

# Derailing the Honeymoon Express: Comicality and Narrative Closure in Buster Keaton's *The Blacksmith*

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RECENTLY, THE CONSIDERATION OF THE general features of classical Hollywood cinema has been complicated by an account of genres posing problems for narrative-centered analysis. Two genres which have attracted a great deal of critical discussion are the musical and a particular type of comedy that focuses upon the activities of a specifically marked comic performer.<sup>1</sup> Both the comedian and the singer/dancer are defined more by their specific performance skills than by the character traits and social roles that the film ascribes to them. The emotional appeal of their films relies as much on sequences displaying their skills as it does on their involvement in particular stories.

In these genres, the overall thrust of classical cinema toward the subordination of all filmic elements to the narrative is counterbalanced by a strong emphasis on self-contained and self-validating performance sequences (gag routines, song and dance) and by the foregrounding of the status of the performer as performer. Performers in these films present themselves in moments of intense spectacle as what they are—professional entertainers—rather than representing what they are not—fictional characters. In these moments, the fiction of the films' narratives gives way to the reality of performance; the representation of a diegetic world is replaced by the presentation of filmic spectacle.

Yet scholars are only beginning to develop sustained analysis of how these performance sequences and the larger narrative interact in musicals and comedies and how these films achieve closure; that is, the satisfactory resolution of tensions introduced at their beginning and played out in the course of their progress toward the end. Whereas classical narration

is characterized by the almost exclusive concern with psychological and social conflicts of fictional characters, musicals and comedies also have to resolve the more fundamental conflict between fictional representation and spectacular presentation, between narrative and performance.

Steve Seidman has proposed an analysis of what he terms "comedian comedy" (films centering on comic performers) that takes into account the above observations and questions.<sup>2</sup> First of all, he characterizes comedian comedy through its fundamental tension between narrative and comic performance and then proceeds to describe the strategies employed to resolve this tension in the course of each film. Seidman argues that in comedian comedies, the special status of the comic performer is ultimately functionalized for, and dissolved by, the narrative. This is facilitated by interpreting the comedian's performance as the expression of the character's unresolved personality, which the film's story works to normalize.<sup>3</sup>

Seidman's arguments have been elaborated by Frank Krutnik in "The Clown Prints of Comedy." Yet Seidman's approach has not been applied in a comprehensive analysis of an individual text. Both Seidman and Krutnik develop their generic model on the basis of examples drawn atomistically from a large number of films rather than accounting for the complexities of any individual film. Such an account blinds them to the process by which textual systems resolve the disruptions posed by gags and performance sequences. Moreover, as I will suggest later, the Seidman/Krutnik model displays little interest in the particularities of individual comedians or historical periods, providing no sense of how individuals might inflect or redefine conventions common to the

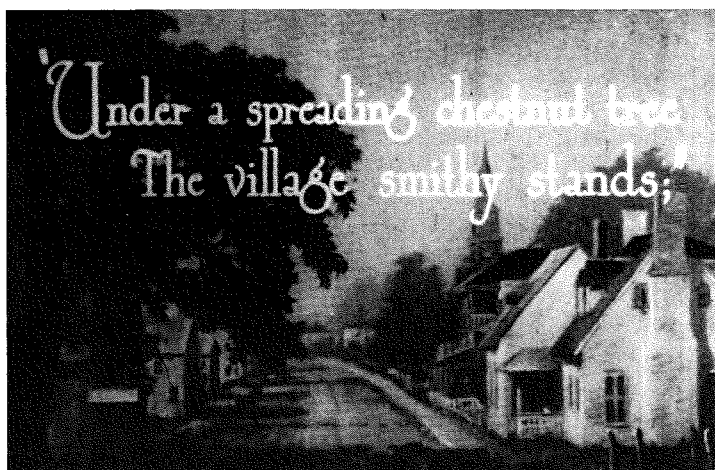


Figure 1

tradition as a whole. All of these limitations suggest a need to return to representative figures and texts within the comedian comedy tradition for a closer consideration of what Seidman and Krutnik's account allows us to discover within these works.

Previous accounts of the early short films of Buster Keaton, one of the key figures in the silent slapstick cinema, have been rare and mostly superficial, especially lacking any sustained analysis of the interaction between, on the one hand, Keaton's performances and gags and, on the other, the film's narratives.<sup>4</sup> Here, Seidman and Krutnik's generic model provides a framework which allows for a more complex account of this relation, particularly of the contribution which Keaton's gags and performances make to the overall meaning structure of his films. Therefore, I have chosen one of Buster Keaton's lesser-known two-reelers, *The Blacksmith* (1922), as a test case for the applicability of Seidman and Krutnik's model for close and comprehensive textual analysis.<sup>5</sup>

While the starting point of this essay is an account of the disruptive force of the extrafictionally constituted performer personality and the comic incidents he engages in, the following analysis will also focus on the function and meaning this disruptiveness has in the context of the film as a whole. Thus, I will analyze the textual strategies of reintegrating and appropriating comic disruptions within the larger framework of the film's semantic organization for the purpose of playing out a familiar scenario: the formation of the couple, the constitution of the family, the resolution and fixing of an initially ambiguous social and sexual identity.

Significantly, comedian comedies in general, and *The Blacksmith* in particular, foreground the process of narration and thus point to the existence of an authorial agency which is constructing and relaying the narrative sequence of events. Yet the framework provided by Seidman and Krutnik lacks a basis in narrative theory which might account for the departure from "transparent" classical narration and which could allow for the analysis of the strategies by which the "laying bare" of narrative discourses is ultimately dissolved into the story being told.<sup>6</sup> I will argue that in the end, the narrative sequence of events is presented as if it evolved naturally, on its own, rather than being constructed for and relayed to the spectator. Hence, the suppression of the spectators' awareness of narrative discourse must parallel the suppression of their awareness of the comedian's performance.

### Comedian Comedy

Seidman's analysis of comedian comedy stresses the tension between the audience's extratextual knowledge of the performer and the specific requirements for his personification within a particular filmic text: "Comedian comedy . . . is generated by two seemingly contradictory impulses: (1) the maintenance of the comedian's position as an already recognizable performer with a clearly defined personality . . . ; and (2) the depiction of the comedian as a comic figure who inhabits a fictional universe where certain problems must be confronted and resolved."<sup>7</sup>

As Frank Krutnik indicates, the same tension occurs in all star vehicles, because the star image (i.e., the audience's conception of the actor's personality and appearance in real life and in previous film roles) is always already given when the particular film in question begins. While the star assumes the role of a fictional character within the film's narrative, the audience's interest in the star's screen appearance always goes beyond the engagement with this character's conflicts and goals. This fascination, sparked by the construction of a filmic persona across a number of previous film appearances, is ultimately directed toward revelations of the star's "true" identity (in real life rather than in this particular story) and to the mere fact of his or her "real" presence on the screen (i.e., the reality of the body rather than the nonreality of characterization). All star vehicles are thus characterized by a tension between star image and characterization, between performance and narrative. Typically, these vehicles resolve this tension by matching image and role, rather than playing out the contradictions between the two.

By contrast, Krutnik argues, comedian comedy is characterized precisely by a fundamental mismatch between the identity of the performer (for example, Woody Allen, the neurotic intellectual) and the role he assumes within the fiction (say, the gangster in *Take the Money and Run* [1968, UA]). In comedian comedies, the performer's function is less to create a believable character, to impersonate someone else, than to be himself and thus out of character. In doing so, the performer disrupts not only the coherence of his particular characterization but also that of the fictional world as a whole. Krutnik writes, "The comedian is marked within the text as having a privileged status compared to the other characters/actors: he is less fictionally integrated and has a relatively disruptive function in relation to the fictional world and its code of behavior and action."<sup>8</sup> While realistic fiction defines the screen as a mirror of the real world, the comedian's performance redefines it as a playground, revealing its natural laws as arbitrary conventions that are open to disruption and playful appropriation. Thus, in *Take the Money and Run*, a bank robbery can be halted and even transformed into an extensive discussion of a particular word which Allen has illegibly written on a rather inept hold-up note.

