

## **Buster Still Speechless: A “Silent” Comic at the Cinémathèque française** Noah Teichner<sup>1</sup>

Buster Keaton Retrospective at the Cinémathèque française (Paris, April 22<sup>nd</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015)

In February 1962, an aging Buster Keaton made a triumphant appearance at the Cinémathèque française to inaugurate the retrospective held in his honor. In a vivid recollection, Robert Benayoun describes the comedian as being rendered speechless by a twenty-minute long ovation that, “after all the hard knocks, reinstated him to his prior glory” (Benayoun 1982, 23). Revisiting the work of *The Great Stone Face* in 2015 has a very different meaning that it did at the dawn of the 1960s, when his films were still gradually being put back into circulation. Just as Keaton’s long overdue Parisian comeback would constitute one of many steps in the then contemporary revalorization of silent film, this post-millennial encore was likewise brimming with historiographical potential. The role of the Cinémathèque française in legitimizing broader discourses about film history cannot be overlooked. Such a retrospective should not simply be seen as one in many periodical revivals of the now canonical films of Buster Keaton, but as an opportunity to question the prevailing narratives surrounding his career.

It goes without saying that Buster Keaton is a “silent” comic. Faced with such preconceptions, what is a programmer to make of his unexpectedly prolific output during the sound era? While a selection of Keaton’s talkies was shown during the festivities, the retrospective remained far from complete. Despite an evidently lackluster print situation, the comedian’s silent era work remained the unabashed centerpiece of the series. His little-seen sound films were confined to a separate section and accorded a lone screening, most frequently from a jittery standard definition video source<sup>2</sup>. Projection quality aside, a laudable effort was made to subtitle Keaton’s seven M.G.M. sound features (1930-1933), even if there was no mention of the French, Spanish, and German foreign-language versions of these films, shot with Buster speaking his lines phonetically. The most conspicuous absence was certainly Keaton’s subsequent work for Educational Pictures (1934-1937) and

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<sup>2</sup> The jerky movement visible in the near entirety of Keaton’s sound films was almost certainly the result of duplicated frames caused by an incorrect conversion to the European 25fps standard.

Columbia's shorts department (1939-1941), generally perceived as more slapstick oriented than his M.G.M. features. Of these 26 two-reelers, a mere four films were shown.

Based on such evidence, one can't help but conclude that Buster Keaton's 1930s work is yet to be accorded an integral place within his filmography. The most common tactic by critics and historians has been to dismiss his career as a sound comic by a sweeping rhetorical gesture, in which a decade of production is reduced to a few stock elements – divorce, alcoholism, and worst of all, Jimmy Durante<sup>3</sup>. In the Cinémathèque's introductory essay we learn that Keaton, "having lost control of his films, became a simple actor assigned to mediocre comedies" (Tessé 2015, 59). Rarely questioned, this has long been the official account of the comedian's sound era output. Taking note of how the 1962 retrospective discredited France's "venerable historians" for their lack of interest in Keaton's work, *Cahiers du cinéma* suggested that we should seek out his early talkies "in order to judge for ourselves whether they are as bad as it has been suggested" (Gauteur 1962, 38). Given the paucity of literature dedicated to Keaton's 1930s work, it would appear that many scholars are yet to heed this advice<sup>4</sup>. One reason that these films are so often deemed "bad" – if they are seen at all – is largely due to the misapplication of an analytical framework developed for Buster's output as a "silent" comic that is equally unable to account for his new production context.

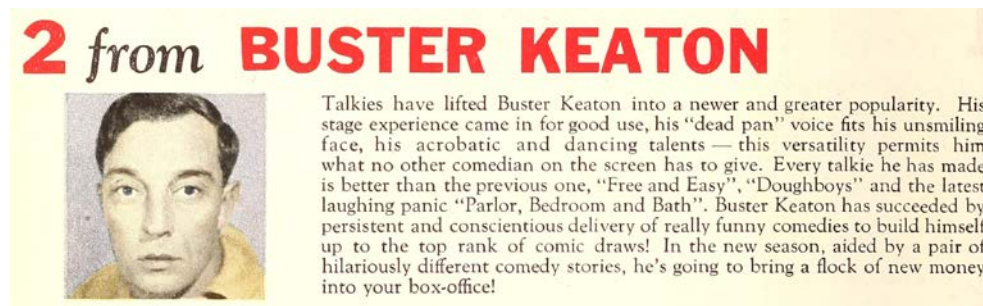


Image 1: "The Crowning Glory of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1931-1932"  
(Motion Picture Herald, 2 May 1931) – Source: Media History Digital Library

In the 1930s, we find Keaton working within an industrial landscape that is significantly different from what he had become accustomed to in the prior decade. With the rise of the studio system, the mode of production based around the comic-producer was rapidly becoming an anomaly. The comedian was nonetheless quick to point out that his M.G.M. sound features, often more successful than his now consecrated silent masterpieces, did not spell his downfall (Keaton 1982, 220). In 1931, the studio vaunted that the "talkies have lifted Buster Keaton into a newer and greater popularity" and that his "'dead-pan' voice fits his unsmiling face" (M.G.M. 1931).

