Keaton Is Missing
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It seems that something has always been missing from Buster Keaton's films. Of course, he never smiled, but that absence in even the funniest of situations only added to the humor and general playfulness of his films. Sound, too, is missing from much of his work, although the films that have always been praised are the silent features; and then, Keaton moved into the sound era far more easily than his contemporary Charlie Chaplin. When Keaton did turn to sound, something else was found to be missing. As Tom Dardis explains, MGM, the studio that produced most of his sound features, "insisted upon knowing how things were going to be *in advance of the shooting*: they wanted to see complete shooting scripts before a camera turned" (166), but Keaton had always worked *without* a script. Still, what I see as most typically "missing" in Keaton's work is none of these.

Or perhaps I should say, it is less *one* than a kind of aggregate feature, something that appears (or disappears) in the very playfulness of his silent, independent features and may well be a key to their unique character.

There is one other thing missing at present that should be mentioned because of its bearing on this problem, and that is simply critical discussion of Keaton. In the wake of the Chaplin centennial, we might well expect that Keaton would temporarily take a critical back seat to his comic colleague. But his work has suffered through curious periods of neglect and reappraisal, periods in which he had been praised as the great genius of silent comedy and others in which he has been nearly ignored. After being resurrected in the auteurist times of the 1960s and 1970s—when Penelope Houston triumphantly proclaimed that, "at long last he seems to be *everyone's* favourite comedian" (65), Keaton has once again fallen into some neglect, a neglect that may have something to do with what I find intriguingly absent in his work, as well as to what may be a bit too present in current critical thinking.

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Following the appearance of Dardis's critical biography in 1979, more than a decade has passed in which his films have received rather scant attention.[1] Marking that decade is a proliferation of new ways of thinking about film. Particularly, various ideological/psychological modes of criticism have taken center stage, with their implicit goal the revelation of what has been hidden or absent from the individual and cultural consciousness: how power is inscribed in our language and images; the way cultural contradictions are obscured by a culture's various constructs and self-representations; how the self—the gendered, sexual, political self—is constructed; the way narrative invariably remodels itself as nature. Despite some excesses, these models have proven their value for illuminating much of American film, which throughout its history has successfully deployed a kind of "illusionism" to accommodate its audiences' needs and desires. But so far these critical strategies seem to have accommodated Keaton somewhat less successfully.

What may be partly at fault is a critical canard about Keaton's films, that what makes them different from Chaplin's is their lack of a social consciousness. Chaplin's silent masterpiece *The Gold Rush* (1925), for example, clearly targets a capitalist struggle for wealth by showing how the rush for gold can lead people to prostitute themselves (as with the girl Georgia) and to prey, cannibalistically, on each other (as Big Jim does with the Little Tramp). In contrast, Keaton's film of equal stature, *The General* (1926), thanks in part to what Walter Kerr terms a "mythological expansion" of its Civil War subject matter (247), seems intent on submerging its story's ideological implications into an individualistic tale of heroic endeavor. Of course, a short like *Cops* (1922) seems to look in the opposite direction, as all the calamities that befall Keaton in that film spring from its protagonist's initial, wrong-headed impulse to become a successful businessman. A feature like *Seven Chances* (1925) can turn love and marriage into bartered commodities when a million-dollar inheritance is promised. And *The Cameraman* (1928) can make the price of a movie camera seem a definitive obstacle to happiness. But while these films open up to some semblance of materialist analysis, they are not really in this way typical of the Keaton canon. And at a time when ideological models dominate much of our thinking, this apparent absence of a consistent social posture in Keaton's films may well weigh against them. Of course, that absence should itself be a kind of comment, as it suggests a studied turning away from those material concerns in a period when much of American society—and the films of a contemporary like Harold Lloyd—was busily celebrating them.