The comedian's disruptive function is already inscribed in his image as a star: The comic star is conceptualized by publicity discourses and consequently by the audience not only in terms of what he really looks and is like, but also in terms of his comic skills, which are to be realized in his performance (for example, Allen's self-deprecating remarks, which are interjected into the text regardless of the narrative situation): "A key expectation the spectator brings to a comedian comedy is to witness/participate in the performance—the 'act'—of the comedian, and this necessitates a certain compromise between the performance mode and the institutional requirements of the individual film."<sup>9</sup> These institutional requirements comprise, on the one hand, the employment of a codified set of filmic devices characteristic of classical cinema (scene dissection, continuity editing, point of view structures) and, on the other, the establishment and resolution of a set of social and romantic conflicts characteristic of the film in question.

In the same way that performance sequences, incorporating, for example, direct looks into and verbal address of the camera and a generally frontal staging of the action, depart from classical scene construction, the personality and behavior of the comedian depart from the classical conception of the protagonist as a well-defined, goal-oriented character. As Krutnik notes, it is this conflict between performer personality and the requirements of the position of

the hero, and, in fact, the social norms of proper identity in general, which comedian comedies first state emphatically and then try to resolve:

Not only is the comedian a misfit-hero, but he is also deviant in regard to more general "rules" of identity and maturity. . . . The comedian, then, is figured forth as a locus of confusion, and the "unresolved personality" comes into conflict with those fictional procedures which are concerned with resolving these aberrations and "fixing" the comedian's persona in terms of the narratively articulated problems and the generic field.<sup>10</sup>

We can see these dynamics at work in *The Blacksmith*. Buster Keaton's film follows specific strategies of situating the performer within the film but outside the fiction and its conventional role ascriptions. Later, the comedian is transformed into a more conventional hero. By such a process, Keaton's fascinating figure becomes increasingly involved in the narrative; his performance is both redefined as deviant behavior and gradually replaced by straight acting. At the same time, instances foregrounding the processes of narration are ultimately redefined as actions of the now properly constituted hero.

### The Opening Sequence

Under a spreading chest-nut tree  
The village smithy stands;  
The smith, a mighty man is he,  
With large and sinewy hands,  
And the muscles of his brawny arms  
Are strong as iron bands.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,  
"The Village Blacksmith" (1842)<sup>11</sup>

Even before the film has started, the comicality of *The Blacksmith* is firmly established. The generic image constructed by the prerelease publicity and especially the announcement that the film will feature Buster Keaton, the comic star, give the film a general comic orientation which its title already seems to specify: it can be expected that the film's star, Keaton, will be playing the title role.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the film establishes expectations of a basic comic discrepancy between the star's image, which is strongly connected with the smallness of his body, and the role he is playing, which evokes the popular image of a big and strong man.

With the first five shots of the film (Figures 1–6), these expectations are confirmed, while at the same time the film presents itself as a parody of Longfel-

Figure 2



Figure 3

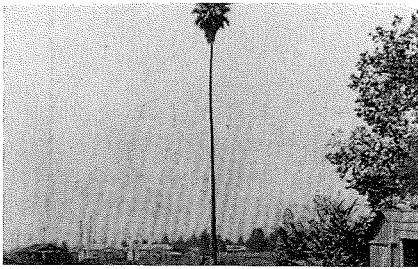


Figure 4

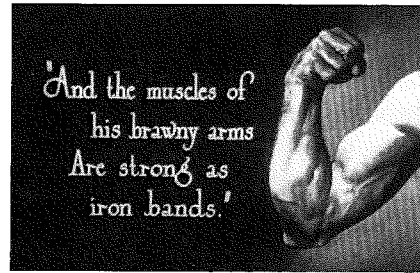


Figure 5



low's poem, "The Village Blacksmith."<sup>13</sup> The comic nature of this sequence derives from juxtapositions on two levels: Intertitles quoting from a solemn literary work are contrasted with images showing the antics of the comedian; the ideal image of a strong man (evoked by the words and images of the intertitles) is contrasted with the "real" image of the small and presumably weak body of Buster. His smallness and weakness are emphasized by the huge tree against which he is leaning (Figure 3) and his fake biceps (Figure 5).

Thus, the film's opening brings together two discourses, the literary discourse of Longfellow and the comedian's discourse of Keaton. Both work in contrasting ways on the same topic: the blacksmith, or more precisely, his body. The sequence is descriptive, implying no temporal development of events from shot to shot, and presentational, allowing the performer to present himself to the audience rather than impersonating someone else. Buster, in long shot facing and thus addressing the camera (Figure 2), is not at one with the character he is embodying. Instead, he is presenting himself as an obviously and deliberately unsuccessful impersonator of a blacksmith. The strongest mark of this is the balloon trick (Figures 5, 6), where Buster enhances his biceps with a balloon and then proceeds to pop it with a tie pin, which is blatantly unsuccessful and clearly not intended to deceive anyone. In this fashion, the opening sequence of the film presents a performance of its star instead of representing the beginning of a story of a fictional character. While opening shots introducing the leading performers to the audience in a frontal, camera-conscious fashion were frequently employed in films into the 1930s, the opening of *The Black-*

*smith* goes beyond this convention in its excessively prolonged display of Buster and his actions and its highly ironic and intricate play on the performer's identity and the nature of the story in which he will be involved.

The film engages in a discursive play which is of no direct causal relevance for the story to be told. The first shot (Figure 1) quotes a poem; the second (Figure 2) parodies it and, at the same time, makes room for the performance of the comedian. The film thus plays on its own status as parody of another discourse, as presentation of a comedian's performance, before it finally settles into the telling of a story. At its beginning, the film announces the contrived nature of its operations (i.e., the existence of an authorial agency which juxtaposes intertitles and images for the purpose of parody). It also foregrounds the existence of a gap between the performer and the fictional character he is impersonating.

Yet as soon as the story begins, the fiction constitutes a self-contained world apart from the cinematic apparatus and the spectator. As a result, these discursive instances, which acknowledged the presence of a more or less directly addressed spectator, are being suppressed. The gap between performer and character narrows. The spectators' awareness of the process of narration is replaced by their involvement in the story.

During the following three shots (Figures 7–9), the film's mode of address changes. Although shot 6 (Figure 7) again is an intertitle quoting from "The Village Blacksmith," it is not used for the purpose of parody but is straightforwardly reproduced in the following shot without any comic reversals. With the appearance of two children in front of the smithy,

Figure 6



Figure 7

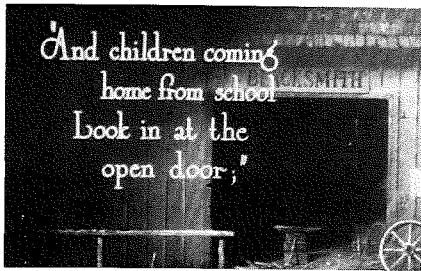


Figure 8



Figure 9



looking at Buster working in the background (Figure 8), the film prepares for a switch-over from description to narration. Longfellow's poem employs the image of the children as an instance of the harmonious relation between the sphere of work and other social spheres. Here, however, the children's appearance is the first event in the causal narrative chain, in that they provoke an angry reaction from a huge character, the owner of the smithy, who enters the frame in the next shot. He angrily pushes the children away from the "open door" in shot 8 (Figure 9) and, in so doing, completes the transition from description to narration.

