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Style in *The General*

In this chapter, I will examine key elements of cinematic style in *The General*. This will include discussions of the composition and editing of the film as well as of the interrelations of the composition with the editing. My major concern is with the more Keatonesque elements of style in *The General*, as distinguished from the style that predominates in the work of most other comic filmmakers. In particular, I am interested in these elements of style as they function in *The General*. Here, three different issues will be canvassed: how the elements of style modify one's perception and experience of the film; how these modifications facilitate the gags in the film; and how the gags and their cinematic structure serve as expressions of the deeper themes of *The General*.

Throughout I shall speak of Keaton as the person responsible for the look of *The General* in terms of composition and editing. This is not adopted merely as a convention of exposition. Nor is it based simply on the fact that Keaton exercised executive control, the final say, over the film. It seems that Keaton had practical control as well. He stated, "Now this was my own story, my own continuity, I directed it, I cut it and I titled it. So actually this was my pet."[1] No one has contradicted this claim despite the fact that Keaton's long years of decline would have provided a wide-open field for any counterclaims. Instead, we have the following testimonial from Clyde Bruckman, the man listed as the co-director of *The General*.

> You seldom saw [Keaton's] name in the story credits. But I can tell you – and so could Jean Havez if he were alive – that those wonderful stories were ninety percent Buster's. I was often ashamed to take the money, much less the credit. I would say so. Bus would say, "Stick [Bruckman] I need a left fielder," but

he never left you in left field. We were all overpaid from the strict creative point of view. Most of the direction was [Keaton's] as Eddie Cline will tell you. Keaton could have graduated into a top director – of any kind of picture, short or long, high or low, sad or funny or both – if Hollywood hadn't pushed him down and then said "Look how Keaton has slipped!" Comedian, gagman, writer, director – then add technical innovator. Camera work. Look at his pictures to see beautiful shots, wide pans, unexpected close-ups and angles that were all new when he thought them up.[2]

Bruckman's statement of Keaton's contribution is quite emphatic. We have no reason to distrust Bruckman here. Bruckman's own career was quite tragic. He ended committing suicide in the bathroom of a restaurant, leaving a note saying that he couldn't afford a funeral. If anything, one would think that someone in Bruckman's straits might be tempted to claim more of the glory that surrounds the Keaton films that he worked on. His lavish praise in such circumstances provides a degree of confirmation to his report. That such testimony is not called into question by other testimony is further evidence.

The Long-Shot

I begin my discussion of the style in *The General* by considering its composition. Isolation of the particularly Keatonesque format of composition need not be a completely *de novo* undertaking. I shall pick up on the observations of other critics, hopefully corroborating these leads via argumentation, and also refining those leads into more specific hypotheses. In this regard, there does seem to be a consensus among recent commentators that the long-shot is the characteristically Keatonesque format.[3] Indeed, Penelope Houston has speculated that the rise of Keaton's critical stock in the fifties and sixties can be accounted for by his use of long-shots, a practice which corresponds to favored strategies in the contemporary films of the period,[4] including those of neorealism, the new wave, and *cinéma-vérité*.

   To say that the long-shot is characteristic of Keaton, and especially characteristic in *The General*, is to claim that he uses this device more than other comics. "More" here is ambiguous. It does not simply mean that Keaton's use of this device is statistically greater, but also that the device is of greater importance in Keaton. Every comic director uses long-shots, if only as establishing shots. What people are suggesting when they focus on Keaton's long-shots is not the statistical tabulation that there are more shots that meet the dimensional standards of long-shots. Rather they mean that there are many

long-shots that perform services in the narration that go beyond simple establishment of action. Claiming the long-shot as characteristic of Keaton is to claim that it is central to the ultimate project of the work.

In my analysis of gags in *The General*, I noted on many occasions that the gag under consideration was represented via a long-shot as in the shot of the bemused and dismayed Johnnie Gray sitting on the driverod of a locomotive after Annabelle Lee spurns him. In this shot, we see an engineer in the cab of the locomotive, in the upper screen-left corner of the shot, start the engine while Johnnie sits listlessly in the center of the shot. Johnnie glances screen-right. Suddenly the train begins to move. The camera pans screen-right to follow the movement. Just before the train enters a tunnel, Johnnie realizes his predicament. Why is the long-shot used here?

The Authenticity Hypothesis

This kind of shot might be explained in terms of Keaton's commitment to a kind of authenticity. We have already remarked on the extreme danger the shot involved. Keaton is sitting on the driverod of an ancient piece of machinery.

> The engine was a museum piece; in his search for authenticity, Keaton had found a working locomotive of almost the right Civil War vintage, and had it further modified to resemble the actual "General" in every respect. There was one trouble with such an old piece of machinery, the engineer told [Keaton]: it had a tendency, if the steam was not fed to it just right, to spin its wheels at the start. This would probably kill him outright or at least very seriously injure him. Keaton often talked about the care they took to make sure the gag didn't backfire: they tried a smooth start several times without him on the crossbar, and when the engineer was quite sure he had the knack, Buster actually sat down and they did it again for the camera.[5]

The danger described above is authenticated by the long-shot. This shooting format reveals that the stunt is not faked. Keaton is not tightly framed, sitting on a moving metal rod. Shot that way, it would be possible to disconnect the rod from the train and manipulate it by some directly controllable method. Shot from afar, however, we see there is no chicanery. The rod is unquestionably attached to the wheels of an awesome locomotive. The long-shot confirms our sense of the real risk that the image involves. We say "real" in the same sense as Bazin when he expresses his thrill when Chaplin

truly enters the lion's cage in *The Circus*.[6] Long-shots in such cases putatively vivify the action by establishing that the fictional action being portrayed encompasses many of the same risks to life and limb that the represented act entails offscreen.

The authenticity hypothesis can be used to deal with many shots in Keaton films. One recalls the shot in *Sherlock Jr.* in which Sherlock falls from a moving train onto the spout of a water tower, which drenches him and then sends him tumbling to the track. The shot literally fractured Keaton's neck.[7] Watching the ordeal, one does not doubt the danger of the scene for a second.

The use of the long-shot in such scenes also serves to authenticate Keaton's prowess as an acrobat. His backward catch of the Canfield girl, a dummy, as she shoots over the falls in *Our Hospitality* is quite a testament to Keaton's precision, as is the shot where he uses a railroad gate to lower himself from the top of a building into a moving convertible in *Sherlock Jr.* We may initially suggest that the function of the long-shots in Keaton and in *The General* can be explained by an analysis in terms of authenticity which purports that the long-shot is used to demonstrate that the represented actions are authentic rather than synthetically contrived through editing. The motivation for this authenticity can be explained in several ways, including: (1) Keaton's pride in displaying his own ability; (2) audience appreciation of Keaton's acrobatic skill; (3) the titillation of the audience by actual danger to Keaton. Keaton keeps

> as much of the action as possible within a shot. It started, presumably, with a natural pride in letting the audience see that those leaps and falls and glissades of movement were all his own work. There could be no cutting because to cut into the action would suggest a cheated effect. . . . He was prepared to risk his neck for an effect which might last twenty seconds on the screen. The camera had to get far enough back to take it all in . . .[8]

Further motivation for Keaton's commitment to authenticity can be found in what might be called Keaton's naive commitment to realism. Here, realism is actually a cluster of different attitudes which fall under the same rubric, though the different components of the cluster vary in kind. Keaton was excited by film, in contrast to theater. He wrote:

> In the theater you had to create the illusion of being on a ship, a railroad or an airplane. The camera allowed you to show your audience the real thing; real trains, horses and wagons, snowstorms, floods. Nothing you could stand on, feel or see was beyond the range of the camera.[9]

Today some may bridle at the above implication that cinema is not an illusion. Yet, the passage does show Keaton's obsession with the real, as found in theorists like Kracauer and Bazin. Keaton's obsession is literally implemented – he tackles all those real things that he excitedly enumerates. In comic style as well, Keaton's commitment to the real causes him eventually to drop certain gags from his repertoire. He wrote: "We also discontinued what we called impossible gags."[10] In terms of cinematic style, Clyde Bruckman claims that Keaton was the first comic director to abandon the use of undercranking because he, Keaton, believed that it rendered movement unbelievable.[11] In terms of imagery, Keaton also had a passion for historical detail, taking the filming of *The General* to Oregon because of his desire to use historically accurate, narrow-gauge railroad trains. Admittedly, the historical realism of detail, the physical realism of material possibility, and the realism of the long take/long-shot are different matters. A director could employ one of these practices without being committed to the other two. However, it is also the case that, within the history of twentieth-century culture, these different kinds of authenticity have often been equivocally yoked together in a composite, cluster notion of realism. Keaton has a commitment to authenticity on many different levels of representation. In this light, his use of the long-shot becomes a further instance of his obsession with realism.

The authenticity view of Keaton's use of the long-shot certainly has strengths. It correlates with Keaton's avowed, multidimensional commitment to realism. It also points to experientially felt grounds for an explanation of why audiences relish Keaton, given the way the long-shot enhances the thrills and acrobatic effects of his stunts. The authenticity approach also places Keaton within a comprehensible, historical film framework as a precursor of the deep-focus style of filmmaking. However, all these strengths must be balanced against an unfortunate defect: long-shots occur in Keaton, and especially in *The General*, where no stunts are involved. Even if every stunt in Keaton were represented via a long-shot, the authenticity hypothesis would still be questionable because not every long-shot contains a stunt. Admittedly, the authenticity approach may provide a good analysis of the subset of long-shots that involve stunts, but the authenticity theory cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of Keaton's use of the long-shot in *The General*. How would it accommodate the shot of Johnnie chopping wood as he enters enemy territory, or the shot of the Union-driven General dropping lumber on The Texas from the high bridge? What risky or acrobatic stunts are involved here? What inauthenticity would be perpetrated by representing these events in a tightly composed montage?

Appreciating the narrow focus of the authenticity theory of Keaton's use of the long-shot, E. Rubinstein comments that "the central importance in Keaton's directorial technique of those long-shots of all kinds . . . [is to], by their very nature, communicate in a single image the sense of man in relation to his world."[11]

Rubinstein upholds what we earlier called a conflict theory of the relation of man to the environment in Keaton. The theory that the long-shot constantly describes man in relation to the environment connects conveniently with the adversarial picture of Keaton versus the environment. There are a mass of images that relate man to the environment. The narrative, so a conflict theorist might explain, specifies the nature of that relationship as a hostile one. Here, the long-shot is given the thematic function of constantly repeating the major motif of the work. The long-shot is a device that recurrently sets the terms of the theme that will be developed by the narrative action.

The Environment Approach

Insofar as the preceding "environment" approach to the use of the long-shot derives feasibility from the conflict theory of Keaton's iconography, the environment theory of Keaton's use of long-shots is faulty to the degree that we have shown that the conflict theory is strained. However, one could maintain the environment theory of the long-shot without buying into a conflict theory of the iconography because the environment theory is compatible with any relation between man and the environment including a merely spatial relation.

Admittedly, the environment view of the long-shot is better than an authenticity theory when it comes to comprehensiveness. This is true mainly because it is so vague. The only way the environment hypotheses can fail to apply to any long-shot in any film is if there are no people in the shot. In some cases, even shots without people might be ingeniously integrated into the environment theory by claiming that such shots represent the victory of nature over man. In *The General*, every relevant shot has at least one person in it. Thus, the environment approach does exhaustively cover the data we are concerned with, but at the cost of unenviable amorphousness.