What I want to look squarely at—or for—is that symptomatic absence which in various ways characterizes Keaton's films. And I want to read that sense of something "missing" here not so much as a lack, a problem calling for some critical indulgence, but positively, as a significant mark, what a Derrida might term a "supplement" to their meaning. In fact, Keaton's work seems thoroughly concerned at every level with the missing, with something taken away, with what, at the risk of over-complicating things, I might term a kind of Derridean absence. We should note that one of the things which always distinguished his films from most other silent comedies was their careful and often expensive attention to texture—to, for example, historical context.[2] Thus Houston praises them precisely for their constant "sense of a world beyond the comedy" (65). That recognition becomes all the more significant when we look carefully at his films and find they most often seem to be about *what is not there.*

Consider for a moment how many of Keaton's most famous films are structured around a missing element, something that should be there but is not. For example, the whole pattern of humor in a short like *One Week* (1920) emerges from the fact that Buster and his new bride have received a prefabricated house kit, but its instructions have been tampered with by a rival, so Buster must assemble it as best he can—and that "can" is in a most imaginative way, as if the concept itself had to be mentally "constructed" from scratch. Similarly, in *The Cameraman* Buster goes to photograph a ballgame, only to find that the team is playing away. Inspired by the empty ballfield, he fills in for the team, pantomiming the various players and actions. Daniel Moes claims this elaborate scene "is nicely done, but it does not fit in" (311). Yet the manner in which Buster accepts and imaginatively copes with absence,

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creating his own ballgame, seems central not only to this film with its implicit commentary on the filmmaker's creative coping, but to the entire Keaton canon.

A brief catalogue of similar effects may be in order to suggest the pervasiveness of this motif. We might think of *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), which revolves around a stolen watch; *The Navigator* (1924), with its mysteriously missing steamship crew; *The General* (1926), which is structured around a chase to recover a stolen locomotive and accidentally kidnapped girl; or *College* (1927), whose climax depends on the protagonist's rescue of his kidnapped girlfriend. Of course, what is recovered is often only of minor importance—for example, the watch, or even the girl in most Keaton films—compared to the machinations involved in regaining the missing element. Still, in these and many other works, Keaton focuses our attention on *something missing*, a point of absence, and then, in the best comic tradition to restore a kind of wholeness that has been lost.

At least, the Keaton persona tries to make his world as whole as it can ever really be. A short like *The Balloonatic* (1920) is instructive here. After a series of mishaps—first at a carnival and then out in the wilds, where a "captive" balloon from the carnival has accidentally deposited him—Buster sets out fishing in a collapsible canoe. As he floats serenely downstream, the camera pulls back to an extreme long shot that reveals Buster drifting toward a waterfall. Yet when he reaches the falls, the canoe seems to violate the very laws of nature; instead of falling, it simply floats on in the air, changing neither course nor altitude. A longer shot then discovers the trick. Buster, as if anticipating that nothing, not even the water under his boat, is quite reliable, has rigged chance against itself; that is, he has attached the wayward balloon to the canoe. Yet the momentary sense of relief we feel—both for Buster and for ourselves, as that absence is filled in, reality reconstructed—quickly disappears when the collapsible canoe begins collapsing in mid-air, first the front, then the rear falling off, leaving Buster tentatively perched, perhaps waiting for his balloon to burst next. What he might well have anticipated, of course, is that nothing can be anticipated. If the very physical supports on which we usually depend—the ground beneath our feet, the water under a canoe—can simply disappear, then so can whatever flimsy contrivances we pose against such instability. In the natural scheme of things, it seems that something will always turn up missing.

This interpretation, in some ways, recalls the stance taken by Keaton's existentialist admirers, who would describe him as a kind of fugitive from a Samuel Beckett play: the isolated individual poised against nothingness. Yet something remains missing even from this portrait. Consider a scene from his own comedy about the mad pursuit of wealth, *Seven Chances*. Buster sets out to drive from his club to his girlfriend's house. He walks from the club to his car, gets in, and almost immediately, as the background shifts to that of the girl's home, gets out again and walks up to her house. It is a stunning instance of invisible editing of the sort that occurs repeatedly in *Sherlock, Jr.*, wherein Buster, as a dreaming projectionist, enters a movie scene and finds himself bewildered by its constantly shifting locales. But here Keaton is not simply compressing narrative time, as movies have always done via jump cuts. Rather, he is erasing space, transforming it before our eyes, ultimately making a joke out of filmic space—and, in the process, forcing us to question the reality of all we have seen.