From this shot onward, the images evolve into a causally linked series of events instead of parodying another discourse. While corresponding physically to the poem's image of the blacksmith, the big man with his aggressive act against the children forever destroys the poem's social harmony. This action immediately denounces him in moral terms rather than denouncing the poem's unanimous celebration of the blacksmith's virtues and those of his social order. Significantly, there is no further direct or indirect reference to the poem following his entrance into the film. Furthermore, this character occupies the position that the filmic discourse up to this point has attributed to Buster: He is the blacksmith and Buster is only his assistant/employee.

This shift provides Buster with a role which he can more adequately and more seriously fill. Despite the incompetence and destructiveness that Buster soon reveals, he is nevertheless at one with the character he is playing from now on. His antics have to be attributed to the fictional character, the blacksmith's assistant, rather than to Buster himself as a per-

former. This shift in the audience's understanding of the comedian's behavior is facilitated by Buster's lack of camera consciousness from this point onward. He is not directly communicating with the camera/spectator anymore but interacts with other fictional characters instead.

Although the division is by no means clear-cut, it can be said that pure performance has given way to the fiction. Buster as the blacksmith's assistant is engaged in a series of events initiated by the aggressive intrusion of the blacksmith which will lead to the blacksmith's punishment (the destruction of his shop, his physical defeat). The narrative places even more importance upon the assistant's resistance against his position in the smithy than upon the punishment of the villain. It builds toward the assistant's escape from the smithy into different social surroundings, where his social status can be redefined and even celebrated. At last, the former blacksmith's assistant is seen as a husband and father in his own middle-class home.

### Performance and Narrative

The suppression of discursive instances and the marks of performance in *The Blacksmith* are by no means complete after the prologue. There is always a tendency in comedian comedy for the filmic fiction to be disrupted by the performer or an interfering authorial agency in order to produce comic effects. These disruptions do not at all disturb the spectators' relation to the film because they are part of their generic expectations from the start. These transgressions are made enjoyable by provoking laughter

**Table 1: Narrative Segmentation of *The Blacksmith***

Segment	Agents	Narrative Description	Number of Shots	Seconds
1	Buster	"The Village Blacksmith" parody with Buster's performance	6	55
2	Buster/Boss	Boss halts Buster's cooking in smithy	7	42
3	Buster/Horseshoe	Buster misuses hot horseshoe, resulting in personal injury	4	27
4	Buster/Magnet/ Boss	Giant magnet prevents Buster from giving tool to Boss	8	40
5	Buster, Sheriffs/ Boss	Sheriffs prevent Boss from punishing Buster, jail Boss with Buster's help	27	89
6	Buster/1st Horse, 1st Customer	Buster shoes horse of female customer	21	130
7	Buster/1st Horse, 1st Car	Buster attempts to repair car and soils horse and himself	6	56
8	Buster/1st Customer	Customer fetches horse without realizing it is soiled	12	42
9	Buster/ 2nd Customer, 2nd Horse	Buster provides shock absorber for horse of female customer	9	75
10	Buster/Watch	Buster repairs his watch with hammer and anvil	2	20
11	2nd Customer	2nd Customer experiences discomfort on horse	1	4
12	Buster/1st Car, Boy	Boy with balloon disturbs Buster's attempt to repair 1st car	9	77
13	2nd Customer	Same as 11	1	4
14	Buster/ 3rd Customer	Male Customer brings car for repair	4	30
15	Buster/1st Car, 2nd Car	Buster attempts to repair cars but destroys them	10	125
16	2nd Customer	Same as 11, 13	1	4
17	Buster/ 2nd Customer	2nd Customer returns to punish Buster	4	19
18	Buster/Boss	Boss returns to punish Buster, attacks him, and is defeated	29	90
19	Buster/Boss, 2nd Customer, 3rd Customer	3rd Customer returns to punish Buster; he flees from the three adversaries	10	22
20	Buster/ 1st Customer	Fleeing Buster gets stuck in rails, then accidentally rescues 1st Customer	14	47
21	Buster/ 1st Customer	Buster and 1st Customer fall in love and decide to wed	6	56
22	Buster, 1st Customer/Boss, 2nd Customer, 3rd Customer	Buster and 1st Customer narrowly escape on train from his adversaries	12	28
23	Buster, 1st Customer, Child	Buster enjoys life with wife and child	3	30



rather than producing a critical distance from the operations of the film which would provoke an intellectual and self-conscious reaction.

Furthermore, these disruptions are precisely this: disruptions. They are moments which transgress an otherwise firmly established filmic fiction. The spectators must be engaged with that fiction in order to realize and profit by the disruptive force of the comic incident. Spectators also must return to that fiction after the disruptive force of the gag has been consumed by their laughter. Frank Krutnik has characterized this particular type of spectator positioning as "a dialectic between disruption and (re)ordering," as "a play between engagement and distanciation."<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, the comic incidents which constitute most of *The Blacksmith* cannot be treated as a series of isolated gags but rather must be regarded as contributing actively to the construction of the film's narrative. As these gags generate narrative consequences, they re-establish the filmic fiction and the spectator's engagement with it. The dialectic of "disruption and (re)ordering" operates at the levels of performance and narration as well, with each comic gag creating disruption and the narrative consequences of the gag re-establishing the fiction.

A brief description of *The Blacksmith's* narrative structure confirms this process at work. From the appearance of the blacksmith to his final defeat, *The Blacksmith* consists of a series of confrontations between the protagonist and a specific object and/or person. Table 1 shows one possible segmentation of the film based upon the changing objects/persons that Buster confronts. This table suggests that the film, in fact, tells two stories which are only loosely and accidentally connected.

First, there is the story of the assistant's disastrous failure in his job. The accumulation of his failures and their destructive effects generate growing hostility from his customers and his boss. The story consists basically of the following narrative sequence: A task is set for the assistant by his boss or customers. He tries to achieve what is requested. He fails. His failure is revealed when his work is checked. He is attacked and about to be physically punished. He runs away. Certain elements of the sequence are repeated and modified, allowing in terms of Buster's performance for a series of gags centering on the misuse and maltreatment of objects and, in terms of the story, generating an accumulation of the assistant's failures and the intensification of hostility and aggression against him. When a sheriff puts the blacksmith in jail (segment 5) and leaves the assistant without supervision, the assistant is free to (unintentionally) soil one horse, equip the other with a dangerous sad-

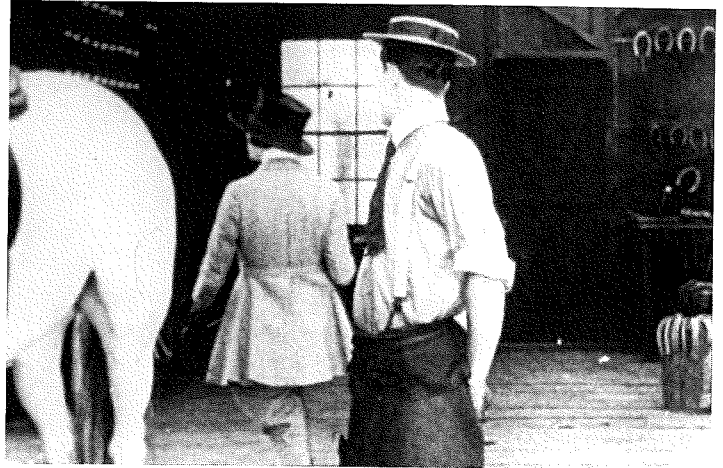


Figure 10

dle construction, and, most important, destroy two cars, one of them a brand-new Rolls Royce. This antagonism results in a climactic confrontation with the boss (segment 18), the assistant's escape from the smithy (segment 19), and his pursuit by his assembled enemies.

