

21L.011, The Film Experience  
Prof. David Thorburn  
Lecture Notes

## **Lecture 1 - Introduction**

### I. What is Film?

- Chemistry
- Novelty
- Manufactured object
- Social formation

### II. Think Away iPods

- The novelty of movement
- Early films and early audiences

### III. The Fred Ott Principle

### IV. Three Phases of Media Evolution

- Imitation
- Technical Advance
- Maturity

### V. "And there was Charlie" - Film as a cultural form

Reference: James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (1957)

## **Lecture 2 - Keaton**

### I. The Fred Ott Principle, continued

- The myth of technological determinism
- A paradox: capitalism and the movies

### II. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)

### III. *The Lonedale Operator* (1911)

### IV. Buster Keaton

- Acrobat / actor
- Technician / director
- Metaphysician / artist

### V. The multiplicity principle: entertainment vs. art

### VI. *The General* (1927)

- "A culminating text"
- Structure
- The Keaton hero: steadfast, muddling

*Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term. Four lecture sessions covered introductions, the Fred Ott Principle and Buster Keaton. These topics were covered in two lecture sessions for Fall 2007 term.*

- You should be open to new forms of aesthetic experience in this class
  - You should gain a new kind of aesthetic discrimination and aesthetic pleasure
  - You should develop a much enhanced vocabulary and better standards for all humanistic disciplines
- This class should be hard work, but not overwhelming
- Each week of this course has required reading and required film(s) (with a couple exceptions)
- The afternoon lectures will be broader in nature, while evening lectures are more concrete introductions to the specific film for that night.
- Students should watch the films together
  - Until very recently, films were a totally communal experience, like theater
  - You couldn't stop and start, freeze-frame, or watch at home
  - These changes have an enormous social effect on how we watch films
  - However, films are also available to watch individually in the course, for other occasions such as when you write your papers.
- Writing requirements (see syllabus)
  - Brief response paper
    - This won't get a letter grade, just a check, check plus, or check minus.
    - This doesn't have to be a complete essay
  - Three complete papers, 5-7 pages each
    - Suggested topics will be provided – you should choose among them
    - You are strongly encouraged to revise
      - All great writers revise *obsessively*
      - Revision is essential to good writing
      - You must learn to cut things out
        - Concision is a mark of good writing and well-developed critical thinking
- Exams
  - One quiz
    - Short answer identifications
  - One 1-hour test
    - Short answer identifications
    - One essay question

- One 3-hour final exam
  - Short answer identifications
  - Two different types of essay questions
- Grading:
  - *Roughly* 30% of the class will get As, 40% of the class will get Bs, and most of the rest will get Cs
- *Film is a form of Chemistry*
  - Why is that the case?
    - The actual physical process is a chemical reaction (we're not talking about digital film)
    - You can alter that chemical process by changing how you develop it
  - This is important because it reminds us that film is a natural process
  - This may be one of the greatest contributions that chemistry has given the world
    - Movies have had a profound impact on a huge number of lives.
- *Film was a novelty in its early days*
  - Penny arcades
- *Film is a manufactured object*
  - Movies could be one of the most fundamental early products to be mass-produced
  - Specialization of labor was at the heart of what allowed films to become such a mass item
  - Other mass-produced items were associated with early films
    - There were Charlie Chaplin dolls, for example
  - Movies were and still remain an essential form of mass-produced wealth
  - You could do an entire history of film looking at it from this perspective, without ever examining the content
  - Films have been economically essential to American history, culture, and development, like the automobile
- *Film is a social form*
  - Over time, from this, film developed into an essential medium of art
    - Movies illuminate the world the way art does
  - These two aspects – social and artistic – are separate. Not in conflict, but separate.
  - The less self-consciously artistic movies are often the most socially revealing
    - We don't need to be embarrassed about watching less artistic movies
    - In fact, we *should* look at them

- For example, take Griffith – an artistically brilliant director, but highly racist, with strong social prejudices
  - By analyzing these prejudices, we can examine the contemporary American social pathologies
  - These are exercises in understanding the world that we value intrinsically
  
- The Fred Ott Principle
  - Clip: *Fred Ott's Sneeze*
    - a very early film – the first copyrighted film in the US
  - The Fred Ott Principle is the process that illustrates how film goes from novelty to social form
    - In under 30 years, we go from Fred Ott sneezing to Charlie Chaplin
    - It's that evolution which is essential
  - People used to watch shorts at nickelodeons
  - This was a very popular form of entertainment
  - Clip: *The Kiss*
    - Many people were scandalized by this at the time
    - This was probably the first kiss ever shown in the movies
  - People loved shorts like these partly because motion itself was amazing – it was totally new to see it reproduced in this way
    - It felt more real to them than it does to us
    - There were stories of people running and screaming in fear when a train in a film appeared to drive straight at them, or when a cowboy turned to the camera and shot directly at it
    - To understand this you have to imagine a world where visual experience was far simpler than it is today, without modern technology.
  