Here, finally, is what I mean by the "missing" element in Keaton's films. Perhaps I should just term it a reflexive trick of the sort of which Keaton was so fond and leave it at that, but in its various versions, the effect I have in mind is more complicated and significant. Keaton is, of course, making fun of the conventions of movement or travel that film narrative typically depends on—and especially, in a subtle way, of the frenetic chases and rallies, the almost absurd fascination with movement for movement's sake, the playfulness toward physical space, that so typifies early silent comedy. But at the same time he hints at a very different sense of the world than we find in conventional narrative or even most other silent comedies, a world that his persona must respond to, by turns, in both conventional and unconventional ways. It seems that the world of his films always operates under the threat of erasure, as if it were the creation of a disgruntled cartoonist who might return at any time

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to rethink and wipe out some of his prior creation—including the Keaton persona (thus Houston appropriately refers to him as "the Great Blank Page"). Keaton, consequently, must function *as schizophrenic*, that is, as one who responds to this fluid world as if it were quite solid and predictable, yet also stands ready to cope with its inevitable contingencies.

In a Keaton film, then, we never simply observe the world of the existential or irrational man, a realm where the individual, through the act of being, creates a meaning for his life. Rather, Keaton's persona mirrors a schizophrenic world, as he sets about understanding *why* its strange conditions pertain. In the best of his films, we enter a world wherein the semiotic is itself unstable, prone to erasure. Works like *Sherlock, Jr.* and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) repeatedly raise a very basic question: How can we convey meaning when the very signs by which we signify are constantly turning up missing? How can one "mean" with absence? When we consider his films in this light, "missing" effectively becomes the key sign.

I want to examine this pattern as it surfaces in the last of Keaton's independent silent productions, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* In this film he not only fashions a narrative that has its own sort of gaps or absences; he also conjures up a world that is constantly slipping away, coming unmoored like a wayward steamboat—and literally disappearing. In fact, by the film's end the town of River Junction, the setting for the entire narrative, has been blown away by a cyclone. But even before that devastating erasure, it seems that everywhere Keaton's protagonist, Willie Canfield, Jr., turns here, he encounters an absence, an opening in the world that, as is apparently always the case for Keaton, appears to be quite new, unknown, and puzzling. He is, as a result, constantly challenged to respond in typical human fashion—and, we might extrapolate, in typical moviegoer fashion—to either fill in or simply overlook those gaps.

We might begin by noting how *Steamboat*'s plot itself seems to disappear right before our eyes. One of the narrative's major set pieces, for example, is the hat sequence, wherein Willie's father, Steamboat Bill, tries to remake his son in his own image—or at least as something that more nearly approximates his image than does the effete, ukulele-playing, beret-wearing "shrimp" that suddenly turns up at the River Junction train depot and announces itself to be his son. What Bill wants to do, in effect, is to fill in a gap, to "create" the proper image of the son who has been missing for many years—missing because his mother had taken him away when he was only a baby and had brought him up "back East" in Boston. What he is hoping for, as he tells his first mate, is a young man "as big as me"; that is, he expects another version of himself, sameness rather than difference.

Yet what he gets is a son who, in nearly every way, defies those expectations. So after Willie's arrival, Bill quickly tries to make him over in the appropriate image—his own—by drawing on his culture's store of conventional icons, particularly by providing him with an appropriate, masculine, workingman's attire. His first effort in this vein is to exchange his son's beret for some more suitable headgear. It is an effort that results in one of the film's longest set pieces, a classic comic turn wherein Willie tries on and rejects, or has rejected by his father, the conventional arbiter of meaning here, a long series of hats—straws, bowlers, Stetsons, even the traditional Keaton porkpie—before finally settling on a rakish one of which his father approves. The resulting image is still not in line with Steamboat Bill's hopes, but is a move in a direction that at least closes the gap between his expectations and reality.

As they leave the store, though, a strong gust of wind comes up and snatches that hat away. As an isolated shot points out, the hat blows into the river—as will happen to most of the town itself by the end of the film when a stronger wind, a cyclone hits. Nonplussed by the unexpected loss, Willie simply redons his original beret, which he had carefully stored in a pocket, as if anticipating some such turn of events. When his father turns and looks, he sees essentially the same image of Willie that he encountered prior to the hat sequence. Apart from the laughs at the various hat jokes that have occurred, it is almost as if the sequence had never happened. The narrative simply reconstitutes itself at this point—although that very reconstitution is a major joke—the "topper" for all those we have previ-

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ously seen about real toppers. At the same time, this narrative absence takes on its own real thrust, for it points up the futility of trying to fill the gaps here, of trying to insert an image—of the masculine son of Steamboat Bill—where that image is pointedly lacking, or of relying on such external signs to determine meaning.