Second, there is the story of his romance with an upper-class lady whom he first encounters as a customer in the smithy (segments 6 and 8). Later, during his escape, he accidentally rescues her from her horse, which is running wild. This rescue, in turn, causes them to fall in love and go away together (segments 20, 21, 22). The final scene of the chase assembles all the main characters of the film—the assistant, his boss, and his three customers—as if to recapitulate the story. Then the assistant and his "wife" leave his antagonists and his past behind in order to move into a much more desirable position than the one he held at the beginning of the story.

At the level of comedian performance, both stories present opportunities for the insertion of characteristic slapstick gags. The presence of such gags within *The Blacksmith's* narrative evokes a set of fundamental ambiguities, the most important of which concerns the status of its protagonist. The blacksmith's assistant is at the same time Buster, the comedian; the sequence of events is also a series of comic performances; the smithy is simultaneously a peculiar kind of stage. Each of the blacksmith's assistant's unsuccessful attempts to fulfill a specific task is simultaneously a successful performance by Buster, in which the complete setting, including props, other characters, and the narrative situation, is utilized to produce comic effects. These effects are based on a contrast between the ostensible aims and

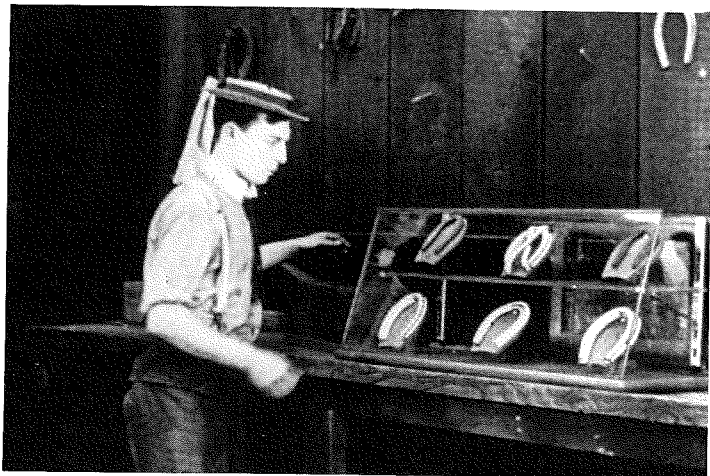


Figure 11

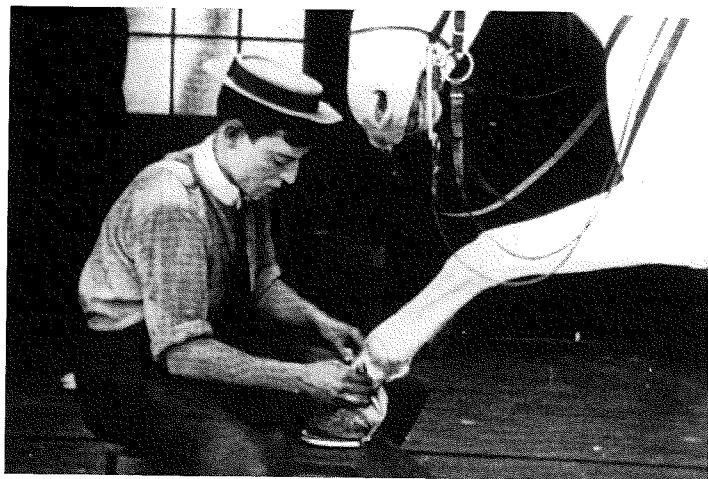


Figure 12

the actual effects of actions (e.g., repairing a car/destroying it) and/or between the means and ends in carrying out these actions (e.g., cooking a meal in the smithy's fireplace, repairing a watch with the blacksmith's tools).

Beyond Keaton's performance, at the level of narration, these comic effects are connected with a fundamental transformation of the fictional world, in which all these actions are supposed to take place. Natural laws are invalidated: magnets have a fantastic pull; horses behave like human beings; balloons are able to hold up cars. The smithy is revealed to be partly furnished and equipped like a shoeshop with elements of a jeweller's and barber's shop as well. Moreover, exterior space is represented in a decidedly "unreal" fashion, one which breaks with conventional constructions of spatial continuity within the classical cinema; it is an imaginary place in which people walk out of the frame of one shot into the frame of another without any convincing relationship between the two spaces being established.

The obvious manipulations of the fictional space toward the end of the film are connected with equally obvious manipulations of the film's two story lines, which unexpectedly converge and schematically result in a stereotypically happy ending. The two stories are intertwined through a series of displacements, which are first articulated in segment 6, forming the basis of the film's most elaborate and extensive gag sequence. When the assistant first encounters the woman, his interest in her, expressed by the look he casts at her when she walks away (Figure 10), has to be displaced, due to his low status and her apparent loftiness, onto her horse. He treats the horse as a female human customer, thus evoking the famil-

iar theme of the seductive shoe-clerk (Figures 11, 12).<sup>15</sup> The character's adoring treatment of the horse leads into a sequence where he unwittingly soils the white horse and himself with oil (Figure 13). This juxtaposition is very suggestive for metaphorical readings: sexual intercourse, loss of virginity, male aggression. In the more literal terms of the story, this scene prepares not only for an exchange of curious looks when the woman returns and fetches her horse (Figure 14) but also for their final encounter outside the smithy.

Being unaware of the oil on one side of her horse, the lady rides away and later stops in front of an elderly woman (presumably her mother) who notices the stains and screams. The horse runs wild and races into the assistant, who has by now left the smithy and his low status behind and can thus encounter her on a different level. The female customer/salesclerk configuration gives way to the even more familiar relation between female victim and male rescuer, damsel and knight. The class boundary, which still separates them, is denied by the assistant's refusal to take a financial reward. This gesture enables him to get the traditional fairy tale reward instead: the woman herself.

The fact that he unintentionally rescues her from a chain of events which he himself initiated through his soiling of her horse is a reminder of the nonrealistic logic, of the displacements that are at work in this peculiar formation of the couple and in the organization of the film's gags into a larger narrative structure.<sup>16</sup> Like the other comic elements within *The Blacksmith*, the arbitrary circumstances surrounding the formation of the couple may offer a temporary disruption, but it is one which the film can



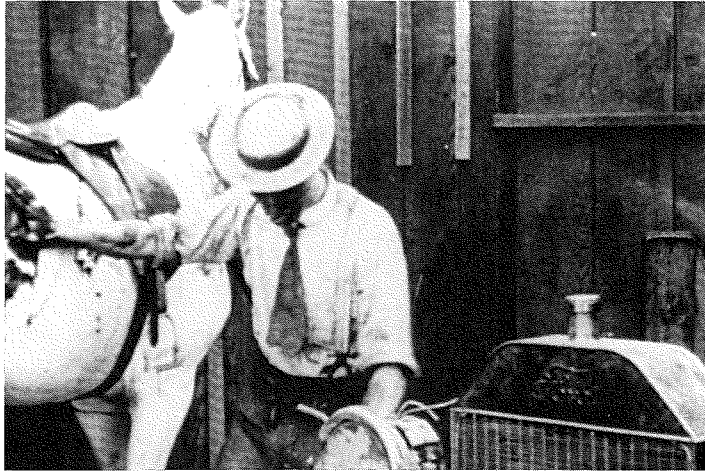


Figure 13

easily override, since the disruptive actions are vitally linked to the text's overall narrative and semantic structure. Their meaningfulness within the text overpowers our momentary recognition of their apparent implausibility and incongruity as distancing dissolves again into engagement.

### The Closing Sequence

Perhaps the most remarkable instance of comic disruption occurs within the film's closing sequence, where the integrity of the fiction is challenged first by the manipulations of the authorial agency and, second, by Buster, only to be reordered again by the unfolding narrative. The first shot (Figure 16) is an intertitle reading, "Many a honeymoon has ended thusly." The title card is decorated with a drawing of a train moving from right to left. This image refers back to the preceding shot (Figure 15), which showed the "honeymoon express" departing in the right foreground and going toward the left background.