A defender of the environment view might argue that we have looked in the wrong place for specificity when we object to the environment theory of Keaton's long-shot. The specificity of this explanation as a tentative account of the Keatonesque function of the long-shot in *The General* comes from the fact that a long-shot is an unusual device for a comedian. Chaplin

and Langdon prefer a theatrically derived "proscenium" medium-shot. In Lloyd, the long-shot is generally an establishing shot. Hawks, in his comedy, prefers intensive use of the *plan américain*. Here, the specificity of an environment approach to the use of the long-shot in *The General* gains traction, not in contrast to alternative possible uses of the long-shot, but in contrast to the very different forms of representation deployed by other comedians. Thus, the environment view is quite specific to what is specific in *The General* versus films by other comics because long-shots, *per se*, are rare in most comedies, but profuse in *The General*.

In order to short-circuit this mode of defense of the environment theory of the use of the long-shot in *The General*, we need only note that the later films of Tati seem to rely as much as *The General* on the use of long-shots. Obviously, the preceding defense of the environment approach is suspect exactly because it does not differentiate between Tati and Keaton. The fact that Tati and Keaton share the use of the long-shot gives us an inroad to a possible mode of analyzing Keaton's use of it. If we can establish the difference between the two men's use of the shot, we may have a pivot from which to turn to elaborate an analysis of Keaton's use of the format.

In Tati's *Playtime*, in the long-shots that depict the wreckage of the nightclub, it seems that action pervades every square inch of the screen surface. Humorous interactions are constantly occurring without special formal devices, such as centering or diagonal composition, being used to draw audience attention to exactly one sector of the frame. There is no highlighting or underscoring of certain actions over others. The centers of interest in the images are faceted. Tati makes virtually neorealistic comedies. For instance, the audience looks about finding its own sources of interest. A key factor in building this sort of open, multifaceted image is Tati's use of sound. He records voices in a garbled way. He does not erase ambient sound or increase the decibel level of characters. There is little guidance from dialogue for the path our eyes are to follow over the scene. Instead, our attention roves over an image packed with incidents. We may or may not find interesting aspects.

Tati is the type of comic who sees comedy as a philosophical stance or viewpoint on life. He recreates Bazinian compositional patterns that facilitate perceptual realism as a way of engendering a perspective on the flux of everyday life. He provokes the audience to view his comedy as one could view an actual street scene; this is intended to be propaedeutic, one supposes, to viewing actual street scenes as comedies.

In *The General*, the multifaceted aspect of the image is completely lacking. One's eyes are always led to the relevant sections of the long-shot through

strongly directive formal devices, such as diagonals. Keaton rigorously structures his images in highly determinate ways. Keaton does not promote the kind of roving attention Tati encourages. Our attention is forcefully led along a predetermined pathway.

To begin to support this claim let us reconsider two of the shots so far mentioned in this chapter. In the long-shot of Johnnie on the locomotive driverod, the engineer, throughout the pan, is kept in the upper screen-left corner of the shot. Johnnie is kept in the center of the frame. At times, when the driverod rises, Johnnie is at the very epicenter of the image. This composition employs a highly directive set of formal strategies. Johnnie is centered, making him an immediate focus of attention. The cab window is a frame within a frame, the sort of compositional rhythm that has strong attraction for the average Western eye. Keaton further enhances the legibility of this rhythm by framing the cab by the corner of the screen. The image is of one 90-degree edge proximately surrounded and enclosed by a larger one whose sides are parallel to the smaller one. Here, proximity yields an undeniable pattern that immediately rivets the eye. Keaton, by careful design, directs attention to two points in the scene that are crucial for his gag to work.

In the long-shot of Johnnie entering enemy territory, we again see rigorous formal structuring of the shot in operation. There is a shot of an open field; mounted troops, a wagon, and infantry race across it. This activity is at some distance from the camera. Suddenly, the headlamp of The Texas pulls in from screen-right. The camera stays stationary and The Texas dominates the foreground of the shot. As The Texas pulls past the camera, we see Johnnie Gray in the foreground chopping away at the lumber, while in the background, the Southern army continues its retreat. This set-up, with Johnnie in the foreground and the battle in the background, is repeated several more times in this scene. It employs use of foreground/background tension. Given the first of these shots in which we initially see only the battle and then see the train with Johnnie, we can say that the audience is sequentially drawn from one point of interest to the next. There is no question of a viewer's roving eye making sense of this scene. Keaton is in total control. First, he selects the battle as the focus of attention. Then, he shifts attention to the train by filling up the foreground with The Texas. Keaton carefully builds the shot, deliberately modulating the tempo and order of the audience's understanding of the situation. He uses a rigorously and simply structured foreground/background format, enhanced by a sequential shift of the focus of attention, to direct the audience to an apprehension of the two facts. It is these two facts that must be grasped for the gag to work.

We note that a difference between Tati's use of the long-shot and Keaton's involves Tati's use of the format to provoke a multifaceted, open, roving perception of the scene, whereas Keaton's use of the format involves a highly structured one intended to control viewing responses. Tati's structures result in multiple points of interest; Keaton narrows them. Keaton also employs strident compositional devices to draw attention quickly and efficiently to exactly those points of interest that he wishes to make salient.

To analyze the significance of Keaton's use of the long-shot in *The General*, we might attempt to expand upon what we have already learned from our comparison with Tati. An understanding of Keaton's interest in this sort of determinate composition will help us to understand the *raison d'être* of the long-shot in *The General*.

The first hypothesis we might offer for the determinateness of Keaton's long-shots is comic functionality. In the two examples considered so far, we note that, in both cases, the two points of interest stressed by the structure of the shots are the two elements that constitute the sources of humor in the shots. Both shots are inattention gags: they rely on representing an absent-minded character misunderstanding or unaware of his situation. Both shots, then, communicate two situations: the situation as it stands statically in the mind of the character, and the situation as it actually is. This is an example of what Bergson calls an "equivocal situation," namely, "one which permits of two different meanings at the same time, one merely plausible, which is put forward by the actors; the other a real one which is given by the public."[12] One might hypothesize that the long-shot, employed determinately, is the best way to enact an inattention gag of an equivocal situation. If this were true, we would have a perfectly functional account of Keaton's use of the long-shot as the best cinematic means for representing such gags. We could also make use of part of the authenticity approach to the long-shot: that is, for Keaton's achievement gags and stunts, he uses the long-shot as the most functionally efficient means to confirm the audience's admiration of the character's skill. For the automatism/inattention gags of equivocal situations, the long-shot is also favored for functional purposes. Thus, Keaton's concern with representing comic successes and failures at adaptation predisposes him to the long-shot which, for different reasons, is the best device for portraying both successes and failures at adaptation and this is what he wants to achieve in *The General*.

The difficulty with this purely functional account of Keaton's use of the long-shot is that it is simply false that the long-shot is the best means for representing inattention gags of the equivocal situation variety. The long-shot

is one way of doing this, but hardly the only way. Harold Lloyd, for instance, often favors doing equivocal situation gags by editing *à la* Griffith. In *The Freshman*, Harold Diddlebock is tricked into giving a public address. As he speaks, he holds an épée whose tip he absent-mindedly pushes along the floor. An insert shot of the floor reveals an open light socket there, threateningly close to the tip of Harold's wayward rapier. One senses that, at any moment, Harold will unknowingly plunge the sword into the open electrical outlet. Lloyd returns to a frontal medium close-shot of the character speaking. Anticipation builds; clearly the character is unaware of the danger that we, the public, know of from the insert. Suddenly, the character starts dancing frenetically as a shock of electricity courses through the steel sword and into Harold's body. Here, we have an inattention gag of the equivocal situation variety. The character believes the situation is safe while the audience, alerted by the insert, knows an accident is imminent.

This example from Lloyd indicates that there are ready alternatives to the long-shot for representing equivocal situation gags. Lloyd uses editing, juxtaposing a detail to a medium-shot in the case cited. An overhead, medium long-shot might have turned the trick just as well. Someone like Keaton could have done the gag by placing the camera over Harold's head with the open socket on the floor in focus in the background of the overhead shot. However, this means of representing the situation is no more effective than Lloyd's two-shot format for conveying the information that is crucial to understanding the gag. Consequently, why should the single-shot method be considered a superior comic device?

To get the gag, you must know that: (1) the open socket is near the end of the épée, and (2) that Harold Diddlebock is unaware of this. Such knowledge can be communicated by either a two-shot or an overhead, deep-focus shot. To make the gag work as a gag, either format is viable. There is no reason to believe that the deep-focus long-shot is the best functionally available means for representing equivocal situations, though it is one means.

Seeing How

The preceding discussion also reveals that a deep-focus long-shot does more than simply serve the function of making gags viable. As the Lloyd example demonstrates, all the audience needs for equivocal situation gags is the knowledge of the alternative viewpoints on the situation. Such knowledge can be conveyed synthetically without ever visualizing all the elements of the

gag in one shot. In short, we must look for another explanation for why Keaton chooses to use deep-focus long-shots.

The gag will work if the audience knows that event x has happened. Keaton's use of the long-shot gives the audience something above just knowledge: they see that the event happens. Knowing that x has occurred is sufficient for an equivocal situation gag to work. Such knowledge can be communicated by fragments through editing, as one often finds in Lloyd. Keaton goes beyond the basic requirements of comedy in his treatment of equivocal situation gags by framing the action with long, deep-focus shots in such a way that the audience sees x happening in its totality, that is, with all its relevant elements visible.

We should abandon the idea that Keaton uses long-shots simply because they are the best cinematic means for portraying the type of gags with which he is most concerned. We realize that his use of the long-shot is more than simply functional as a comic device. He is committed to the audience seeing the whole event as well as its context, and, therefore, as more than a comic concern.

The comic functionality explication of Keaton's use of the long-shot can also be challenged by pointing out that Keaton uses the format in many situations that are not comic. For instance, the Union troops stream across Rock River in the background of the shot, while Southerners creep up into the foreground, almost a quarter of a mile away from the Northerners. There is no gag here, so a comic functionality explication of Keaton's use of the long-shot is unlikely. On the other hand, one notes immediately that this ambush scene could be represented by editing. The narrative only requires that the audience know that the ambush is taking place; the audience need not see the ambush happening in its totality. Keaton, however, is at pains to represent the ambush in its totality, with the major factors of the scene simultaneously available visually to the audience. Both in gags and in actions in *The General*, we see that Keaton seems to use the long-shot to enable the audience to see events in their totality rather than merely to know what is happening via fragmentary views through editing. Keaton's interest can be contrasted with much of Hitchcock's practice, in which his use of various cinematic techniques usually prompts the audience to know *that x* on the basis of inference from discrete details that are not depicted simultaneously and homogeneously. This explanation of Keaton's use of the long-shot shares an essential feature with the authenticity theory of Keaton's long-shots, since both theories acknowledge spatial integrity, *à la* Bazin, as crucial. Yet this "seeing that" theory of the long-shot is not so closely bound as the

authenticity theory to certain kinds of subject matter, such as stunts. Thus far, we only speculate that Keaton uses the long-shot because he wishes to engender in his audience the cognitive and perceptual experience of seeing *that x* as a visible totality rather than the different cognitive and perceptual experience of knowing *that x* as a result of a synthetic mental construction of fragments of information conveyed by a string of shots of details.

The discussion so far points away from an analysis of Keaton's use of the long-shot in terms of pure comic functionality. We have argued that Keaton, by eschewing editing as a means of representing equivocal situation gags, shows a desire to present events to his audiences, with all the crucial elements of the gag simultaneously visible at the same time. We infer that Keaton is interested in engendering in his audience a state that we have dubbed "seeing *that x.*" This state involves knowledge. But it also contrasts with the cognitive state where the audience merely knows *that x* on the basis of an inference from the discrete details of a montage. The experiential modality, "seeing *that x,*" can serve as a basis for all Keaton's long-shots, not merely equivocal situation gags. Thus, it affords a comprehensive basis for explicating Keaton's use of the long-shot. This explanation argues that the long-shot is used in order to engender the experience of seeing an event happening in its totality.