This pattern begins even earlier, though, and with another instance of absence, as Steamboat Bill goes to the train station to meet the son he has not seen since childhood. Without a picture or memory of his son, Bill must rely on his own expectations of what Willie will look like, as well as on a telegram that tells him to expect someone wearing a carnation. Of course, since it is Mother's Day, *everyone* at the train station is wearing a carnation, and no one quite fits Bill's imaginary model, which is a kind of self-image. Willie, meanwhile, faces much the same problem, and he similarly goes about looking for a much older version of himself, while offering his carnation-adorned lapel for all to see. The resulting comic encounters with various likely and unlikely candidates partly rework a traditional comic pattern of mistaken identity, but Keaton makes this pattern his own by having it hinge on an unreliable and eventually missing sign, the carnation, which in turn stands in for that other unreliable sign, the self-image from which each works. In this instance, the carnation simply drops away, leaving Willie to hold out his empty lapel, Bill to overlook him because he has no carnation, and the supposed sign of difference here to become little more than a trick played on meaning itself—a sign of absence and even *in*difference.

Even after Bill finds his son and sets about making him over in his own image, he faces a troubling absence—the tendency of his son to slip out of the role he envisions for him, to be, as it were, missing in action. Ordered to get working clothes for the boat, Willie shows up in a yachtsman's outfit. When Bill tries to show him how to run the boat, Willie's ineptitude nearly sinks it. And when ordered to stay away from Kitty King, daughter of the man who has brought a new steamboat to River Junction and vowed to run Bill "off the river," Willie simply sneaks away. But first, he leaves a dummy in his bed, to which Bill embarrassingly finds himself talking, as if his son were still there. The ruse/absence discovered, he decides that Willie is not a riverboatman, is a poor excuse for a son, and should be sent back East, there to remain an absence in his life.

Fittingly, the resolution to that hasty decision springs from another false sign here. When Mr. King uses his influence to get a "condemned" sign placed on Bill's boat, Bill tears up the sign, strikes King, and is thrown in jail. In turn, Willie tries to get Bill out of jail by trading on the slippery nature of such signs. Now wearing his father's clothes which, ill-fitting as they are, nearly swallow his small body, he appears at the jail in a guise of contradiction. While he may be dressed like a steamboatman, Willie tells the sheriff that his father is ashamed of him because of his unmasculine interests, particularly his baking. That baking, though, has produced a large loaf of bread in which all the tools Bill needs to break out of this very substantial jail are hidden. While the tools are discovered—the bread, wet from a storm, falls apart, depositing its contents at the sheriff's feet—Willie does briefly manage to rescue his father by trading upon his very unseemliness. He knocks out the sheriff, who has laughed at the very thought of a "shrimp" like Willie trying to hurt a big guy like him.

This momentary victory too quickly vanishes, though, as the sheriff's deputies return and imprison Willie in his father's place. Knocked out by the sheriff, Willie is then carted off to the hospital, but he falls out of the car en route—he accidentally escapes—and that absence goes unnoticed by his warders. But staggering to his feet, he by chance wanders up to the hospital door, just as the car that had been carrying him arrives. In this variation on the earlier hat sequence, it seems to the deputies taking him to the hospital as if he has been in the car all along, as if nothing has ever been missing here, although we know better. In this world, it seems, people and signs alike constantly prove elusive, frequently missing, as it is only chance that, unpredictably, at times restores the erasure.

On a much larger scale this pattern works itself out when the storm strikes and wipes out most of River Junction. But in this instance, it is not so much Willie who turns up missing, as it is everything around him. When he awakes to find himself in the hospital, most of the hospital itself is already gone, simply blown away by the storm. Reacting as if it were just a

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bad dream induced by his blow on the head, Willie ducks under the covers while his hospital bed is blown all about the town. Still dazed, he finds himself in the middle of the street, looks around to see no one, and stands puzzled while, in one of Keaton's most dangerous and justifiably famous stunts, a building's entire facade falls around him, its second-story window, the single opening in this quite solid front, by chance, neatly framing him and sparing him from being pounded into the ground.