Just as in the opening sequence of the film, the intertitle is used to set up specific expectations which in this case are concerned with the relation of "honeymoon" to sex and marriage. The next shot (Figure 16), however, takes over the reference to railways in the intertitle (honeymoon *express* instead of *honeymoon* express) and shows a train moving along an overpass from right to left, continuing the movement depicted in the two preceding shots. The train falls over (Figure 17) and, for a moment, an illogical connection is made between "honeymoon" and death, as if a lot of honeymoons ended in train accidents. The film seems to have come to an unhappy, though still comic, end.

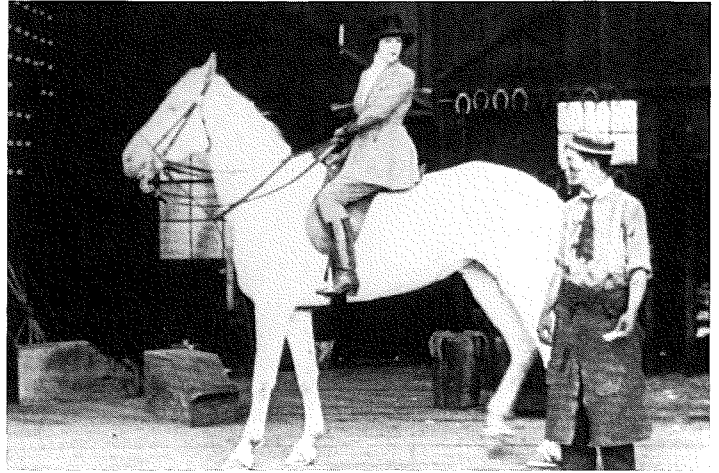


Figure 14

With the entrance of Buster into the frame (Figure 18), this connection is revealed as being based on a misinterpretation of the image, and the filmic discourse returns to its "normality." As the next shot reveals (Figure 19), the "honeymoon express" has propelled Buster, as was expected, into family life, complete with wife, child, and what looks like middle-class security and prosperity.

This return to "normality" on the level of the film's meaning is paralleled by a "normalization" of the filmic signification. The toy train, which can easily be recognized as such from the start, for a moment seems to be intended to signify a "real" train. The spectator has to understand it as such in order to make sense of the shot and its relations to preceding shots. With the entrance of Buster, however, the toy train takes on its "normal" meaning again. Instead of unconvincingly and artificially signifying a real train, it quite naturally signifies what it is—a toy train.

These two shots (intertitle, toy train) are a comic discursive digression which is not built around the performance of the comedian but on that of the authorial agency, materializing in the intertitle and the following "trick" and playing upon the spectator's expectations about and readings of the filmic discourse. With the return to "normality," the comic disruption then gives way to narrative closure, which is reached when Buster's identity and status have been redefined in the final domestic scene.

Nevertheless, the film ends with yet another comic reversal. The last shot of the film shows Buster's home with a familiar domestic scene, preparations for bed, quite naturally taking place. Buster's movement toward the camera threatens to disrupt the "transparent" representation of the scene in that

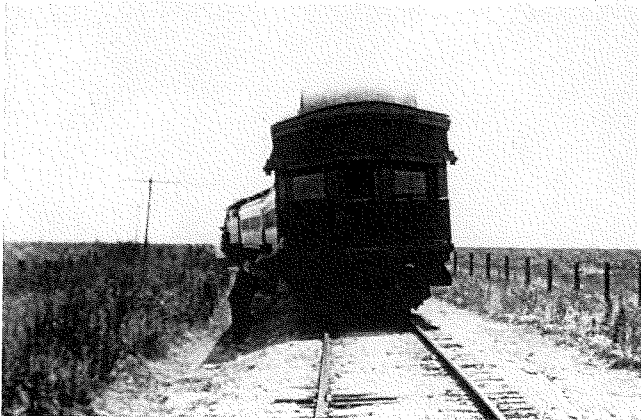
*The Closing Sequence*

Figure 15

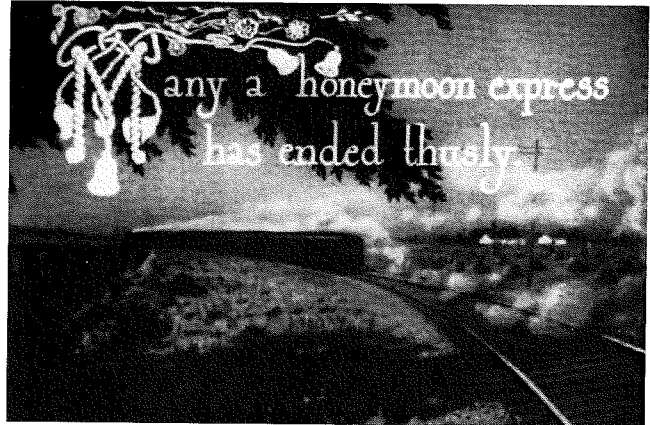


Figure 16

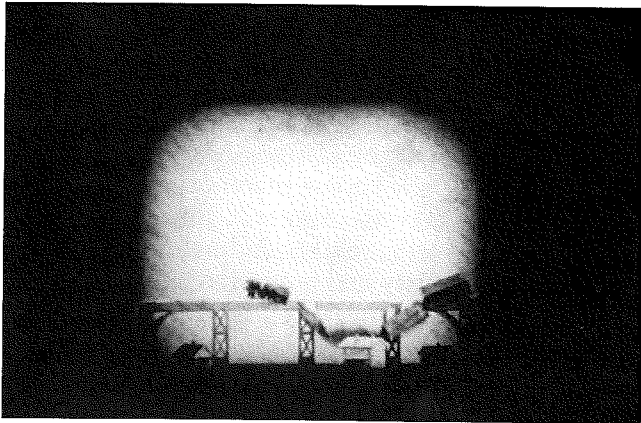


Figure 17

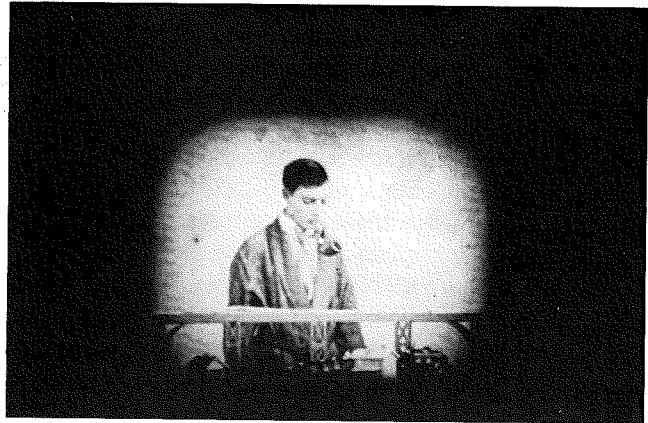


Figure 18

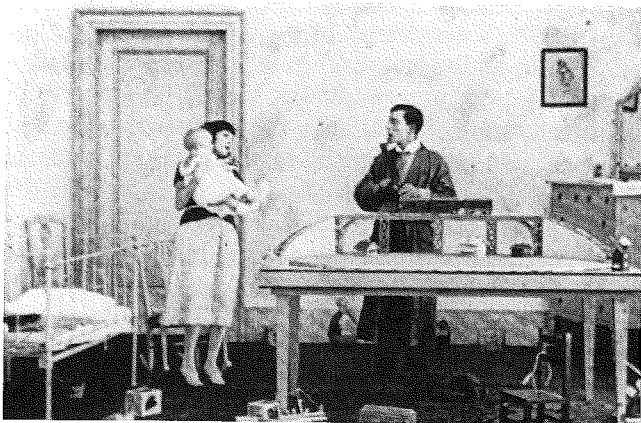


Figure 19

it points to the fact that a camera is there, allowing us to watch what is going on. In contrast to his postings in the opening of the film, however, Buster himself shows no awareness of the camera here. What he does, before going to bed, is quite naturally draw the blind on what from his point of view seems to be a window but what from the spectator's point of view is the camera look/the screen (Figure 20). Furthermore, what Buster draws into the frame turns out to be the final title of the film (Figure 21), announcing and representing "The End."

