

Lecture 3 - Chaplin 1

- I. Movies before Chaplin
- II. Enter Chaplin
- III. Chaplin's career
 - The multiplicity principle, continued
- IV. The Tramp as myth
- V. Chaplin's world - elemental themes

Disclaimer: *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- Quick review: Keaton's "contingent universe"
 - By this phrase I mean that certain artists can embody live experience in their work, even if they couldn't articulate it themselves in words
 - Art can be serious even if the content doesn't seem that way
 - Keaton has a profound understanding of the world worthy of being called philosophical
 - The phrase "contingent universe" captures the complexity of Keaton's world
 - For example, think of the cannon sequence from *The General*: brilliant long sequence, with each joke building on the previous ones, eventually becoming a statement about our existence in the cosmos.
 - The cannon actually working the way it does is repeatedly *contingent* on Buster's actions in a hundred ways... and yet also not.
 - *Contingency* also means accidental!
 - His behavior is necessary, but it also doesn't fully explain the results
 - The universe has to do with your choices, but it's also accidental – it is rational and random simultaneously
 - You get what you want, when you get it, accidentally
 - This is a particularly brilliant vision to apply to a mock heroic film about the Civil War
 - *The General* demystifies the sentimentality that has been attached to the Civil War.
 - The Continuity Principle
 - Old media determines the forms that new media will take
- Chaplin's career
 - Began as a child
 - By the time he was a teenager, he was already something of a star

- Like Keaton, he did Vaudeville acts
 - His shows were immensely successful in Europe
 - He was known as one of the great pantomimers of his day
 - He pulled in a huge salary for his time: \$150 a week, which was a huge amount of money at the time, while he was working for Keystone
 - When he moved to Essanay it went up to \$1250 per week
 - From there he moved to the Mutual Film Corporation, where he made most of his great films
 - The Tramp character had been in so many different movies, and the audience would have seen most of them – this is a kind of literacy, and we cannot underestimate the importance of that history that the audience was a part of.
 - Each year during this period Chaplin made fewer and fewer films, but they got better and better
 - He started making \$670,000 a year
 - When he moved to First National, he made \$1,000,000
 - Then he moved yet again, joining D. W. Griffith in 1919 to co-found United Artists
 - By the 1920s he was the most recognizable, famous figure in the world
 - His sound films, from later on, aren't as great artistically
- The Tramp as a myth
 - The tramp becomes a kind of mythological figure
 - He taps into deep psychological issues
 - In a way, the tramp is a communal creation, like a myth, even though Chaplin created him, because the historical culture had a part in it – there were so many unemployed hoboos and bums at the time, and so the Tramp was a kind of social reality
 - Think about the costume – coat and shirt too small, pants and shoes too big – he is an emblem for mismatch
 - His body is dexterous and graceful
 - Chaplin realizes the power of the close-up to allow him to show emotions in his face
 - Even the chase scenes help to create character.