This sequence in which the world literally disappears or collapses all around Willie, in which the landscape seems to change each time he blinks, is one of the most characteristic in the Keaton canon. It echoes the famous sequence in *Sherlock, Jr.*, wherein the Keaton character enters into the film frame itself and there must cope with the instant shifts in time and space produced by a rapid series of jump cuts. This echo reminds us how much the real and reel worlds have in common, how, for all their appearance of unity and solidity, each is governed by a kind of rule—or aesthetic, if you will—of disappearance or unreliability.

Fittingly, Willie ends up in a theater, an emblem for the film itself and its reliance on illusionism. Here he tries to escape from the storm's ravages in various ways that further emphasize the contingent and untrustworthy nature of the images around him. Seeing a river, Willie tries to dive in, only to find the water missing; it is only a painted backdrop. Frightened, he hops up on a platform and pulls a curtain down around himself. But the curtain quickly pops back up to reveal Willie missing now; it is a magician's stage prop, hiding a trap door. Emerging from beneath the platform, he makes for the stage door and exits, just as the theater's walls and then the doorframe itself collapse. When he looks around, it is, thanks to this strange illogic of events, eerily as if the theater had never even existed, and as if this whole sequence, like that of the hats, were nothing more than what he originally suspected it was—a hallucination. Once again, the scene, much like the town, has effectively been erased from the narrative, and all of its images reduced to a fleeting, dreamlike existence.

The film's conclusion, wherein Willie uses Bill's boat to save everyone from this distaste, seems almost anticlimactic, simply the sort of happy resolution—the restoration of some sort of order in a world of change—that comedy has always required. More than this, though, the final sequence reconfigures this pattern of contingency. It illustrates, for example, that one cannot tell a steamboatman by his clothes or general demeanor, and that the missing can always, unexpectedly, turn up. Willie uses his imagination and his unsuspected skill at piloting a riverboat to pluck Kitty, then his father, and finally Mr. King to safety from the swollen river. Moreover, to do so, he turns to the one thing that should most certainly be missing amid all this destruction, the decrepit and condemned steamer *Stonewall Jackson*. Athough practically falling apart as the film began, the boat now rides high amid the flood, precisely like the sort of bulwark its name implies. At its helm, Willie is, demonstrably, a true Steamboat Bill, Jr., it seems, and the boat a real "stone wall," although the logic behind both of those realities remains elusive. Yet it is precisely the sort of comic illogic that, we might argue, most naturally fits in a world where the signs always turn out to be slippery, their referents elusive or simply missing in action.

A final rescue merits a bit more attention in this context, for it turns absence into the film's final joke. After saving his father, Kitty, and Mr. King, Buster looks off-screen and dives into the river once more. No point-of-view shot intrudes here to show what has prompted Willie's leap, so we are left to puzzle momentarily over that missing motivation. Finally, a reverse-angle shot reveals the absent cause, as Willie swims back to the ship towing a priest who will, we presume, marry him and Kitty.

This final surprise gag seems an especially fitting *coda* for a story centered about absence. For Willie's disappearance from the frame reworks the central issue articulated by the film's title—the missing Steamboat Bill, Jr., the figure who, we were told, should look just like Bill, Sr. Of course, he is a figure who was *produced by absence*, in this case the absent mother, and whose connection to the father is the film's abiding open question and source of humor. It is worth noting, then, that with this final gag, the film leaves Willie juxtaposed not with some missing mother returned, the family restored, an original unity,

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but rather, ironically, with three "fathers"—his own, his girl's (soon to be his father-in-law), and the father/priest he has rescued. In effect, the film ends with a surplus of fathers—none of whom Willie resembles. It might be described as a surplus of meaning that never quite fills in the blank, never erases the absence here. It simply and comically reinscribes it within the narrative as an imbalance that can never be accounted for.