With the drawing of the blind, the domestic scene is hidden from the camera's look. The realistic motivation and execution of this act give a strong sense that the scene is going to be continued behind the blind. Simultaneously, this act proclaims the film's end. The former seems to be an act of the film's protagonist, while the latter clearly is a discursive statement. Thus, character and authorial agency, story



Figure 20

and discourse seem to collapse in this final filmic incident. The end of the discourse is brought about from within the story (i.e., its final domestic scene). The paradoxical execution of the final discursive act does not destroy the fiction; there is a strong implication that the story goes on (with the family going to bed) while the discourse has come to an end. In this manner, the disruption of the film's fiction by an obtrusively interfering authorial agency is finally, although paradoxically, presented as an act of the protagonist of this very fiction.

### The Semantics of Gags

In all screen comedy, the filmic discourse creates comic effects in its narration of a story. Not only are most of these effects discernible only when seen in relation to the fictional world of the story, whose conventions they disrupt, but they also gain significance in this context. While comedian comedy is characterized by the disruptive force of the comedian's performance and by the comic incidents he initiates, this force, nevertheless, has to be analyzed as a factor that both subverts the fiction as a whole and contributes to its meaning.

The way Buster as the blacksmith's assistant (segment 6) treats the horse as a woman with the horse in turn acting as a human is funny in itself. It further destroys the very coherence of the fictional world in which the assistant's story is supposed to occur. Yet the full force and meaning of this incident can only be realized if it is placed in the context of the assistant's preceding desirous look at the horse's female

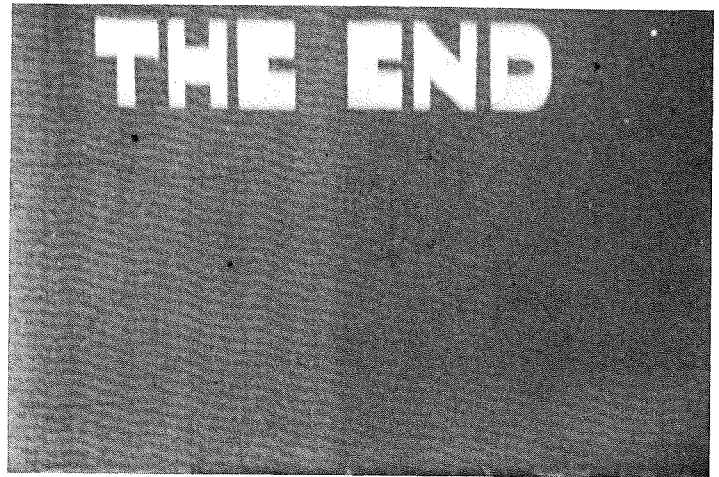


Figure 21

owner, of the contrast between his present state as an employee and the lady's high class, and of his following maltreatment of the horse, which leads directly (albeit accidentally) to the formation of the couple. In this context, the adoring treatment of the horse arises from the assistant's frustrated desire for the woman and ultimately, though unintentionally, allows him to realize this desire. In this manner, the ongoing narrative invests the gags with meaning, which in turn they contribute to its advancement.

Although the comic incidents are, at first sight, disruptive and gratuitous in relation to the fiction, they are integrated in it on a higher level. The formal operation of the comic incident ignores, subverts, transgresses the narrative operations of the classic realist discourse not only to produce laughter, but also to make a semantic contribution to the narrative. Comic incidents are thus both funny and meaningful in terms of narrative issues, with a great deal of their humor deriving precisely from this meaning.

In the comedian comedy, the significance of the comic incidents is centered on the conflicting signs marking the character's identity within the fiction, while on the discursive level these very same incidents are examples of the comedian's performance skills (i.e., of his secure identity as a comedian). The comic incidents/performances place the comedian at the edge of the fictional world; he is in some respects an extrafictional intruder, performing through direct address of the camera/spectator instead of acting only within the fiction.

At the same time, he is at the edge of the social order within the fiction: as a child in a world of adults, comically misplaced in the role of the adult hero. The trajectory of the film is to involve the comic charac-

ter in a dramatic conflict and with this to educate, stabilize, and integrate him in terms of the fiction and its social order. At the same time, it is necessarily suppressing his extrafictional status as a performer. By the end of the film, the comic character is fully integrated not only into the fiction but also into its social order. He has become an adult by overcoming his unresolved personality; that is, by having found an unambiguous social and sexual identity, and by discontinuing his escapist, nonconformist, transgressive behavior. This is exactly what happens in *The Blacksmith*, and it can best be demonstrated by a comparison between the initial and the final narrative situation (segments 2 and 23) and, most specifically, between the gags in which these situations are articulated.

With the disruptive appearance of the blacksmith in shot 8, the stage is set for a dramatic conflict between him and Buster. This conflict between employer and employee is articulated in shots 7–11 with an alternation of shots showing the blacksmith preparing for work and of those showing Buster being engaged in an irregular activity. Both opponents are brought together in the frame in shot 12, which defines their relationship in a climactic and, at the same time, very comic event. Buster has been frying eggs at the fireplace and he has just put them on a plate when the blacksmith enters the frame and disapproves of this unproductive activity of his assistant with an angry look and threatening gestures. Buster reacts to this with a gesture of subordination. Vainly, he attempts to pretend to be working, and in applying the gestures of work to his plate, he smashes it with a hammer (Figure 22).

The comic incongruity of gesture and object in the first comic incident of the story has a very precise effect in terms of the drama that has just started. Buster is forced to refrain from his private activity and return to work. Instead of realizing his self-interest (having a meal), he has to realize the interests of his employer (doing work for him). His subordination under the controlling look and power of someone else has been made blatantly clear.

Furthermore, the comic sequence in its two contrasting parts indicates the basic strategy Buster is going to adopt in the remainder of the film. His ingenious use of his working place for his own purposes, in the first part of the sequence, contrasts with his sheer destructiveness in the second. His ingenuity later reappears when he is repairing his watch with hammer and anvil, fire and water; when he defeats the blacksmith with a set of pulleys; and also, more indirectly, when he shoes the first customer's horse. His destructiveness, now in the form of incompe-

tence and ignorance, later manifests itself mainly in the demolition of two cars.

The duality of incompetence and ingenuity, failure and success which characterizes the protagonist's actions throughout the film is already present in a condensed form in the first comic sequence of the narrative. This sequence takes on even more significance when compared to the final result of Buster's actions. In the end, they lead him to marriage and family life. In the last segment (Figure 19), he shows all signs of middle-class wealth and familial authority: a pipe and a smoking jacket, expensive toys, a large room, the wife handling the baby, and Buster self-confidently taking a stroll.

The contrast to the first scene in the smithy is even more striking when considered in the light of some peculiar similarities. The clothes Buster is wearing in the smithy already point to the end (Figure 22). His tie and his hat hardly fit into images of work in a smithy, an inappropriateness which is underlined by the far less elegant appearance of the blacksmith. But, even more important is the fact that the irregular activity which he performs, the cooking, is a domestic one and furthermore, one which is firmly rooted in traditional notions of femininity. The apron he is wearing thus not only signifies his being a blacksmith but also takes on feminine connotations. And the physical contrast between him and his boss, together with his subordination under the latter's look and power, expresses not only the authoritarian relationship between employer and employee but also connotes a certain femininity in Buster.