The problem with explicating Keaton's use of the long-shot in terms of a desire to afford audience experience of the "seeing *that x*" variety is that this interpretation, like the environment theory, is too broad. For instance, how will this new formulation differentiate Keaton from Tati? We must not only account for Keaton's use of the long-shot; we must also account for his use of it in a determinate versus a multifaceted way. We must add something to the "seeing *that x*" state of mind that characterizes that state as having a highly determinate structure. Keaton's long-shots not only facilitate seeing *that x*; they facilitate our seeing *that x* in a highly specific way. What way is that?

We have already noted that Keaton's use of the long-shot presents us with a situation. We have also claimed that these elements are arrayed in striking compositional patterns such that the eye is drawn to them quickly and efficiently; we are drawn to the central elements of *x* so that in a glance we immediately size up the dynamics of the situation. As the camera presents it, the situation is highly intelligible.

Reconsider the gag with Johnnie on the driverod. We see both Johnnie and the engineer. Formal devices highlight these two quite effectively. We see where both of them are looking: the engineer busies himself in the cab and Johnnie looks listlessly away from the cab. Given this, we understand each man's ignorance of the other. This enables us, *at a glance*, to understand

how the ensuing situation happened. The highly directive structure of the shot leads us to zero in on the crucial elements of the situation in such a way that we understand, at an almost perceptual level, exactly what is causing the situation to unfold as it does.

Keaton emphasizes situations as developing processes rather than simply as facts. He shows a long-shot with the engineer in the cab in order to include the causal antecedents of the event. The event, Johnnie's ride on the driverod, is represented as a process of causes and effects. He could have rejected this method in favor of one that simply presents a medium-shot of Johnnie where the rod starts pumping, and in which Johnnie gradually becomes aware of his movement. This would record the fact of the situation, including the comic fact of Johnnie's inattention, but this method would not explicate *how* the situation came about.

The long-shot in *The General* functions to foster intelligibility in scenes. Intelligibility here is something more than knowledgeability. A close-shot of the engineer starting the engine and a medium close-shot of Johnnie on the rod would afford the audience the knowledge of the steps in the causal transaction, but this would not completely explain how the action happened due to the way the attention of the two men was diverted. Heightened understanding is the result of seeing how the event evolved due to the simultaneous and specifically situated inattention of the two characters.

Seeing how the event transpired is more involved than just seeing the event itself. For instance, the driverod gag might have been represented so that the cab was not in the upper corner of the screen, where it visually echoes the edge of the frame. Instead, it might have been more to the center of the image. In our imagined shot variation, let us call it "the Tati variation," there is also room for the lumbercar in the shot. Suppose a group of workmen are on the lumbercar furiously chopping wood in a semicomical manner. Otherwise, suppose the Tati variation is the same as we find in *The General*. It is entirely possible that one could view the hypothetical Tati variation without attending to the perceptual behavior of the engineer. You might, but it is equally probable that you might not. In Keaton's version, it is undeniably more difficult to avoid attending to the engineer's perceptual behavior. In the Tati variation, you would see the situation in its totality; it is also possible that you might see how the situation happened. Keaton's highly determinate structuring of the long-shot format makes the likelihood of one's seeing how the event comes about far less tentative. In the Tati variation, a structure that facilitates curiosity and the possibility of discovery is adopted. In Keaton, the structure aims at provoking the experience of understanding

at a glance. Keaton propels the viewer's eye – virtually grabs it – and then leads it where it needs to be to grasp the dynamics of the unfolding event.

Provoking the experience of understanding at a glance is not requisite for representing comedy, even sight gag comedy. We have seen that such comedy works as long as the audience knows what is going on. Griffith-derived editing can provide knowledgeability. Keaton, in *The General*, is interested in engendering an experience of intelligibility not simply knowledgeability. To this end he employs long-shots including intensive use of foreground/background oppositions, assertive use of diagonal compositions, and high and low angulation.

In the opening shots of *The General*, we see Keaton's expertise in employing long-shots involving careful play between foreground and background. In the third shot of the film, we have a long-shot of the main street of Marietta, Georgia. In the foreground there is a horse and buggy. The driver is on foot, struggling to quiet his excited horse. Suddenly, from screen-left, *The General* pulls into the image. Here, we see the event of the train arrival narrated in terms of an effect that the train's movement has on the environment. Keaton does not just give us a shot that reports the fact the train has arrived; he also attempts to weave the arrival into a larger network of relations.

The faculty exercised by the arrival shot is not simply our ability to recognize that the train is arriving; understanding is also called for. The horse bucks, but why? It's a mystery until the train appears; the mystery dissolves in short order. The presence and sound of the train frightened the horse. The structure of the shot is such that we are directed to the two elements of the humorous anecdote of the troublesome horse.

First, the horse is alone in the foreground. In the background, there is a sparsely inhabited street. The horse and buggy are in a passageway between two fences. The central position of the buggy in the foreground, at a break in the regular patterns of the two fences, drives our attention to the buggy. Then, the movement of the train draws our attention to the background. Finally, the enormous train fills the background, almost completely blocking out a view of the town. Only the buggy and train remain as focal points of attention.

Though both foreground and background come into play in this shot, one can hardly fall back on Bazinian notions of ambiguity here. The fact that the foreground and background are employed sequentially makes the structure of the scene highly directive. Keaton, in this shot, even though it is in many ways merely an establishing shot, prompts the audience to more than just a recognition of the narrative fact that the train has arrived.

He uses the occasion of establishing the setting for narrative action in order to promote a problematic: why is the horse bucking? He presents the situation as *a process* to be understood rather than just as a fact – the arrival of the train – to be recognized. He uses sequential modulation of the foreground and background to assure that we notice the relevant causal transaction. If the shot began with both the train and the buggy, attention might have only been drawn to the train and not to the trouble with the horse. Representing the process in a *hysteron-proteron* format also facilitates the audience's grasp of the process by reversing the causal order of the event in the order of presentation of the key elements of the event.

Another example of an early use of a long-shot in *The General* occurs in the gag discussed in chapter 1 in which Annabelle Lee falls in line behind Johnnie and the two young town boys mimic him. Here again the very aim of the shot appears to be to show the audience how the event transpired, rather than merely that the event did transpire.

Johnnie and the boys are in the mid-ground of the shot. Their cadence evokes a parade. Appropriately, their eyes are riveted ahead with a frozen martial fixity. We see them march past a hedge. In the background, standing slightly behind the hedge and out of the line of the parade's fixed vision, we see Annabelle. As the parade passes, she lines up behind them. How Annabelle gets behind them, unbeknownst to Johnnie, is thus intelligible at a glance.

The shot of Johnnie chasing the hijacked General is another example of the use of the long-shot we are considering. Johnnie is running away from the camera. He is initially in the foreground. In the deep background of the shot, we see The General pulling away. Johnnie turns, beckoning his comrades to follow him. The comrades jog into the foreground of the shot and then stop. Johnnie runs on alone.

This gag can be easily imagined as a montage. We could have a shot of The General pulling off. This could be followed by a medium-shot. Johnnie and his comrades could show shock and run toward the camera. Cut back to the train. Then, cut to a tight medium-shot showing Johnnie's comrades halted. Perhaps, one of them waves his hand downward, signaling that he's disgruntled. Then, finish off the sequence with a tight, moving shot of Johnnie running alone. This format will make the gag work. The average audience, aware of editing conventions, will know that Johnnie is chasing the train all by himself. Yet they may not understand how this came about because the shots enumerated above could support a number of theories about why Johnnie is unaware that his comrades are no longer following him. For instance, it may be that the tracks swerve a great deal so that it is impossible for Johnnie

to see behind himself. Or, it may be that Johnnie is just too imprudent to ever check behind.

For Keaton, it is important that the audience comprehend the *how* of a situation. Keaton uses the long-shot to enable the audience to see how a state of affairs evolves. We see in the shot we are discussing that Johnnie, despite the fact that he is on a straightaway, is simply too fixated to ever check behind himself. We see his comrades in the foreground as he tears away from them into the background. Johnnie and his comrades are standing in between railroad tracks that lie in the center of the image. The perspectival pull of the tracks rivets our attention along this central axis in the frame, organizing the crucial elements of the scene along a perceptually almost irresistible trajectory of vision that makes the dramatic foreground/background juxtaposition of elements even more compelling.

The shot in which Johnnie gets drenched with water from the water tower is a striking case of Keaton's use of the long-shot for the sake of intelligibility. In preceding shots, the Union hijackers of The General have pulled away from the water tower leaving the spout open. Then, we see a shot of The Texas from behind. In the foreground, Johnnie is bending over in the cab. We also see the window of The Texas and notice that Johnnie is not looking out the window. In the background of the shot, in the upper, screen-right corner, we see water flooding out of the tower. The shot is executed so that we can see the railway running right under the tower.

All the elements of the gag are laid out on the right side of the screen so a narrow pathway of movement is set out for the eye. From the moving cab, we move along the track in the direction of the motion. This draws us deeper into the shot where we see the tower cascading water. The fact that the tower is framed by the corner of the screen adds emphasis.

The compelling structure of the composition directs us to the crucial elements of the gag, first and foremost, by setting out the two elements via a forceful foreground/background juxtaposition. Including a clear view of the track also facilitates the movement of the eye by drawing us into the depth of the shot. Setting the right edge of the frame proximately parallel to the stanchions of the water tower also highlights their vertical linear pattern in a way that elicits attention. Each of these strategies is a determinate compositional element that can modify and facilitate a complete and efficient scanning of the crucial elements of the situation.

Perception is directed from one point to the next in a highly selective way by means of formal compositional devices that give special salience to key elements of the water tower gag. Not only can the audience see all the

elements of this event, but those elements are laid out in such a highly determinate way that a rapid comprehension of the situation is abetted immensely. Moreover, once the composition sets off the basic elements of the gag, seeing how Johnnie's unfortunate drenching comes about is virtually unavoidable.

Johnnie is bent over. We can see out the window of the cab. As the train approaches the tower, we can literally see the water fall through the window. We also see Johnnie's line of movement as he stands up. We see him bypass the window in the front of the cab and instead move to lean out the window on the screen-right side of the cab, thereby unknowingly missing his last chance to notice the water coming and duck. As Johnnie leans out the side window of the cab, the water hits him squarely in the face.

The highly directive strategies employed in the formal layout of the water tower shot enhance one's comprehension of how the event happened by exactly honing in on the relevant factors in the situation. We not only know that Johnnie, from his point of view, was inexplicably drenched. We also understand what Johnnie does not, namely, the source of the water, and why Johnnie failed to see it coming. From the above, we note that a frequent device Keaton uses to direct audience attention in *The General* is exploitation of the possibility of play between the foreground and background of deep-focus long-shots. In Keaton, this device does not involve ambiguity. Rather he uses the visual categories of near and far in order to juxtapose elements. The formal opposition of foreground and background is used to lay out or align crucial elements of the scene, generally by placing one element in each zone. In this way, Keaton exploits the normal perceptual habit of looking close and then looking into the distance. As we have seen already, Keaton enhances this foreground/background play by employing added formal strategies to move the eye from one element to the next. One of the most important and frequent of these devices is diagonal composition in depth.

