

# Buster Keaton compilation: One Week (1920), The Scarecrow (1920), The 'High Sign' (1921) and Cops (1922) (Keaton, US)

## Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area: Critical Debates (AL)

### Rationale for study

- This collection of Buster Keaton 'two-reelers' epitomises the peak of sophisticated visual comedy of the early 1920s. Here we see the essence of Buster Keaton's star persona – the deadpan expression and a simple man dealing with a chaotic world. These shorts provide a comedy that is surreal, funny, creative, and stylish.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and Timings/Links

- The Scarecrow* - The kitchen sequence.
- One Week* - The train gag at the end.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

- Long shots followed by close ups are common in these Keaton two-reelers. The long shot encourages the audience to look around the frame and see the joke for themselves. Long shots in these films allow

an appreciation of the gag, while close ups allow us to focus on characters' emotions.

- In the horse-drawn procession scene in *Cops*, Keaton is depicted in the foreground trying to take a nap – deep-focus is used to show us the city unfurling in the background. In these two-reelers, Keaton's character is often placed at the centre of the frame to allow the audience to focus on how he interacts with a chaotic and mechanical world.
- Keaton employs natural lighting and reflectors to create an even and bright look. These two-reelers are mainly shot outdoors in daylight hours (e.g. *Cops* and *One Week*). This even lighting enables the audience to look around the frame and watch Keaton interact with his environment.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- The sets in Buster Keaton's shorts can function as characters. The house in *One Week* seems to take a life of its own. On Wednesday, the house takes on a cubist appearance, a visual gag that references the cubist movement, popular in the early 20th century and typified by objects and figures that appear abstract and fragmented.
- Keaton was a visual director – he avoided title cards and focused instead on gesture and action. His comedy is rooted in his Vaudeville background (where he performed as a child), and gag-based slapstick comedy popular in the 1910s. Keaton's trademark deadpan expression serves as a blank slate on which the audience can project emotions.
- Props are an important element of Keaton's films. Houses often feature secret doorways or specifically designed elements. The trick house in *The High Sign* with trap doors and escape mirrors exemplifies Keaton's trademark 'mechanical comedy' – the use of traps enables the audience to guess what is going to happen, while Keaton's deadpan responses and mastery

of his stunts elicits surprise. The props in the kitchen sequence in *The Scarecrow* all have a dual function – the bookshelf is a refrigerator and the salt and pepper pots dangle from the ceiling.

### Editing

- Keaton employs long takes to construct stunts within the *mise-en-scène*, rather than camera trickery. The long takes and long shots allow us to marvel at his virtuosity as an acrobat and marvel at the stunt work (Keaton performed all his own stunts).
- The train gag in *One Week* is shot in one long shot to create restricted narration. When the train flies past the house we are just as surprised as the young couple.
- The framing and cut is used to create the gag in the opening of *Cops* – the mid-shot makes it appear that Keaton is behind bars in prison, then the cut to a wide shot reveals he is only behind the iron bars of a garden gate behind a wealthy drive. The cut demonstrates how Keaton is not locked in prison but locked out from the upper class world his girlfriend inhabits.

### Sound

- Although these are ‘silent’ films, early film audiences would always experience film with musical accompaniment. There is no set synchronised score, therefore the musicians in the theatres would play along to the film to heighten and emphasise the comedy.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

### Representations

- The policemen in *Cops* are a typical of how the police were often represented in silent comedy. They were often presented as bullies and figures of fun that serve as obstacles for the hero. Chase sequences involving policemen who are eventually outwitted by the hero were commonplace.
- Women often function as romantic interests and an integral part of the plot. In *One Week*, Keaton’s wife is both his equal and foil to his gags. The heroines in *One Week* and *The Scarecrow* always retain a certain amount of independence – Sybil Seely in *The Scarecrow* dances primarily to please herself.
- The house in *One Week* can be interpreted as a metaphor for the dangers of idealising

married life. The obstacles Keaton faces with the house shakes his idealised masculinity, as Keaton loses control and even begins to struggle with simple tasks.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the ‘look and feel’ of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Keaton was involved in all aspects of production and a true auteur. He wrote, directed, produced, edited and starred in these two-reelers. Most of these films were shot on location in the back streets near the studio lot.
- Keaton was interested in the geometry of a gag. Look at the use of frames, parallel lines and circles in all these two-reelers. Consider the composition of the hanging salt and pepper pots in *The Scarecrow* – the characters sit at the table at each end of the frame in symmetry and the hanging pots create horizontal, vertical and diagonal patterns.
- Many of these early Keaton films contained what he called ‘cartoon gags’ – the gags are surreal and function almost as magic tricks. These films, not bound by narrative constraints, have a dream-like quality, where one action or gag simply follows another.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- Buster Keaton’s fascination with the workings of mechanical objects bridges the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, with the rise of new industries and the expanding consumer culture. His films reflect modernity of the late 1910s and 1920s – *One Week* is a parody of a Ford advert *Home Made* (1919) about how a young married couple can buy and build a portable home in seven days.

### Institutional

- These films are four of 19 shorts produced for Buster Keaton Productions between 1920 and 1923. Film executive Joseph M. Schenck set up Buster Keaton Productions in 1919 and gave Keaton complete creative freedom in writing, directing and acting. The star system had become institutionalised by the 1920s, with Keaton one of the great silent comedians, alongside Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. Each of these silent comedians had a distinct persona and style.

### SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Critical debates - STARTING POINTS

- American silent film comedy flourished in the 1920s. These films combine Hollywood slapstick (based on gags, stunts and physical comedy) with narrative cinema. However, the gags in these two-reelers are far more surreal than Keaton's later feature films and do not always have a narrative function – an example is the newspaper gag in *The High Sign*. The newspaper becomes comically large yet serves no purpose in the narrative. These films lie in-between the non-narrative 'cinema of attractions' of early cinema and narrative-driven features.
- The bathroom scene in *One Week* draws attention to the camera. Here, Keaton exposes the illusion of cinema as the cameraman's hand covers the lens. This breaking of the fourth wall is unexpected and interrupts the narrative flow. Such gags demonstrate Keaton's ability to play with the flexibility of cinematic rules and draw our attention to cinematic devices.