The final scene of the story is already prefigured by its very first one. Consequently, the movement of the narrative can be described as taking Buster out of a pseudo-domestic scene in which he is placed as a female and inserting him into a "real" domestic scene where his masculinity is restored. Simultaneously, the narrative resolves the contradictory signs of his class position (the blacksmith's apron vs. tie and hat) to more fully reveal his essentially middle-class status. Thus, the narrative first states and then resolves the contradictory and "unresolved" sexual and social identity of its protagonist.

Looking even further back beyond the first scene of the narrative to the very beginning of the film, another striking contrast becomes apparent. The comedian who is presented, and presents himself to the camera/spectator in the opening sequence, has been completely reduced to a fictional character by the end of the film. All signs of self-conscious comic performance have been suppressed, and even the pork-pie hat (Buster's trademark, which he was wearing throughout the film) has disappeared. Without any

traces of his former identity being left, the comedian has become a petty bourgeois.

### Conclusion: Toward a History of Comedian Comedy

At first sight, *The Blacksmith* might appear to be a series of more or less unconnected gags or, more precisely, of comic encounters between the comedian and objects or people. Using the generic model proposed by Steve Seidman and developed further by Frank Krutnik, this analysis has provided an account of the connectedness of these comic incidents, both in terms of their constitution of a causal chain of events (albeit realizing a nonrealistic type of causality) and in terms of their exploration of a number of thematic and narrative issues. The gags focus attention on the social and sexual identity of the performer and his position in relation to the fictional world and to the audience in front of the screen. The overall trajectory of the film is concerned with the integration of the extrafictionally constituted performer personality into the ongoing narrative and, simultaneously, the dissolution of the performer's conflicting signs of class and gender into an unambiguous social and sexual identity. At the same time, the film works to dissolve the interfering authorial agency into the story.

In Seidman and Krutnik's account, this trajectory is seen to be characteristic of comedian comedy in general. Their model allows for only two possible outcomes of a comedian comedy: "The comedian must either become 'adult' by becoming integrated or remain regressively escapist, the latter a 'revolt' which cannot be taken seriously but is excused by the 'specialness' of the comedian 'putting on his act.'"<sup>18</sup> Both alternatives in this model situate the comedian and his performance within the rules and norms of classical narrative cinema and of "normal" adult behavior. According to this model, the comedian's antics are ultimately perceived and judged by the audience in terms of their deviance, irrespective of the film's specific strategy to achieve closure. The film may proceed to integrate the comedian into the fiction and its social order or, in the end, place him outside these spheres altogether.

In either case, the above model implies that the comedian's performance, which constitutes the film's main attraction, comes across as an aberration. Although comedian comedies and their audiences celebrate this aberration in self-validating sequences which spectacularly display the comedian's skills, these antics ultimately have to be renounced as an untenable, purely imaginary, and temporary depar-



Figure 22

ture from the social norms that govern and regulate identity constitution and behavior both in the reality of social interaction and in the realistic fictions which circulate within our culture. In each comedian comedy, the fictional world of the narrative offers "proper" role models and thus develops preferred alternatives to the comedian's antics, which are more in line with the obligations and rewards, the necessities and securities, of what is socially constructed as "normal" identity and behavior. The filmic fiction both in comedian comedy and in other classical films invariably defines this normality through unambiguous identity, stable characterization, and couple formation. Against this background, the comedian's initial antics, pleasurable as they may be, increasingly appear to reflect undesirable shortcomings of his character. According to this argument, then, comedian comedies achieve closure by either correcting these shortcomings and turning the comedian into a respectable member of society or by acknowledging his incurable deviance and placing him as an eternal child in a world of adults which he can never be part of and for which his antics, in the final analysis, have no relevance whatsoever.

Appealing and helpful as it is, Seidman and Krutnik's model of the generic characteristics of comedian comedy needs elaboration, precisely because it so neatly accounts for the common elements and structural features of a wide range of American comedies from the mid-teens up to the present day. In their attempt to provide a generic model for a large body of texts, Seidman and Krutnik have by necessity played down the differences between groups of texts within their corpus. For a historical analysis of the genre, however, these differences are of crucial importance. Within the broad generic characteristics



that are shared by all comedian comedies, certain more specific options dominate the work of individual performers or the output of comedian comedies in a particular period and differentiate these bodies of texts from others within the same genre. The first step toward an account of these specific historical manifestations of comedian comedy would be, for example, a modification of Seidman and Krutnik's model along the following lines.

First, a more systematic account of the different ways in which comedian comedies achieve closure; that is, resolution of the initial tension between performance and narrative, performer and character, is needed. Obviously, different types of narratives can be employed to facilitate the engagement of the comedian in a dramatic series of events and eventually resolve his ambiguous sexual and social identity, in the process investing the comedian's performance with narrative meaning. In Keaton's case, an interesting shift from his short films to his features can be observed: Whereas the former generally involve Keaton in a direct confrontation with the authority figure (e.g., the blacksmith) as a precondition for his uniting with the girl, he typically avoids this confrontation in the latter in favor of a battle against less personalized natural or quasi-natural forces (e.g., the storm in *Steamboat Bill Junior* or the Northern army in *The General*). This battle proves his worth in the eyes of the authority figure (here usually more precisely defined as the girl's father) and of the girl and thus brings about the resolution, the formation of the couple. The triangular construction (protagonist—authority figure—object of desire) is the same in both cases, yet the solution is different.

This shift in narrative construction is accompanied by a shift in the articulation of Keaton's performance. The clown's virtuosity is mostly relegated to clearly marked comic sequences that are interspersed with straight dramatic sequences carrying the narrative interests and that culminate in an extended comic action spectacle toward the end of each feature film. This spectacle is only retrospectively motivated by the narrative when it is shown to bring about the father's recognition of the protagonist's worth. This extended spectacle sequence in which Keaton's body is first subjected to and then in turn masters the physical world around him assumes an altogether different meaning from the gag sequences in the shorts. It signifies a retreat from the demands of social life, symbolized within the shorts by the necessity to deal with authority figures in order to realize one's desires, into an asocial realm of mere physical interaction and spectacular display of physical mastery of one's own body and the world around it.

This shift in the types of narratives that Keaton's shorts and his features employ and in their respective articulation of performance is one example of historical developments within the generic framework of the comedian comedy. Other examples have to do with the precise balance between narrative and performance, character and performer. Seidman and Krutnik's distinction between two possible outcomes of a comedian comedy may be more important than they acknowledge. Whereas the integrative solution (the comedian becomes fully integrated into the fiction and its social order) ultimately rejects performance in favor of narrative, the second alternative, that of infantile escapism, is based on a different relation between the terms that form the fundamental opposition of comedian comedy. Performance remains the dominant force throughout the film and can only temporarily be dissolved into narrative. There are certain comedian comedies (e.g., early Marx Brothers) that do without narrative continuity and stability of fictional characterization altogether and instead seem to be concerned mainly with functionalizing ever-shifting narrative situations and possible characterizations for the purposes of comic performance. This type of comedian comedy was most prevalent in the early sound period.<sup>19</sup>

This new form of comedian comedy was one of the major influences on Keaton's early sound films. Keaton moved from independent production to the position of a contract actor in a major studio, MGM, in 1928 and made the transition to talking pictures with *Free and Easy* in 1930. In this new production context, he was first assigned to stories based directly upon particular Broadway plays (for example, *Parlor, Bedroom and Bath* [1931]) or on the general model of the Broadway farce. This meant a retreat from elaborate physical and visual gag sequences into isolated falls and other physical mishaps and into situation comedy articulated mainly through complex narratives of mistaken identity and frustrated sexual desire and through the spoken word.