A number of the diagonally composed long-shots in *The General* rely heavily on the curves in the roadbed of the tracks over which the trains are racing. For instance, shortly after hijacking The General, the Union spies stop to remove a rail from the tracks in order to derail Southern pursuers. The shot that records this is a medium long-shot with the spies in the mid-foreground, and the recently stolen General in the background. The rail is being removed from the screen-right side of the tracks. The tracks sweep from just screen-right of the center of the image and proceed diagonally into the background. The curve of the tracks is slow but sure, the eye drawn along the uniform articulations that result from the intervals between the ties in the roadbed. The

General continues this diagonal pull into the depth, its huge bulk sprawling around the bend, enticing the eye deeper. The recession into depth along this diagonal moves the eye gently further. This formal arrangement serves the narrative quite well. First, the eye moves along the track to the derailing, and then the eye moves back to the train as the center of attention as the action shifts to the vehicle. One might hesitate to say that the formal arrangement here causes the viewer to move from the first point of interest to the second. However, the careful organization of elements in this instance does facilitate, perhaps by overdetermination, an extremely clear presentation of the subject.

Shortly after the spies remove the rail, we are shown a long-shot of Johnnie approaching the portion of track that has been tampered with. Johnnie is in the background. The stretch of track, as mentioned above, is curved. In the foreground, we see the rail missing. Johnnie comes around the bend, getting closer and closer to the gap in the rails. There is nothing to obscure his view of the tracks in front of him. He just keeps pumping away on the lever of the handcar, until he and the car go crashing onto the roadside.

The design of this shot is striking. In the foreground, the roadbed is visually dominant. It is quite large given its proximity to the camera. The eye darts to it. Again, the rhythmic recession of the ties of the tracks pulls us into the depth of the shot, past the absent rail, and then back even further to Johnnie. The natural path of vision here, as dictated by the formal arrangement of elements, leads from one crucial element of the situation, the missing rail, to the next, Johnnie. Editing can be eschewed in favor of a highly directive mode of composition which not only restricts details to what is relevant, but which also further enhances the legibility of those details by setting them in an arresting formal context that exploits foreground/background play, and which also enhances this juxtaposition by aligning the key details along a continuously articulated diagonal running from the front to the back of the shot.

From the above shot we can see that Keaton's use of the diagonal articulation of long-shots involves the same penchant for clarity of presentation that we saw in his particular use of foreground/background play. The rigorous structure of the shot is meant to give salience to the basic elements of the comic events so that the audience sees how the event transpired instead of merely knowing that it did transpire. The use of the diagonal in these shots also has another striking effect; namely, it gives the audience quite a dramatic sensation of depth as the distance from the foreground to the background of the shot is continuously annotated by the virtually measurable units of the spaces between the railroad ties.

The subject of depth is constantly reemphasized by the long-shots in *The General*. The long-shots with diagonal schemas are particularly important in this regard. On many occasions, when Keaton represents trains as stopped, the format he chooses is a long-shot from the side of the train with the entire train stretching diagonally from one of the lower corners of the frame backwards toward one of the upper corners. For instance, this method is used when The General first arrives in Marietta, when The General leaves Marietta, at the hijacking at Big Shanty at Kingston, where Johnnie enlists The Texas, and at many other stopping points along the chase. In all these many shots, as in the handcar shot, a strong sense of depth emerges given the constantly articulated recession. The uniformly spaced elements of ties and of railway cars in these shots are like dotted perspective lines, fostering a powerful sense of depth.

When I say that depth is the subject of these shots, I mean that depth and distance, as physical dimensions of the scene, are given prominence by the composition that Keaton favors. This is not to claim that there is no depth in shots by other comedians who do not employ the diagonal. Depth is there; it is a feature, just not an especially highlighted feature. In this regard, we see a special interest in Keaton not only for depicting action in a way that is intelligible at a glance, but also for engendering a sense of the scale of the action by prompting the audience to exercise its faculty for distance judgment. Keaton's concentration on the subject of physical judgment, which is presented to a passive audience through some of the gags and feats in his films, is dealt with in these diagonal compositions in *The General* by way of activating the audience's spatial intuitions.

An interesting use of the railroad tracks that more or less falls into the category of diagonal composition occurs in the shot in which Johnnie realizes that the Confederate troops are not attached to The Texas. Initially, this begins as a medium-shot. The camera seems to be mounted on the bridge that runs from the cab of the locomotive to the cowcatcher. In the foreground of the shot we see Johnnie staring ahead. We know that the troops are not attached to the train and we know that Johnnie is unaware of this. There is a certain comic reaction to Johnnie's confidence, given that it is groundless. In the screen-left background of the shot, we see trees lining the roadway. We can also see a receding line of the tips of the railroad ties that make up the roadbed. Initially we cannot see the track. Because the rails are straight, we cannot see behind the train. Given the position of the camera, the locomotive and the timbercar completely block out the track behind. The effect is somewhat like that which Keaton achieves in *The Playhouse* when Big Bill

Roberts camouflages the entire line of Zouaves by standing in front of them with his enormous bulk. Since the stationary camera can't see around corners, it is easy to interfere with the sheaf of light rays that is being delivered to the audience by interposing objects in that sheaf.

In the shot in *The General* the blocking effect is only momentary. Suddenly, the train hits a bend in the track and as the locomotive and lumbercar snake around that bend, the lumbercar jostles out of the camera's path of vision and the open track behind The Texas comes into view, pulling off diagonally toward the upper, screen-right corner. The audience again sees evidence of what it already knows: there is nothing behind Johnnie; he has lost his army.

The foreground/background tension is comically exquisite with Johnnie, confident yet totally ignorant, counterpoised against the devastating absence of his confederates. Eventually, Johnnie turns around, briefly pausing before poking his head out of the side window of the locomotive. Pausing again, he then thrusts his entire torso out of the train. He turns his face toward the camera in a look of disbelief that gradually metamorphoses into a mixture of anger and determination.

The use of deep-focus, foreground/background play and diagonal composition in this gag are hardly necessary for the gag to be effective. A much easier mode of representing the event would be to break the scene up into four shots. There could be an establishing shot from the side of the train showing the locomotive and the lumbercar with nothing behind them. Then, there could be a close-shot of Johnnie turning around, followed by a point-of-view shot involving the camera moving over an empty track. Then, we could return to another close-shot of Johnnie in order to catch his comical disgruntlement.

Alternatively, the shot might have been done in a single shot from alongside the train. Here, the camera would pull up from behind the train, at first registering the absence of the troops and then passing by the cab of the train at just that moment when Johnnie leans out the window and realizes that he is alone. This variation of the shot might end with Johnnie turning forlornly toward the camera.

What is achieved by Keaton's way of handling the scene as opposed to the suggested alternatives? The answer has to do with that swerve in the track. The audience understands how in the geographical context of the situation it is physically possible for Johnnie to learn that the troops are not attached to the train.

In the montage we suggested, the audience would know that Johnnie learned that he was alone. But they would not know how he was able to see from

the cab that he was alone. It is a notorious fact about point-of-view shots that, though they tell you what a character sees, they do not supply evidence of how he manages to see what he sees. There is a noteworthy example of this in Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948). Kirby York (John Wayne), aided by binoculars, sees Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda), get killed in a box canyon. Or, at least, this is what the point-of-view shot establishes. One would have thought that given the distance, the narrowness of the canyon opening, and all the smoke and fury of battle, this feat of vision on York's part to be unbelievably extraordinary. Given the point-of-view shot format, we understand that York sees Thursday die. But we have no idea how this incredible feat is accomplished.

In our hypothetical, alternative single-shot method for the relevant scene from *The General*, the audience does see that Johnnie learns he is alone; it does not just know that he learns this. However, in our alternative single-shot variation, the audience does not see how it is physically possible for Johnnie to learn what he does. Keaton's actual approach makes the swerve in the track absolutely perspicuous. Shooting from the side would, in all probability, flatten out such a subtle curve. But, even if the shooting angle didn't obliterate the curve, it would still require a somewhat thoughtful viewer to make the connection between the curve and the possibility of Johnnie's rude awakening. The viewer would have to reconceptualize the lateral scene frontally.

Keaton's approach, of course, starts frontally. To account for why he does this we have to go beyond what is required to make the gag work, for, as we have outlined, there are at least two other formal structures that will probably make the gag work. Keaton's choice has more behind it than merely comedy: he wishes to engender a particular cognitive/perceptual state in his audience – the state that we have dubbed "seeing how."

"Seeing how" is perhaps an awkward locution. For that reason, it may be better to refer to the effect of Keaton's highly determinate composition as "visible intelligibility," where this is understood as a situation which one comprehends at a glance in terms of its causal processes. So far we have found that it is fruitful to explicate Keaton's highly determinate long-shot compositions in terms of his desire to facilitate visible intelligibility in the situations he depicts. The fruitfulness of this explication can be measured by the large number of shots we have been able to explicate under this concept. By large, I don't mean to suggest that this explanation covers the majority of shots in the film. I don't even mean to claim that I'm handling every long-shot in the film; there are many merely establishing shots. By large I mean there

are a significant number of highly determinately composed long-shots in *The General* especially compared to the works of other comic directors, including Tati. For that significant group of shots, the explication in terms of visible intelligibility seems more compellingly appropriate than competing explanations.

Intelligible Physical Relationships

What is interesting about many of the examples that we have so far considered is not only that they promote visible intelligibility *per se*, but that they promote visible intelligibility about physical relationships and physical processes. Keaton's composition makes crucial physical elements and relationships in a situation salient. For instance, the curve in the track in relation to the movement of the train is made prominent in the shot that depicts Johnnie's realization that he is alone. In this light, we can say that an important feature of Keaton's composition in *The General* is the way that it can sensitize the audience to key physical variables in the situations being portrayed.

To consider yet another example of Keaton's diagonal composition, recall the scene in which Johnnie, again in command of The General, topples the Union telegraph pole. The scene is portrayed in several shots including a long-shot of Johnnie hurling a rope over the telegraph wires, and then tying the rope to The General, plus another long-shot of The General starting. The third shot in this chain is especially interesting. It is taken from the top of a freightcar that is attached to The General. In the lower screen-left corner of the frame we see a cleat with the rope wrapped around it. The rope stretches diagonally across the frame upwards toward the screen-right corner. It is connected to the telegraph pole. As the train moves, the pole crashes onto the track. Keaton then cuts to a shot of Union troopers futilely attempting to wire ahead to their advance positions. Then Keaton returns to the shot from the top of the boxcar; Johnnie Gray enters the frame with an ax in hand. We see the telegraph pole being dragged along the track. Johnnie severs the rope with his ax and we see the pole lying still on the track. What is important about the above shot of the cleat and the pole is its extraneousness to the narrative. The narrative would be perfectly served by a single lateral shot of The General tearing down the telegraph pole. The first shot set-up in this interpolation could have sufficed here. However, Keaton adds this extra set-up of the cleat and the pole. Why? He clearly conceives of physical work processes as intrinsic to his viewpoint of the situation. There

is no comic effect here, nor is key narrative information being added. Neither comic nor narrative functionality explains the shot. Rather, postulating that Keaton is committed to concentrating on the physical process dimension of situations seems a more apt explanation.

The way that Keaton supplies this additional dimension on the toppling of the telegraph pole is also worthy of note. The forceful diagonal composition, with the cleat bracketed by the edge of the frame and the rope strikingly taut, leading the eye across the visual field, directs us almost sequentially to the key physical variables within the physical process. Because of his interest in physical processes, Keaton shows us the whole event, including much more detail than is required to make a simple comic narrative function. Furthermore, he shows us the physical process via a compositional structure that emphasizes the crucial physical elements of the situation in such a way that we understand the physical unfolding of the scene at a glance. The composition renders the process visibly intelligible immediately.