However, this mystery or playful sense of absence, I would argue, is finally at the core of Keaton's most personal films. Partly because of this sense, because his films seem to show the individual deprived of all external supports and forced to constitute or give meaning to himself, he has typically been viewed—and valued—as a kind of protoexistentialist, a precursor who would, in turn, be embraced by Beckett and Sartre. But that manner of "appreciation" has also led to some oversight in recent years, as critical fashion has shifted. With ideological models dominating current critical practice, we have come to value highly certain kinds of signs, particularly those that speak of social awareness and involvement in our filmmakers, as if simply addressing or reflecting a cultural problem were sufficient evidence of merit. In this context, Keaton's more fundamental questioning of those kinds of signs, measuring just how slippery they ultimately are, may seem somehow a bit too . . . playful.

One positive result of that ideological emphasis has been the relatively recent reinstatement of Chaplin to his place of prominence in the comedy pantheon. Yet while Chaplin deserves his standing, Keaton merits better—better than the near indifference of the last decade that seems, in many ways, to replay the critical neglect of the 1940s and 1950s. He deserves better, too, than the general sense that his films offer a very limited vision, because they seem to lack a clearly defined ideological dimension. That dimension is, like the Keaton persona himself, or like the famous hat scene from *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, simultaneously there and not there—and for that reason, perhaps simply hard to discuss, too elusive. His films do teem with carefully drawn characters and richly textured environments: worlds like the small-town-becoming-modern in *Steamboat Bill*, the Civil War landscape of *The General*, the early nineteenth-century ambience of *Our Hospitality*, or the dingy Chinatown of *The Cameraman*. But those worlds themselves very easily collapse, disappear, become little more than a puzzling absence in the course of his narratives; and the characters, who often seem able, like the protagonist of *Sherlock, Jr.*, simply to step in or out of the movie frame at will, to be present or missing in action, can appear every bit as elusive.

Amid the disappearing, Protean, and even irrelevant worlds of Keaton's films, the lack of a more direct address to social issues has taken on added weight. Yet what should be clear, particularly in light of the critical method of a Derrida, for instance, is that absence does, after all, invariably carry its own ideological implications. It becomes a stylistic commentary on the very flimsiness of all that generally passes for culture, of all that stands as institution, of all that asserts its natural, inherent meaningfulness, while denying the playful, slippery nature of reality. In short, it seems the very essence of much of silent comedy. The town of River Junction with its booming economy—carefully detailed at the film's beginning in a montage of Mr. King's many enterprises—simply collapses and disappears, and its very disappearance starkly comments on the sort of capitalist enterprise that it embodied. Nature itself, apparently, stands opposed, stands ready to swallow up and render all of our cultural constructs missing. Keaton, it seems, stands ready to do the same to many of our critical ones.

At the risk of simply putting old wine in another of those new critical bottles, let me turn again to Derrida's comments on meaning. He identifies two ways of thinking about meaning, "two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play." The first "seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign," while the other, "which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play" (292). That is, it describes the playful, elusive nature of the sign, as it constantly turns up absent in the line of duty. Keaton's comedy, as well as the Keaton persona, fundamentally depends on this affirmation of "play," especially of the playful, unpredictable nature of our world and all who inhabit it. But it is, at the same time, a comedy of "interpretation," one that recog-

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nizes how much inevitably "escapes" and works to reveal the play at work in all human signs and structures, including the gaps or absences that, sometimes disconcertingly, at others pleasingly, can suddenly show up—show ridiculously as gaping holes in that tight fabric of reality we commonly construct in both our everyday lives and our films. Keaton's films and the Keaton persona point out those holes, peer within them, and, in the process, help us cope with them. But perhaps we would only expect such a sense of things from someone who, in his early feature *Three Ages* (1923), knew enough to cast himself as "the missing link."

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Notes

[1] The "Annual Bibliography of Film Studies" published in the journal *Post Script* lists only four essays from 1982 to the present that either directly or tangentially look at Keaton's work. See Kirby, Kramer, Rapf, and Sweeney. Even more telling, though, is the fact that an omnibus volume like Pam Cook's *The Cinema Book*, which is "structured around the collection of 'study extracts'—short slips excerpted from films—built up by the British Film Institute" (v), does not even mention Keaton.

[2] Keaton supposedly insisted that the recreated Civil War setting for *The General* should "be so authentic it hurts" (Blesh 271).

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