Already, in *Parlor, Bedroom and Bath*, the appearance of a second comic personality, Charlotte Greenwood, works toward the ultimate dissolution of narrative into comic performance. Toward the film's conclusion, Buster becomes ensnared in an absurd series of formations suggesting potential couplings. Keaton and Greenwood's lovemaking transforms the conventions of popular romantic byplay into a painful and acrobatic exercise in physical combat. In a vain attempt at closure, however, the protagonist suddenly and violently grabs the "proper" (that is, noncomic) love object, who a few shots earlier remarked, "I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man



on earth." The abruptness and illogic of this shift in affections is overcome by the sheer force of physical performance when Keaton mechanically goes through the same routine he had exercised with Greenwood. The film's conclusion reduces romance to a strange type of performance, one which belittles the earnest feelings normally associated with couple formation in Hollywood films.

The influence of this new type of comedian comedy became dominant with Keaton's teaming of Jimmy Durante, starting with *The Passionate Plumber* (1932). Keaton's last film as an MGM star, *What No Beer?* (1933), goes even further than *Parlor, Bedroom and Bath* in displacing narrative interests for comic performance. Here, however, it is Durante whose performances become the focus of attention. Durante's incessant talk serves more as a running commentary on rather than as a part of the shifting narrative situations in which he and Keaton become involved. In the movie's final scene, the vamp, who has seduced and betrayed Keaton throughout the film, is suddenly and inexplicably transformed into his romantic lover. With the lifting of Prohibition, Keaton and Durante, petty criminals so far, briefly reappear as rich beer brewers. This conventional, though abruptly realized, happy ending ultimately gives way to a close-up of Durante drinking beer and addressing the camera: "It's your turn, folks! It won't be long now!" Here, the comic performer clearly isn't defined as part of the fiction but as a representative within that fiction of the spectators within the real world, who, at the point the film was released (February 10, 1933), are still prohibited from taking a drink.

In short, Seidman and Krutnik's conception of comedian comedy provides a useful model for the close analysis of individual comic texts as well as providing a framework for constructing a history of the comedian-centered genre. It focuses our attention on the potential disruptiveness of comedian and narrational performance and on the processes by which those disruptions are contained and made to contribute directly to the film's overall narrative and semantic structure.

However, although a powerful analytical tool, this type of abstract generic model cannot fully explain the complex manifestations and inflections of the general performance tradition which occur within a specific film or group of films. The series of shifts in the articulation of narrative and performance in Keaton's films of the 1920s and early 1930s, from shorts to silent features and into talking pictures, reflects historical developments with wider implications: the transition of a major comedian from short

to feature production, the conversion of Hollywood to sound, the accompanying decline of independent production, and the influx of Broadway material and performers. Textual analysis, of the sort performed here, necessarily must be coupled with a description that preserves the historical specificity of individual texts or groups of texts and provides an explanation of the historical shifts they represent if it is to avoid collapsing all textual differences in a totalizing generic model.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Thomas Elsaesser and Henry Jenkins III for their help in revising this essay for publication.

1. For discussions of performance and the musical, see Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). For discussions of the role of performance in comedian comedy, see Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1981); Frank Krutnik, "The Clown-Prints of Comedy," *Screen* 25, nos. 4-5 (July-October 1984): 50-59; Steve Neale, "Psychoanalysis and Comedy," *Screen* 22, no. 2 (1981): 29-44. Other genres that have attracted a great deal of recent interest for their departure from classical narration, from "deviant" narrative construction and stylistic excess are film noir and the melodrama. See E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1978); Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987).

2. Seidman, *Comedian Comedy*.

3. Seidman employs the masculine pronoun to reflect the fact that there have been few female comedians working within this tradition and that their work has not been substantially examined to determine if it follows the same formal patterns as male-centered comedian comedies. I have chosen to follow his example here for similar reasons.

4. Full details of the film, including a useful plot summary, can be found in George Wead and George Lellis, *The Film Career of Buster Keaton* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977), pp. 37-39.

5. There have been relatively few texts concerning Keaton's shorts as opposed to the wealth of essays and book-length studies concentrating on his silent features. See Daniel Moews, *Keaton: The Silent Features Close Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) for the most useful of these discussions. The more extensive analyses of Keaton's shorts can be found in Sylvain du Pasquier, "Buster Keaton's Gags," *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (1973): 269-291 and Peter F. Parshall, "Demonic Farce, Saturnalia, and Buster Keaton's *The Cops*," *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature* 7 (1981): 18-26. Margarent Ga-

briella Oldham's Ph.D. dissertation on the topic, "The Nineteen Independent Short Silent Comedies of Buster Keaton," Columbia University Teacher's College, 1981, is mainly descriptive, giving plot summaries and describing individual gags.

6. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Ithaca University Press, 1978), amongst others, has proposed a model for the type of communication that is realized by narrative texts, using the following concepts:

Each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and the discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. (P. 19)

Narratives are communications. . . . But we must distinguish between real and implied authors and audiences; only implied authors and audiences are immanent to the work, constructs of the narrative-transaction-as-text. The real author and audience of course communicate, but only through their implied counterparts. What is communicated is story . . . ; and it is communicated by discourse. (P. 31)

7. Seidman, *Comedian Comedy*, p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

11. Richard Gray, ed., *American Verse of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Dent, 1973), p. 29.

12. I will use the term "Buster" to refer to Keaton's screen persona, which had been established in the series of films he appeared in prior to *The Blacksmith*. When I am referring to the specific role which Keaton is assuming within the fiction, I will use the term "the blacksmith's assistant," or such like.

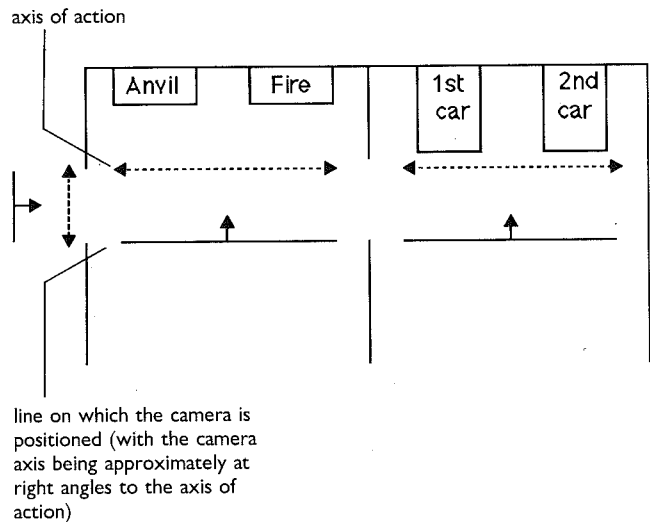
13. A contemporary reviewer for the *Moving Picture World* writes, "it starts off like a burlesque on 'The Village Blacksmith', but soon branches of [*sic*]." C. S. Sewell, *Moving Picture World*, 16 December 1927, p. 672.

14. Krutnik, "Clown-Prints," pp. 51, 58.

15. The *MPW* review highlights this scene: "The way in which Buster 'sells' a fancy [*sic*] pair of shoes to a beautiful white horse, going through exactly the same routine as a shoe salesman would do for milady is a scream [*sic*]."

16. Additional complexity is suggested by the way in which the sequence could be read as a parody of the D. W. Griffith-style "race to the rescue" climaxes characteristic of popular melodramas of the period. The iconography and formal organization of this sequence place Keaton in the role of the victim trapped on the rails in the path of an oncoming train, while the female's runaway horse suggests the hero's gallop to the rescue.

17. This conception of filmic space as a stage is underlined by the camera setups:



Although the cutting rate is very high, there are no point of view shots and no reverse field cutting. Camera axis and position are always distanced from the characters' looks and positions. Exceptions occur only outside the smithy.

18. Krutnik, "Clown-Prints," p. 55.

19. See Henry Jenkins III, "What Made Pistachio Nuts?: *Diplomaniacs*, Anarchistic Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic," *Velvet Light Trap* (forthcoming).