The use of the rope in the above shot is highly reminiscent of the scene in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* where Willie Jr. rescues King's daughter. King's daughter is on the roof of a house. The house floats next to the steamboat. Willie throws a line with a grappling hook onto the house. He climbs across and then attempts to inch his way back to the steamboat along the rope with King's daughter hanging on his neck. Two of the set-ups used to portray this situation recall the use of the diagonal spoken of above. One shot, taken from the boat side of the action, diagonally aligns the physical elements of the action. Then, Keaton reverses the action to the house side of things. In both shots what is emphasized by the diagonal is the rope and its anchor points. That is, the crucial physical elements of the event are emphatically advanced as primary features of the situation for the audience to attend to.

Editing, of course, enhances the salience in these elements by enabling the audience to view the same elements from systematically different viewpoints, thus engendering a felt sense of greater familiarity and intelligibility. One feels one has a better grasp of the environment due to the reverse-field cutting. The systematic alternation of the same strikingly diagonally articulated event also activates one's sense of depth, drawing the audience into a context that engages its faculties of physical judgment. Moreover, the use of the diagonal in *The General* seems to parallel its use in this sequence of *Steamboat Bill Jr.* In both, the aim appears to be to use highly directive compositions in such a way as to put the audience in a "seeing how" frame of mind.

Examples of Keaton's use of diagonal composition in *The General* can be multiplied handily. In the shot where The Texas pushes the burning boxcar

from the enclosed bridge, Keaton diagonally sprawls the locomotive and the freightcar across the screen in such a way that the point of contact between the two vehicles is placed in the center of the screen so that one can see how the slope of the cowcatcher of The Texas rides under the carriage of the burning car, pushing it along.

Keaton also employs a diagonal composition in the shot showing the disabling of the retreating Union train during the battle. In the first shot of this retreat, Keaton includes two boxcars in the image of the withdrawal of the train. The cars pull away from the camera diagonally. The shot is also somewhat low, chopping off the top of the boxcar nearest the camera. The diagonal nature of the shot draws the eye to the last boxcar, while the lowness of the shot leads the eye to the wheels. A cannon shell hits the wheels, crumbling the boxcar to the track. The composition here directs the eye exactly to the relevant physical point in the action.

In the next shot, Keaton continues the diagonal approach by taking an extreme long-shot of the entire train starting with the locomotive in the lower screen-right corner with the line of boxcars aligned higher and higher into the upper screen-left quadrant. Here, the shot emphasizes the great mass of the train jammed against the shattered axle of the last boxcar that has been so effectively bombarded. The interrelations of the scene are thus strikingly arrayed via a highly determinate composition that makes the situation physically intelligible at a glance.

Another compositional strategy in the long-shots in *The General* is the recurrent use of high and low angulation. An important example of a high-angle shot has already been discussed in our analysis of the gag in which Johnnie Gray attempts to run the boxcar onto a siding. There, the camera is mounted high on the lumbercar. We see Johnnie Gray busy in the cab of the train. He is in the center of the foreground of the shot. Off in the background, in the upper screen-left corner, we see the wayward boxcar on the parallel track. The rectangular boxcar echoes the edge of the frame while the rectangular window of the cab sets up a third resounding echo. We move naturally through this formal pattern. Johnnie is bending down under the window, fiddling with this or that. The high-angle shot not only shows us the key elements of the situation, but also shows how the boxcar winds up in front of The Texas again, and why Johnnie is insensible to this sequence of events.

Editing could have easily rendered the event. One shot from the side of the moving vehicles, a close-shot of a preoccupied Johnnie, a shot of the point where the tracks converge, and a return to the lateral shot of the boxcar sliding ahead would have done the trick. But Keaton is not interested in the

easiest way of hammering home the gag; rather he is interested in the formal structure which will facilitate the audience's seeing how the physical situation yielded the results it did.

In the second part of the boxcar gag, shot angulation again is central. Unbeknownst to Johnnie, the boxcar goes careening off the track when it strikes a piece of debris the Union spies have thrown there. The shot that represents this is a low-angle long-shot. Here, angulation substitutes for editing in terms of selecting the relevant aspects of the situation. The low angulation directs the audience to the track and to the wheels of the boxcar. We anticipate and then effortlessly understand how the crash occurred. Rather than starting with a close-shot of the tie on the track and then shifting to a standard lateral medium long-shot of the crash, Keaton employs a single long-shot with low angulation so that the eye follows the subtly rising trajectory of the low angle to the center of the screen where, on the track, we find the tie that overturns the car. At a glance, the whole event is comprehensible because the low angle immediately gives prominence to the tie and sensitizes us to the key physical variable in the situation.

The shot in which Johnnie is pinned under a railroad tie on the cowcatcher of The Texas provides another example of the way the overhead shot sensitizes us to the relevant physical feature of the situation. Here the overhead shot emphasizes the weight of the railroad tie, which will be crucial when Johnnie hurls the tie on his chest onto the tie on the track, thereby catapulting it out of his path. In this way the overhead shot of Johnnie pinned to the cow-catcher emphasizes the dimension of the railroad tie that is crucial for the physical process that is being depicted.

This is not to deny that the audience is aware of the weight of the tie in the level-angle shot of Johnnie pinned on the cowcatcher. Rather what is claimed is that Keaton adds the high-angle shot to the level-angle shot which on its own is perfectly suitable for narrating the gag. Keaton adds the high-angle shot to heighten, enhance, and emphasize the matter of weight in the scene, thereby sensitizing the audience to the key physical variable in the situation. What the audience is sensitized to is exactly that property of the tie that Johnnie must concentrate on for his "catapult insight." Seen in this light, the high angle anticipates the determinant factor of Johnnie's reconceptualization of his predicament.

The preceding shot from *The General* is reminiscent of the overhead shot in *The Navigator* in which Rollo Treadway bombards the attacking cannibals with coconuts. The cannibals have laid a tree against the side of the ocean-liner intending to use it as a ladder to climb onto the deck of the ship. The

overhead shot that depicts the battle gives particular salience to the length of the tree, and to the distance between the oceanliner and the canoe of the marauding natives. The tree runs down the center of the screen acting as a virtual measuring rod of the distance between the oceanliner and the canoe. Our spatial intuitions are titillated, drawing our attention to the fact that the tree is just long enough so that, if it were pushed from the side of the ship, it would arc over and topple down, crashing the cannibals' boat.

Because of the overhead shot, we anticipate the insight that Rollo is about to have. The overhead shot emphasizes the length of the tree whereas a shot from the side of the ship would emphasize the function of the tree as a ladder. In a manner of speaking, the overhead angulation of the shot performs for the audience that transformational operation of reorganizing the elements of the visual field that Rollo must perform mentally.

Here we see that the condition of intelligibility as a cognitive state for the audience is a close analogue to the operation of concrete intelligence on the part of the character. Angulation is a literal means to reorient the visual field. This serves as an analogue to the processes of mental reorganization that Keaton's successful adaptation gags presuppose. Thus, Keaton's highly determinate compositions may be seen as a means of returning, at the level of style, to the concern with concrete intelligence that dominates his gags. The function of Keaton's highly determinate compositions seems to be to elicit extreme audience awareness and sensitivity to the key physical elements of physical processes. This is not undertaken simply for comic functionality since Keaton's attention to physical detail occurs in contexts that are noncomic. Rather, Keaton gives salience to key physical details through highly determinate compositions in order to engender in the audience an alertness and concrete sensitivity to the environment, which is what characters lack in failure gags and which is what characters have in abundance when they excel. The visual intelligibility manifested in Keaton's cinematic style corresponds neatly to the theme of concrete intelligence that recurs in the action throughout the film.

We have cited foreground/background juxtaposition, diagonal composition, and angle elevation as major means in Keaton's highly determinate manipulations of the long-shot. As our analyses of shots so far should bear out, we are not claiming that these strategies are the only ones that Keaton employs to give prominence to key elements of the situations that he depicts. For instance, on occasion, we have cited echoing structures as further determinations of the composition added to angulated, foreground/background, and diagonal composition.

Furthermore, there are strategies that result in highly determinate long-shot compositions that we have not discussed because they often occur once and thus are not classifiable in an overarching category such as diagonal compositions. An example of this sort is the shot in which the Union spies, sitting atop a high railroad bridge, drop lumber on Johnnie Gray in The Texas below. Here, the shot has an incredible vertical emphasis. The extremes of the vertical positions of the shot are employed as the only centers of narrative interest. The extreme high point of the shot and the low point are respectively occupied by The General and The Texas. An imaginary perpendicular line could be drawn from one to the other. This striking geometrical array of crucial elements gives them visible intelligibility.

A simple objection might be offered against the preceding interpretation. It might be claimed that Keaton really uses the long-shot because of the scale of his comedy and not because of his desire to instill the initiation of visible intelligibility in his audiences. This alternative seems ill-advised. First, there is no reason to suppose that, just because a film is about a train, it must be developed predominantly by means of long-shots. Several establishing shots of the train might initiate a train narrative, after which the narrative could be depicted by the use of medium-shots and close-shots. It might be objected that, to do the kinds of gags Keaton employs in *The General*, the long-shot is called for. However, as we have demonstrated in several of our analyses, montage solutions are available that would make Keaton's gags work. It is not the scale of the gag that offers an account of Keaton's use of the long-shot; something else is required.

Another weakness with the scale objection to our thesis is that, even if it explains the use of the long-shot, it gives no account of Keaton's highly determinate employment of that device. It hardly covers all the data to be examined. If it went on to account for the determinate composition in terms of visible intelligibility, then it would hardly count as an objection to our theory.

I do not claim to be the only commentator to have realized the correlation between Keaton's use of the long-shot and the way this technique elucidates the processes it records. Gerald Mast writes:

> Keaton favored the far shot not only to juxtapose his individual body with the natural universe but also to provide a distant view of how a particular mechanism works. The cinematic far shot provides the means to see both cause and effect, to see all the relevant elements, to illuminate the total process of a mechanism. And that is why Keaton's far shots are so memorable and so revealing – not just a little man on the vast plains in *Go West* or a little man

falling from a rope bridge in *The Paleface* or leaping from train car to train car in *The General*, but the principle of showing how a totality works.

In both The *Haunted House* (1921) and *The High Sign*, a Keaton far shot reveals all four rooms of a house (one wall cut away) and exactly how the chase progresses from one to another. In *The Navigator* (1924), a far shot reveals exactly how a ship's hugeness can keep two lone passengers from finding each other.[13]

I certainly agree with these observations of Mast, and find much in them that is compatible with my position on Keaton's use of the long-shot. However, my position is even more refined since I have cited recurring strategies within the long-shot that facilitate the kind of intelligibility that Mast speaks of. Though acknowledging an undeniable convergence between Mast's formulation and my own, I must also point out that I part company with Mast in what he counts as the significance of Keaton's use of the long-shot – a means to show how a total process works as a mechanism. Mast describes the physical processes as mechanisms, holding that the motivation of Keaton's far shots is to turn "human processes into mechanisms."[14] Mast attempts to assimilate Keaton's shooting style into a Bergsonian perspective which cites a constant correlation between what is laughable and the intrusion of the mechanical in human behavior. He holds that it is the basis of Keaton's comic endeavor to evoke laughter through the synthesis of man and machine in such a way that the mechanical predominates, thus causing laughter. Since not every case of long-shots that shows how things work in *The General* is laughable, we should reject Mast's analysis of the significance of Keaton's use of the long-shot. For instance, Keaton shows us how Johnnie Gray has anchored one end of the rope on the boxcar cleat to pull over the telegraph pole. In this case, it neither seems appropriate to claim that rendering the process intelligible is to render it a mechanism, nor does it seem that the situation is humorous in any way.

