.