<sup>3</sup> See Rapf 2007 for a closer look at Keaton's three pairings with Durante at M.G.M., *The Passionate Plumber* (1932), *Speak Easily* (1932), and *What! No Beer?* (1933).

<sup>4</sup> For two notable exceptions, see King 2007 and Rapf 2007, cited above.

Buster's trademark impassibility has typically been conflated with mutism, yet in taking another look at his films of this era, we can identify a distinctively Keaton-esque confrontation with language, which is frequently articulated around the breakdown of communication. Unlike Buster's nostalgic repackaging as a retro icon in the post-war era, his comic persona of in 1930s was not yet weighed down by silence. His voice was yet to become a contradiction that, as James Agee would have it, "destroyed the illusion within which he worked" (2001, 26).

This desire to extract a singular poetic essence from each of the "silent clowns", a feature of the lyrical style that characterizes much of the best writing on slapstick, nonetheless has the frequent side effect of positing a static vision of their *œuvres*. Whether or not the 1920s were "Comedy's Greatest Era", as Agee famously argued, they only represent one out of the six decades that constituted Buster Keaton's career. From his childhood touring big-time vaudeville circuits to his ubiquity on early television screens, it is easy to forget that this "silent" comic worked within a network of cultural and media practices that extends beyond the sole medium of film. To give just one example, Buster's formative years on the variety stage were advanced by M.G.M. as a reason for his success in the talkies (M.G.M. 1931). Indeed, the early sound era's revalorization of the "vaudeville aesthetic" (Jenkins 1992) presents an opportunity to see these films as a renewal with his origins as a performer. Instead of taking a synchronic approach to Keaton's comic persona, exclusively formulated around his silent filmography, we must address the heterogeneity of the various institutional contexts in which he worked. This would allow us to identify not only the moments of rupture, but also the broader continuities that span Keaton's half-century long career.

The programming choices of the Cinémathèque retrospective might have embodied such a methodology. Instead of setting up an unbridgeable gap between his silent and sound work, we can imagine screenings that would put the various periods of Keaton's output in relation to one another. The shorts and features, also split into separate programs, could have been brought together in configurations that are greatly facilitated by their succinct running times. This strategy would not only serve to introduce audiences to the true breadth of Keaton's career, but also to bring attention to overlooked resonances within his filmography. In this virtual retrospective, the abandoned Wild West town of Buster's first Educational Pictures short *The Gold Ghost* (1934) would announce the deserted ocean liner of *The Navigator* (1924); the fledgling detective of *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) would return for his film-noir parody in an episode of *The Buster Keaton Show* (1951); the Columbia two-reeler *Nothing But Pleasure* (1941), which features a variation of Keaton's recurrent routine with an inert female body, would follow the better known

example of this extended gag in *Spite Marriage* (1929). These imaginary pairings need not all serve the same purpose: the last example could highlight the different sensation of corporality vehiculed by the specificities of the sound medium, whereas another combination might let us hear the unexpected echo of a jocular silent film intertitle in Keaton's unique brand of verbal humor. Above all, rather than simply reinforcing the perception of his filmography as being cleaved in two by the talkies, such an approach would clear the way for unexplored trajectories in Keaton's career and effectively undermine his sole status as a "silent" comic.

We first encountered Buster Keaton, at a total loss for words, through the eyes of Robert Benayoun at the 1962 Cinémathèque opening. After a seemingly endless ovation during which he "sketched out evasive movements around a microphone", Buster finally raised his inimitable deep voice. Always the epitome of modesty, he invited the spectator seated directly in front of him to ask a question. "By a chance devoid of meaning", this individual was none other than Benayoun himself, disconcertingly caught "in the sudden gaze of a Keaton-esque close up". The critic stammered out a few words that he would never again recall and a "monologue was set off like a record starting up again" (1982, 23). With a familiar mechanical metaphor so privileged by Keaton's exegetes, the comic was lulled out of silence and his voice resounded within the walls of this esteemed institution. It would seem that, over 50 years later, his words are still having trouble reaching us. Yet the positive response to many of his talkies during the 2015 retrospective points to an opening – we may finally be ready to hear what Buster Keaton has to say.

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