Thematic Significance

In order to understand the thematic significance of Keaton's highly determinate use of the long-shot in *The General*, I turn, like Mast, to the iconography of the film. However, I do not turn to a simple, Bergsonian characterization of that iconography, but rather to the more comprehensive, more specific, and more elaborately structured interpretation of that iconography that I offered in chapter 1.

In chapter 1, I claimed that the major theme of *The General* concerned an aesthetic examination of the role of concrete intelligence in the manipulation of things. This examination was exemplified by the behavior of the characters, notably Johnnie. At a stylistic level, we are now faced with making thematic sense of a highly determinate use of long-shot composition which seems directed toward rendering physical processes visibly intelligible in a salient way.

At the level of the iconography, concrete intelligence is the theme. At the level of style, concrete intelligibility appears as the consistent effect of the major recurring representational formats. How are the two related?

The relationship between concrete intelligence and concrete intelligibility does not seem hard to divine. The success and failure gags present the audience with representations of different ways of responding to the physical processes in the environment. The highly determinate long-shot compositions of *The General* are stylistic manipulations by which the audience participates in a certain way of seeing the physical processes of the environment. The theme is concrete intelligence in both style and content, though in one case this faculty is exercised by the character, and in the other case it is provoked in the viewer.

In terms of content, the conditions of concrete intelligence are manifested in action; the audience is passive in its reception of the subject matter. At the stylistic level, the audience is participating; it adopts a perspective on the action that is maximally legible in terms of the physical processes and factors involved. Composition, through highly determinate long-shots, embodies a viewpoint on the environment that is sensitive to relevant, ongoing physical processes. The camera, here, organizes the visual field in a manner that is virtually, unavoidably conducive to the understanding of the ongoing events in the environment. The camera incarnates the kind of perception that characters should but don't have in the failure gags concerning concrete intelligence. At the same time, the camera replicates the kind of attentiveness the characters do have in the success gags and feats concerned with concrete intelligence. Concrete intelligence as a theme that the audience witnesses passively in the behavior of characters is the active, participatory equivalent of the stylistic theme of the visible intelligibility of physical processes which the audience engages in through the mediation and promptings of Keaton's highly determinate use of the long-shot. Keaton's visual style promotes the kind of perspective on the physical environment that an engineer might have and thereby encourages the activation of a comparable species of intelligence in the viewer, namely, a variety of concrete intelligence.

By means of the concepts of concrete intelligence and concrete, visible intelligibility, we can explicate a uniform preoccupation underlying both the iconographic content and the long-shot style of *The General*. The relationship I am postulating involves a doubling relation between the character's experience, which concerns concrete intelligence, and the audience's experience, which *vis-à-vis* the long-shot display of processes, concerns visible intelligibility. Concrete intelligence and concrete intelligibility are related as passive and active refrains of a single preoccupation, which involves sensitivity to and understanding of the ongoing physical processes of the environment. Characters either show this sensitivity or fail to show it. The audience is led to exercise this faculty of understanding through compositions that select and array the significant physical variables in a salient way. Keaton makes geometers of us all.

Concrete intelligence is a matter for the character who fails to adapt if he does not constantly reorient himself to the changing environment, and who succeeds in adaptation if he is able to reorient himself to the environment. The process of organizing visual information is also a theme of the style of the film, which lays out the pertinent visual data in ways that facilitate immediate audience insight into ongoing physical processes. The concrete intelligence of the audience is thereby prompted and engaged by compositional formats that prime the audience's cognitive faculties, leading one to an immediate insight into the processes at hand. Keaton examines the conditions of concrete intelligence through the success and failure gags of the character. The theme is also developed at the level of style, which exercises the audience's faculty for concrete understanding by means of highly determinate long-shot compositions that facilitate the audience's comprehension of how the processes happen. Here Keaton seems concerned with engendering a very definite cognitive state in the audience, one in which the audience sees how events happen rather than a cognitive state where the audience simply knows that an event has happened. What Keaton's compositions aim at appears to be to produce a flash of understanding in the audience, thereby doubling, at the level of the audience's experience, the motif in the success gag of the character's insight into physical interrelationships.

Postulating a thematic unity of style and content in *The General* between the iconography of the gags and feats, on the one hand, and the highly determinate long-shot compositions, on the other hand, places us in a position to transfer, almost as an inheritance, certain explanatory dimensions of our account of the iconography to an elucidation of Keaton's long-shot style. We suggested that part of the power of Keaton's iconography in *The General* was the way it was compensatory. That is, Keaton's imagery, to a certain extent,

exemplified, celebrated, and valorized certain dimensions of concrete intelligence that were no longer part of, or at least were a diminishing part of, the everyday experience of twentieth-century, white-collar society. This compensatory gratification can also be attributed to the highly determinate long-shot composition of *The General* insofar as that composition makes it possible for the audience to exercise a faculty for concrete intelligence that is either a declining or extinct part of the audience's everyday work experience. In the short time of the film, the audience is presented again and again with occasions for insights into the workings and physical interrelations of things. The visible intelligibility of the shots reawakens an aspect of intelligence that our service-oriented culture leaves dormant in most workers.

This possibility of compensatory gratification is not an invariant causal effect of Keaton's composition. Rather, it is a possible response to the structure of the imagery which the highly determinate composition favorably affords, but does not necessitate. Moreover, that this style promoted compensatory pleasure can sensibly be attributed to audiences in the twenties, many of whom had already lost the everyday experience of exercising concrete intelligence in their work. Compensatory gratification can also act as a source of pleasure for our contemporary audiences who are even less practiced in the daily employment of concrete intelligence. The highly determinate long-shot compositions engender pleasure by the way they intelligibly represent physical processes. A dimension of experience, the faculty for concrete intelligence, is animated again, and regaled with the possibility of insight after insight into the workings of things. The iconography of concrete intelligence, exemplified in the behavior of characters, is reinforced by the viewer's experience involving the felt exercise of concrete intelligence. Keaton's preoccupation with physical interrelationships informs both style and content in *The General*. Culturally, the way in which a concern with physical interrelations compensates for an absence in twentieth-century work makes *The General* an emblem for an earlier industrial civilization in which creativity and insight in relation to things were a common source of satisfaction.

Because we have extended our analysis of Keaton's iconography to Keaton's single-shot composition, it may be objected that our argument is incomplete. We noted two modalities in Keaton's iconography: (1) failures at adaptation which correspond to character fixation and (2) successes at adaptation that correspond to character insight. In the analysis of Keaton's composition, however, I have only considered salient organizations of the visual field which can be identified as audience correlates to insightful character organizations of the visual field. But shouldn't we also expect there to be stylistic correlates

to the failure imagery in the film if the model is to be comprehensively extrapolated from Keaton's imagery to his compositional strategies?

To answer this question, it should be admitted that had I discovered a string of compositions in *The General* that corresponded to the failure gags, I would have claimed this discovery as supportive of my hypothesis as it further systematized the data of the film. However, there is no reason this explanatory model for the iconography has to correspond to my explanation of the composition point-for-point. It might be an added nicety if the correspondence were a point-for-point correlation of each feature of the analysis of the iconography with a related feature in the composition, but this is not necessary.

Exact symmetry of iconographic and compositional analysis would be intellectually dazzling. But there is no reason to postulate that all works are designed so intensively. My analysis respects the data of the film; there are compositional correlates to the insights, but not to the failure gags. Our explanation is not symmetric because the film is not symmetric in this way. This is not a limitation unless one has prior expectations that analyses and the masterpieces they dissect must display point-by-point symmetries between style and content. Such an expectation seems completely unhistorical.

For the reader who does place some weight on symmetric correspondences between content and style explications, I can say one thing in favor of my analysis. In Keaton films other than *The General*, we can isolate elements of compositional style that do correspond to Keaton's failure gags. Keaton's failure gags presuppose that the character is fixated on one, generally misconceived, picture of how the environment stands. Such characters have a misleading organization of the elements of the visual field.

Similarly, sometimes in Keaton films other than *The General* the audience is presented with shots that provoke misunderstanding of the situation at hand because the shot organizes information in a misleading way.

Cops opens with a shot which leads the audience to believe that the character is in jail while actually he is behind a cast-iron gate. The closeness of the shot is misleading; it organizes the information in a way inappropriate to locating characters behind gates. We might call these occlusion set-ups since they are composed in a way that blocks a correct understanding of the shot.

In *The Blacksmith*, the shot of the chestnut tree also subverts our expectations, while in *The Navigator* we are as misled as Rollo about the number on the pier, due to the angle of the shot *vis-à-vis* the gate.

The point of the shots in Keaton that trick the audience is that such shots represent faulty organizations of the elements of the visual field. These

occlusion set-ups correspond to the faulty perceptual habits and fixated misconstruals of the characters that lead to failures of adaptation. These shots also contrast with the types of shots we have analyzed in *The General* where the organization of elements is such as to provoke a correct, insightful grasp of the situation. The shots of *The General* that we have discussed correspond to Keaton's success imagery, and contrast with shots in other Keaton films that correlate with Keaton's failure imagery. So my model for the explanation of Keaton's gags is systematically expandable to Keaton's style if we consider all Keaton's silent films and not just *The General*.

On the other hand, my analysis cannot be faulted because *The General* does not contain any of the kinds of misleading shots previously cited. For even the critic with a predilection for explanations of the most elaborate structural variety will acknowledge that not every permutation of an artist's structural variations has to appear in every one of his works. It is enough that our analysis of the iconography successfully predicts stylistic correlates to both the success and failure imagery across Keaton's *oeuvre*.

Editing

Shifting from the composition of *The General* to the editing, one discovers in the latter the same lucidity concerning physical processes that was evident in the former. One technique that accounts for the terrific clarity in the depiction of physical processes is the sedulous way that Keaton breaks down a process into a careful, step-by-step causal analysis of the event. This technique, let us call it causal ordering, is hardly Keatonesque; virtually every film, one would hazard, has some causal analysis. What seems Keatonesque about the causal ordering in *The General* is not that the technique is unique, but rather that the volume at which it occurs is quite distinctive. Many films contain causal orderings of events. In *The General*, these causal orderings are very often not merely operating on events, but on very specific events, namely physical processes or actions involving physical manipulations. Few films seem so completely devoted to laying out incessantly the causal underpinnings of the physical events depicted. In the second and fourth parts of the film, it appears that predominant stretches of narration seem to be based on an action/reaction model of cause and effect with nary a stray shot for a colorful detail or a touch of psychology.

Keaton hardly invented causal ordering, but the intensive use he makes of the technique colors one's experience of the film quite profoundly. It

gives one a sense of it as a virtual clockwork of causes and effects. Typical examples of causal orderings are rampant in the film. For instance, the Union hijackers stop The General and run over to a telegraph pole. There is a cut to a medium-shot of a telegraph operator banging the telegraph key. Cut back to the hijackers; the wires are severed. Cut back to the telegraph operator; there is something wrong with the mechanism. Or, the hijackers remove a rail from the roadbed. There is a shot of Johnnie pursuing on his handcar. Then, there is a shot of The General escaping. These two shots establish that sufficient time has elapsed for Johnnie to have reached the sabotaged portion of track. Finally, there is a shot of Johnnie approaching that section of roadbed and derailing.

Again and again, the editing traces a strict process of cause and effect. In a medium-shot from inside the boxcar in the repossessed General, Johnnie knocks out the back of the boxcar, littering the path of the pursuing Yankees with dangerous debris. In the next shot, we can see the Union troops removing the obstacle. This shot is followed by a medium-long-shot from Johnnie's perspective; he is heaving barrels and boxes from the freightcar onto the track. This is followed by a deep-focus long-shot that perspicuously records a line of barriers from the foreground of the shot to the background where the Union troopers struggle to clear the track. The rhythm of the sequence is cause/effect, cause/effect. The intensive use of this causal ordering method of narration focuses the subject succinctly on the process dimension of physical interactions, while also fostering in the audience a detailed comprehension about the fictional environment as almost every event is laid out in respect to its causal genesis. The film narration becomes an almost constant process of explanation, detailing the why and wherefore of every physical process and manipulation.