- The Fred Ott Principle - summarized
  - The sociological, technological, artistic, and economic changes that allow the development from the Fred Ott film to artistic, advanced films
  - The films we look at in the beginning of this course might not make a great claim on your attention in themselves.
  - Rather, it's the process of evolution that matters in this early film era
  - The essential conventions of cinema were alien at the birth of film
  - People were so excited by the novelty of motion to be riveted regardless of content
  
- A unique language special to the film medium developed over time
  - The audience and the film-makers were editing each other as they went
  - A similar process of change would later occur with the emergence of television: movies changed their role in society and were fundamentally transformed by TV

- Editing:
  - Modern movie viewers multitask visually on a level that is extraordinarily complex. Early audiences couldn't do that.
  - In modern film we can see the camera move while the subject moves, music that doesn't match the events on screen, very fast editing, etc.
- There was always some multitasking though.
  - Silent films were never really silent – there was live music played along with them.
- Ever-increasing complexity
- The language that developed was fundamentally new and specific to the medium
- Paradox: capitalism and technology, with all of their associated greed, are the enabling conditions and seed for what becomes the defining art form of the twentieth century
  - Film is a profound artistic expression, but it originates in an industry that exists to make money
- *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)
  - This isn't quite the first narrative film, but we can consider it close enough.
  - This is a defining early narrative movie
  - It establishes the Western genre
  - This showcases an immense increase in complexity since *Fred Ott's Sneeze* and similar early films
  - You have to think away your experience with modern technology to understand this
- The complete process of development from penny arcades to nickelodeons to movie theatres took only fifteen years
  - By 1910 movie theatres were being built
  - By 1920 film was a major American industry
- New communication is always understood through the metaphors of the old technologies
  - The very first films were made like theatrical pageants
    - The camera was always still, with the action happening in front, as though on stage
    - Film-makers were naturally comparing movies to the theater
    - Later, people learned to experiment more, moving the camera, zooming in and out, etc.
  - First people had to understand film through the metaphor and ancient tradition of theater
  - Theatrical acting is broader, more stylized, because viewers were so far away
    - Over time, a quieter mode of acting developed in film

- D. W. Griffith: *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912): this film represents the more film-appropriate mode of acting that developed.
- The Fred Ott Principle (continued)
  - The immensely complex process from minor, trivial novelty to an embedded social form, the central American medium of entertainment, a more universal form of narrative than prose fiction in twentieth-century America
  - It's about the development of an institution and an art form, not just one film, like Fred Ott sneezing
  - Film scholarship is a relatively recent phenomenon
    - Much of new scholarship today is devoted to the silent era, and particularly to early silent film
      - Discoveries are being made every day
      - One of these recent discoveries: early audiences were at least as interested in the apparatus as in the content
        - Traveling film shows
        - Early audiences were situated at an angle that allowed them to see the projector as well as the image on screen
        - Early films showed motion – waves crashing, an elephant getting electrocuted – as much or more than they showed narrative.
      - Remember, early audiences had to learn the rules and language of film, which hadn't been created yet – lighting, acting, camera placement...
  - The Fred Ott Principle had three main phases:
    1. Imitation
      - Early films drew enormously on past art forms: theater, novel, newspaper, visual art...
      - Over time, distinctly cinematic methods and effects began to appear
      - There was patent warfare – distribution methods, how films would be created, how audiences would be exploited, what the length of films would be, etc. – all these issues were still unclear
      - These things didn't have to develop as they eventually did – film could have developed in many different ways.
      - Whatever approaches made the most money generally prevailed
      - Mass production, specialization of labor, and industrialization all developed around the film industry
    2. Technical Advance
      - At this stage, basic industrial stability had already been reached

- Now film makers had a chance to explore the possibilities of the film medium – parallel action, faster editing, etc.
- Griffith began to discover how film could manipulate the emotions of audiences
- Feature-length films became the standard during this era (around 1916, 1917)