Through the addition of striking details that clarify the relevant ongoing physical process, Keaton contributes an added degree of lucidity to his development of the causal ordering technique. For instance, when Johnnie pulls up the switchtrack to permanently sidetrack his Union pursuers, Keaton uses two shots. The first shows Johnnie in a medium long-shot behind The General. He attaches a chain from the back of the tender of The General to the switchtrack and then runs over and pushes the lever that switches the track. He waves to Annabelle, urging her to start The General so as to bend the switchtrack permanently in the wrong direction. Then, Keaton cuts to a close-shot of the switchtrack being bent into the wrong position. This second shot shows the audience how the switchtrack is bent out of shape. However, from the point of view of the narrative, the shot is extraneous. The first shot

would have sufficed to convey the narrative information that Johnnie was preparing to sidetrack his Union pursuers. Yet, Keaton adds a shot, thereby enriching our comprehension of the causal process by showing us exactly how the desired condition was effected. Keaton's way here is to supply further details so that the audience not only knows what is going on, but also sees how it happened. Perfect clarity on the matter of physical interactions is Keaton's motivation.

The switchtrack example is also analogous to the earlier example we offered concerning Johnnie Gray's dismantling of the Union telegraph wires. That sequence begins with a long-shot of Johnnie hurling a rope over the telegraph lines, and then attaching the rope to the top of a freightcar. Next there is a shot of The General starting up, followed by a shot that we have already analyzed, of the rope diagonally extending from the top of the boxcar to the telegraph pole. The pole is toppled. After this, we see a shot of Union troops futilely attempting to wire ahead. We then return to the third set-up in this shot interpolation as Johnnie cuts the telegraph pole loose. In this causal ordering the third set-up is extraneous from a narrative point of view. Keaton might have returned to the camera set-up of the first shot to record the telegraph pole's crash, but instead he includes the third set-up, thereby adding a significant detail to our picture enabling us to see precisely how the physical process emerged.

The causal ordering technique as well as the addition of illuminating details is not special to Keaton though he executes this conventional technique masterfully. He also uses it to promote his major effect, that is, clarity about physical processes. Of course, the technique of causal ordering with striking detail does not always result in giving the audience the sensation of a flash of intelligibility that the composition promotes. Consequently, we would not attribute the importance of this technique to a doubling of the experience of the characters and the audience. Nevertheless, even though the flash of immediate comprehension is often missing in the causal orderings, the topic is still the examination and understanding of physical processes. The causal ordering technique performs a compensatory function by concentrating on a dimension of experience, such as interaction with tools, raw materials, nature, and industrial objects, that was diminishing in the broader work culture as well as being a rare film topic. Furthermore, the intense lucidity about physical processes afforded by Keaton's use of the causal ordering framework compensates for two elements: (1) the lack of attentiveness to the exact chain of physical causation in most action films; and (2) the lack of the need to understand the exact causal interrelations in twentieth-century work.

A technique that is more distinctively Keaton's than the causal ordering format is his variation of the field/reverse-field trope. In *The General*, on several occasions, Keaton reverses the field of a long-shot. What seems distinctive about this technique is that it is a long-shot that is being reversed. Everyone employs the shot–countershot convention for interpolating close-shots in the representation of dialogue, but, in *The General*, Keaton occasionally uses this device with long-shots. This technique does not appear as prevalently in the work of Chaplin, Lloyd, or Langdon. This may be because this particular structure is closely connected with the characteristically Keatonesque adaptation of the long-shot, that is, with editing functioning as a means to accentuate the foreground/background juxtapositions of elements by systematically rotating them in relation to their screen position and prominence.

An example of the sort of shot interpolation that I have in mind occurs when Johnnie first acquires The Texas. Southern troops crowd on to the flatcar behind the timbercar of The Texas. This shot is diagonally organized. In the lower, screen-right quadrant of the image, we see the cab of The Texas. Stretching diagonally upwards in screen position and backwards in photographic space is the flatcar the troops are on.

In the far background, we see the stationhouse of the Kingston depot. Johnnie sticks his body out the cab window to see if the flatcar is loaded, and if all is ready. Keaton then cuts to the reverse of the first shot. Flipping the diagonal, the flatcar loaded with troops is now in the foreground in the lower screen-right quadrant while the locomotive is in the background. Whereas previously the camera was in front of and slightly to the side of the locomotive, now it is behind the locomotive and the flatcar. As the locomotive starts, a gap grows between the edge of the flatcar and the locomotive. Johnnie has forgotten to attach the two. The flatcar stays stationary while the locomotive plunges ahead. Some soldiers leap from the flatcar and shout to Johnnie, but to no avail, given the presumably great noise of the chugging engine. Off Johnnie goes alone and falsely confident.

Several factors seem to justify Keaton's way of representing the above scene. Clearly, the scene could have been depicted with one shot from the side of the train, but Keaton chooses to use two. One reason for this seems to be his desire to portray the event from behind. This approach might be preferred because it underscores the theme of Johnnie's departure from the Southern outpost as he is also moving away from the audience. Thus, the shot from behind serves to emphasize the departure theme since we are in the same orientation as the Confederates *vis-à-vis* the train.

Shooting from behind also serves to emphasize in a crucial way the distance between Johnnie and the depot. The uniformly articulated tracks provide a palpable measure of the growing distance between Johnnie and the Confederates. Since the scene is about Johnnie inexorably moving away from his cohorts, shooting from behind vivifies the event and engages the spectator's spatial intuitions by providing a felt sense of the distance that Johnnie is from his allies.

The same shot can also elicit a sense of audience participation because of the way in which the shot gives prominence to the motion of the locomotive versus the stasis of the flatcar. The diagonal composition draws the eye along the side of the train emphasizing the edge of the flatcar and the edge of the tender. As the train begins to move, one immediately notices that the edge of the flatcar is getting progressively lower in relation to the back of the timbercar. Here Keaton is exploiting the natural perceptual tendency to use what psychologists call "edge phenomena" in order to judge distance. The eye is instantly drawn to the edge of the flatcar and its background by the diagonal composition. The eye is automatically sensitive to that gray edge of the flatcar moving relative to the black back of the timbercar, which functions as a field for the lighter edge.

Keaton has found a telling way to alert the audience to the central aspect of the scene. Had the shot been taken from the side of the train, one's spatial intuitions would not have been engaged in the same emergent realization sort of way. Essentially, in this shot, Keaton is triggering a natural depth and movement cue, enabling the viewer to discover motion through an exercise of concrete judgment. The viewer participates in the scene, relying on an almost subliminal feedback mechanism about a change in the environment. In this way, the audience is prompted to employ the mode of attention Johnnie ought to be using to avoid many of his failures at adaptation.

So far, I have given reasons for Keaton's use of the second shot in the interpolation under description. But the question arises as to why he didn't simply use the second shot to characterize the scene? Why does he have a shot of the situation from two orientations? Three reasons seem to come into play here. First, in the initial shot, Johnnie is included; ironically Johnnie is looking behind himself, a procedure he unfortunately fails to repeat when the train starts to move. Second, by including both vantage points, the two key elements of the scene, the locomotive and the flatcar, are highlighted by being systematically repeated through the rotation of the visual field whereby the two major elements sequentially occupy the prominent foreground screen position. And third, the major common feature of the two shots is

the continuous line that the train forms. It is this aspect of the scene with which the gag is concerned. Consequently, the field/reverse-field functions to draw attention to precisely the key dimension of the scene. In this light, the field/reverse-field technique functions like Keaton's compositional manipulations as a means of directing attention to the critical dimension in the situation.

After directing attention to the crucial element of the situation, Keaton arranges the shot from behind the locomotive in a way that engages the audience's spatial intuitions, provoking the audience's faculty of concrete judgment. The shot from behind, by underscoring the distance and the forward velocity of The Texas, gives the audience a visual account of how the soldiers can't catch the engine. The billowing smoke from the locomotive indicates that the chugging of the engine makes it impossible for Johnnie to hear the shouting soldiers. We see that this field/reverse-field interpolation involves many of the same modifications of attention we find in Keaton's long-shot composition. In this example, the field/reverse-field technique directs the viewer to attend to the crucial physical factors in the situation so that the manner in which the event happens is intelligibly represented. The audience arrives at its understanding by employing a concrete cue of spatial intuition, thus practicing the kind of adaptive attentiveness valorized by the film.

Perhaps the most memorable and most brilliant sequence in *The General* – the mortar sequence – relies heavily on the field/reverse-field technique we have just discussed. This scene involves 11 shots of which the field reverse-field interpolations are among the most central. The scene progresses as follows (shots 1 to 11, shown in figures 2.1–2.11).

Shot 1: a medium lateral shot. Johnnie loads and lights the mortar.

Shot 2: a medium lateral shot of a space adjacent to that of shot 1. Johnnie moves from the mortar carriage to the timbercar. He gets caught up in the

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.4

linkage between the two cars. When Johnnie frees his foot, he unfortunately drops the linkage between the two cars onto the track. This disconnects the mortar car from the locomotive. The mortar carriage is slower than the train, so it drifts out of Johnnie's control.

Shot 3: a medium, three-quarter lateral shot of the mortar carriage alone in the frame. It bounces on the track. The elevation of the artillery piece is jostled and it lowers until the muzzle of the gun is parallel to the track,

Shot 4: a lateral long-shot that displays the timbercar with Johnnie on the back on the extreme left side of the frame with the mortar on the extreme right side of the frame. In between there is an open space. The mortar is seen to be pointed directly at the timbercar. This shot is composed in a highly determinate manner, using the sides of the frame as striking formal markers or brackets to underscore the significant narrative elements.

Shot 5: a medium long-shot from behind the mortar with Johnnie in the background of the shot. His foot is caught in a chain. He is stuck on the top of the ladder on the back of the timbercar. Our sight line runs along the trajectory the mortar shell will take. Here the foreground/background juxtaposition aligns all the crucial elements of the scene. In the foreground, we see the mortar; we see its fuse; we see it is directly aimed at Johnnie. The composition makes all the important elements stand out. The shot also emphasizes the interrelations of the elements since the line of vision of the camera is virtually the same as the line of fire of the mortar.

Shot 6: a slightly closer shot than shot 5 of Johnnie from the cannon's side of things. He succeeds in shaking off the chain that shackled him.

Shot 7: a frontal long-shot with the camera mounted on the timbercar. In the foreground we have lumber; in the mid-ground, Johnnie climbs onto the top of the car; and in the background, we see the implacable gun, its fuse

Figure 2.5

Figure 2.6

steaming, and its muzzle lowered directly at The Texas. Johnnie throws several chunks of wood at the mortar, hoping to alter its elevation, but to no avail. This shot is especially important because it reverses the field of shot 5. In this way it formally underscores the two crucial features of the scene – the cannon and The Texas. The foreground/background juxtaposition of the fifth shot, of course, already achieved this.

Shot 7 further accentuates this formal underlining by systematically rotating the visual field so that the gun and The Texas exchange the most prominent screen positions. This is a powerful means of giving utmost salience to key elements. Field reversal also gives the audience more data about the relative positions of the two objects, eliciting from the audience a felt sense of depth via the systematic permutation of screen configurations. Lastly, this shot alerts the audience to the fact that there is a curve in the track, a factor of decisive importance in what follows.