### 3. Maturity

- During this stage the content of film became married to the medium
- Film became a mature art form
- Note: we might think of silent film as a separate entity from sound film
  - It's possibly part of capitalism that the maturity of silent film was truncated by the development of sound. The novelty of sound brought about a regression – early sound film was not as good as late silent film.
- Similarly, sound film was later destabilized by the advent of television
  - Film survived World War II, and came out of it just fine, even revitalized
  - The vast majority of Americans were going to the movies every week in 1948 – it was a fundamental part of their lives and routines. Consider what it means, to have such a dominant narrative form
  - When television came along, it supplanted film
  - By the 1970s, most Americans went to the movies only one or two times a year
  - This limited the centrality and influence of movies, but it also liberated them in a sense, allowing them to be more political, controversial, and artistic
- This telling of the story of film makes film history sound like a triumph, but that would be oversimplifying matters.
  - The notion that technology causes enormous, automatic changes in society is oversimplified.
    - Rather, we should consider the multiplicity principle
    - In every case we're looking at, technology might not drive society, but rather the reverse – society drives technology
      - Consider the example of how early automobiles tended to look like carriages, as they imitated the older form.
    - When Thomas Edison first began to think about film, he imagined a much more agrarian art form, where everyone made their own films

- There's nothing inherent to the technology to require the system and outcome that developed, rather, it's cultural, societal, and historical in nature
    - We take the technology in whatever form the society dictates, with all its needs and prejudice.
  - The inherited prejudices, diseases, and lies of a society are carried by the technology
    - Look at the attitude towards violence, race, and morality in these films.
  - You don't have to see all that many very early films to understand the founding principles of development
- The Multiplicity Principle
  - Think about the complex difference between the very early and then the more complex artistic films from later on
  - An instance of art carries multiple meanings at once.
  - All art is entertainment but not all entertainment is art.
    - Art is more intelligent
    - Take soap opera – it over-explicates at the cost of sacrificing character – it's a good measure of a bad movie if a character speaks in ways that are implausible
    - On the other hand, take Keaton. His jokes aren't just one-dimensional – they have philosophical ramifications.
- Buster Keaton
  - Born in the 1890s
  - His family were Vaudeville performers
  - He was in their act from age 3 on
    - As a child he used to do tricks where his father would throw him into the audience, etc.
  - He stayed in that act until he was 21, when the act fell apart due to his father's alcoholism
  - He was offered another job in Vaudeville, and then became involved in film performance with Arbuckle
  - Very quickly, he started directing his own films
  - He was still only doing shorts at this point, because comedies in that era were always done in that format. He wanted to do feature-length films though, and did eventually move into doing those.
  - Then his studio sold to MGM, and he was much more limited in what he was allowed to do there.
  - He fell increasingly into alcoholism, and then MGM fired him in 1935.
  - In 1952 he worked together with Charlie Chaplin to do *Limelight*
  - Note about Keaton: "The great stone face"
- Early cinema



- A cinema of attractions – can include gag films (*The Whole Dam Family*), trick films, narrative films
  - These early films were grouped together with live performances, music, and other acts
  - Quick, funny, and sensational
  - The apparatus itself was interesting
  - Triple exposure – Keaton was able to play himself multiple times in the same short, all on screen at once – Keaton was very meticulous about how he set up his tricks
  - These films didn't develop complex characters, but rather trajectories, gags, tricks, and climaxes
  - Clip: from *Sherlock Jr.*
    - A lot of long shots, which show that Keaton is actually doing this performance himself
    - The long shots also give you a good sense of the set up and trajectory
    - Note Keaton's stone face
    - Note Keaton's engineering genius – he did all his own stunts, and set up all the props and sets
- A lot of this sort of film style was left behind when sound film came along
  - *The General* as a culmination
    - Keaton is more philosophically complex and self-conscious as a film maker (compared to Chaplin)
      - In the second half of *The General*, he lets you revisit the first half in a complex and fascinating way
      - A philosophic idea of the world is enacted by the jokes in *The General*
      - This idea is based on the notion of contingency
  - The Keaton Universe: Contingency
    - Contingency carries the idea of accident and control simultaneously
    - Antiheroic and comic vision of human experience
    - Multiplicity principle: every joke has multiple significances.
    - This should help you see the difference between art and entertainment
  - Modern day: Keaton can be compared to Jackie Chan
    - Jackie Chan also comes from a theatrical background
    - There's a similar emphasis on the performer as someone who can perform stunts, with acrobatic ability, able to endure hardship.
    - Clip: Chan references/revises exactly the same falling set shot that Keaton used
      - Still an emphasis on long shots, but there are many more shots
      - There is a physical continuity of him actually doing all these things
      - Chan shoots in sequence, like Keaton did

- *Shanghai Knights*
- Buster Keaton (1895-1966)
  - Shorts: *One Week* (1920), *The Play House* (1921), *The Boat* (1921), *Cops* (1922)
  - Features: *The Three Ages* (1923), *Our Hospitality* (1923), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), *The Navigator* (1924), *The General* (1927), *College* (1927), *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), *The Cameraman* (1928), *Spite Marriage* (1929), *Limelight* (1952), *Buster Keaton Story* (1957), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966).