Shot 8: a medium-shot on the top of The Union boxcar. The Union spies have their weapons drawn; they are ready to fight.

Figure 2.7

Figure 2.8

Figure 2.9

Figure 2.10

Shot 9: a lateral medium-shot of the cowcatcher of The Texas. Johnnie has put the whole train between himself and the mortar in an effort not to be blown to smithereens.

Shot 10: an overhead long-shot with extreme depth of field. In the foreground, in the lower screen-left corner of the image, the mortar rolls into the frame. In the mid-ground, there is The Texas and in the far background we can see The General. From behind the mortar, we can no longer see its fuse smoking; it is about to discharge. Between The Texas and the mortar, however, we see a fast curve in the track. As we know from previous gags, Keaton can exploit curves magnificently. The Texas is suddenly pulled out of the trajectory of fire by the swerve in the roadbed. The gun fires, the shell whizzes past The Texas, and the explosion detonates a mile away, just missing the last boxcar of The General, deep in the background of the shot. In the foreground a cloud of white smoke hovers over that part of the track where the fuse burned out; it is just before the curve. The mortar fired just as The Texas lurched out of its line of fire.

Figure 2.11

Shot 11: another long-shot. This shot is taken from the top of The Union boxcar. It reverses the field of shot 10. The explosion in the background of shot 10 is in the foreground of shot 11. The Union spies are shocked. They'll not stand and fight the entire army that they mistakenly assume just bombarded them.

These 11 shots represent one of the most carefully and brilliantly edited

sequences in film history. Many elements of style we have analyzed individually are incorporated in this shot interpolation including foreground/background play, field/reverse-field cutting, shot angulation, and a canny use of curves in the track. As a result of these techniques, the scene is extremely intelligible despite the scale and complexity of the physical process involved.

The audience understands completely how the mortar misses The Texas due to the swerve in the track. The high angle of shot 10, with its striking design, is especially important here in drawing the eye from the mortar to the track to The Texas and then to The General. This masterful shot clearly arrays the four crucial elements of the scene in such a way that the audience immediately sees how the event happened. There is a rush of excitement as the gun discharges, due to one's awe at the precision synchronization in the scene, but also due to a flash of comprehension of exactly how these elements interact to save The Texas from damage.

The extreme salience of the crucial elements in the scene is prepared prior to shot 10 in the various compositional and editing strategies employed earlier. In a fairly conventional manner, shot 3 isolates the gun as a major detail. Shot 4, a medium lateral long-shot of the gun and the timbercar, is a highly determinate composition that not only records that the gun is lowered at the train, but also formally underscores this relationship by placing the key elements at the extremes of the frame.

Shot 5, a medium long-shot from behind the mortar is an example of the kind of foreground/background juxtaposition that we spoke of at such length. This shot gives special emphasis to the interrelationships of the gun and the train because the line of vision of the camera and the line of fire of the gun are coincident, underlining the key physical relationships in the most dramatic way, virtually predicting the trajectory of the bombardment by suggestively aiming the camera.

Shot 7 reverses the field of shot 5. The elements of shot 5 exchange screen position with those in shot 7. As in our earlier example, this is an inductive means of narrowing attention to pertinent visual information in the two shots to what is common to them. Again, in shot 7 the gun, Johnnie, and the timbercar predominate. Reversing the field gives emphasis to these elements through repetition. It also adds to the intelligibility of the situation by reconfirming, from another perspective, the line of fire of the gun.

Given shot 5, one assumes, in a predictive way, how the basic elements in the scene will be aligned from the train side of things. Shot 7 confirms these assumptions. This gives us a much more familiar scene of the situation. Our cognitive map, derived from earlier shots, is corroborated. The more angles

we have of a situation, the more we feel it is in our grasp. Shots 4, 5, and 7 give us a very rich cognitive map of the situation, visualizing the material from three different perspectives. The reversal of field in shots 5 and 7 is also telling because of a divergence between the two shots that stands out because the two shots are so systematically interrelated. That is, in shot 5 the track is a straightaway, while in shot 7 there is a curve in the roadbed. The juxtaposition of the two shots underlines the basic relationship of key elements, while also giving salience and alerting us to a new element, the curve in the track. This fact, of course, will be indispensable in shot 10.

Shot 10 is certainly composed in a way that maximizes the intelligibility of the scene in and of itself. Nevertheless, the earlier field/reverse-field alternation facilitates the clarity of the situation by formally underlining the basic elements and relations of the event. The field/reverse-field here, in a manner of speaking, primes the audience for the basic insight of shot 10 wherein one sees how the event happens.

Shots 10 and 11 of this sequence also involve a reversal of field. The background elements of shot 10, the explosion and the hijacked General, become the foreground elements of shot 11. Shot 11, however, does not facilitate any insight into the event. But it does give the audience a greater feel for the space of the event by proposing two systematically linked vantage points on the action. The result is a more elaborate mental map of the situation. One has a more vivid sense of spatial relations of the basic elements of the situation from having seen those elements transformed from more than one perspective or orientation. This is true of shots 5 and 7 as well as of shots 10 and 11. Thus, Keaton's field/reverse-field long-shot technique not only fosters intelligibility *vis-à-vis* causal relations but also *vis-à-vis* spatial relations by giving the audience several orientations on the same event.

The mortar scene just considered might be said to be edited in-the-round since Keaton shoots from the side of the train as well as employing the field/reverse-field strategy that we have noted. Keaton does not approach the scene from one perspective, but rather has camera set-ups at many different points around the scene. Contrast this to the incessant frontality of the scenes inside the hut in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*. A major effect of supplying the audience with different orientations on the action is to familiarize them with the geography of the event by enriching their mental maps of the situation.

Of course, having many camera set-ups around the event, in and of itself, does not guarantee a sense of geographical intelligibility; the different orientations must be linked. This linkage is not merely sequential. It must include a kind of cross-referencing whereby elements of one shot are included in the

next shot in a way that concretizes the relation of the spaces of the two shots. For instance, in shot 7 the composition repeats the elements of shot 5 in a way that one can concretely relate the space of the two shots. In shot 11, the repetition of the explosion makes it simple for us to mentally place the freightcar in relation to the wayward mortar.

Throughout *The General*, we have repeatedly argued, Keaton's stylistic pre-occupation is with the lucid representation of physical states of affairs and physical processes. Field/reverse-field editing in particular and editing in-the-round in general vivify this by imbuing causal factors in events with salience and/or by rendering the geography of settings highly intelligible.

One method of editing in-the-round that we have not emphasized so far is Keaton's recurring tendency to include set-ups from in front of the action along with set-ups from the side of the action. In the mortar scene, the transition for shot 5 to shot 6 is an example of this. The film abounds with examples of this schema of frontal/lateral editing. Johnnie's entry into Union territory involves four alternations comprised of two shots each. Similarly, the battle at Rock River is epically laid out with long-shots, from the Southern side of the battle, overlooking the frontal thrust of the Union assault, and with lateral long-shots from the Union flank as the Yankees wade across the river. This frontal/lateral editing contributes to a vivid sense of familiarity and spatial intelligibility in the audience. Any object, even a toy, becomes more familiar if we can rotate it, looking at it from many orientations. We come to recognize it with its various facets arrayed in different configurations. We have a more concrete feeling for the object. Keaton's editing in-the-round and his frontal/lateral editing perform the function of rotating the geography of the event for us, steeping us in the various facets of the place and process from different orientations, thereby rendering the event extremely intelligible. As a result, we have a richer experience of the environment in Keaton than we do with many other filmmakers because Keaton includes many vantage points on the action that are extraneous in terms of narrative information but which nevertheless enrich our mental map, our schema of assumptions and correlative expectations, about the environment. It is important to reemphasize that not just any montage will result in the effect we are describing The editing must be systematic and cross-referential in order to give the concrete sense of geography that Keaton elicits.

Consider, for instance, the sequence in which Annabelle removes the linking-pin from The General so that she and Johnnie can hijack *it* from the Yankees. There is a frontal shot of men heaving provisions into a freightcar. In the

foreground, a Union officer with a beard directs the activities. Johnnie, with Annabelle hidden in a bag on his shoulders, walks past the point where he should throw the sack into the freightcar. Instead, he walks to the lower screen-left corner of the frame where there is a junction between two freightcars. The Union officer gesticulates. Then, Keaton cuts to a lateral shot. This shot is mounted from behind Johnnie. The camera looks down the alleyway between the two freightcars. A hand, Annabelle's, reaches out from the sack and lifts the linking-pin from between the two freightcars, thereby disengaging them. In the background of the shot, over the top of the sack, we see the Union officer from the previous shot still gesticulating. He orders Johnnie to put his sack in the freightcar that Johnnie just passed. Keaton then cuts back to the frontal long-shot set-up and throws the sack, with Annabelle and the pin, among the provisions. The second shot in this chain is essential. By repeating the officer from the foreground of the first shot in the background of the second shot the spectator can concretely locate the action of the second shot in regard to the action of the first shot. A tighter shot of Annabelle's removal of the pin that did not include the officer would have rendered the geography of the scene more synthetic and abstract. By systematically cross-referencing the elements, however, Keaton conveys a concrete, intelligible picture of the situation. Eisensteinian montage, since it generally lacks cross-referencing of details in this way, does not engender a sense of geographical intelligibility, though in terms of camera set-ups, Eisenstein certainly edits in-the-round. Rather, it is Keaton's use of systematic cross-referencing that allows us to attribute to him a theme of geographical intelligibility.[15]

The frontal/lateral interpolation just described also seems committed to another Keaton theme which we have described as visible intelligibility. The effect of the second shot is not only to orient the audiences geographically to the first shot, it also functions to show us how Annabelle could remove the pin undetected. We see how Johnnie and the sack obscure the officer's vision and camouflage Annabelle's activity. The centrally organized foreground/background juxtaposition, in a highly determinate way, illuminates the physical relation between the officer, Johnnie and the sack, and the pin. A much tighter shot could have been used here; an insert of a hand removing the pin would have sufficed. From such a shot the audience would know that the cars had been disconnected. By opting for a wide lateral shot Keaton enables the audience to see how the cars were successfully detached in a secret manner. We have seen on earlier occasions as well that the frontal/lateral format can be used for the purpose of enhancing the visible intelligibility of events. Both the catapult gag and Johnnie's dismantling of

the Union telegraph involve frontal/lateral alternations that are extraneous to the narrative, but which enhance the visible intelligibility of the physical process being recorded. The themes of geographical and visible intelligibility are aspects of the lucidity with which Keaton attempts to represent the physical environment. As for geography and causal processes, Keaton strives to find editing patterns and compositional formats that will facilitate the audience's comprehension of the location and cause of events. One is constantly struck by the insistent physicality of *The General*, not only in terms of what is represented, but also in terms of the way it is represented. Again and again, one's judgment of depth and one's sense of spatial orientation are engaged, prompting a kind of cognitive-perceptual participation in concretely placing elements of action in relation to each other. This attitude to the geography of the environment is to be expected from a director so devoted to prompting a consonant reaction to the causal processes in the environment. In both cases, Keaton seems to aim at enlivening and awakening categories of judgment that are less and less part of the daily practice of work in the kind of urban, postindustrial society that was arising during his youth, and which predominated during his maturity.

Summary

In this chapter, I have focused on the cinematic elements in *The General*, including especially Keaton's forcefully articulated long-shots, his long-shot field reversals, his editing in-the-round, his use of camera angulation, and his abiding preoccupation with detailed causal editing. These are stylistic features that give Keaton's work and *The General* in particular their characteristic look and feel. The leading question in this chapter is: what, if anything, does this panoply of formal strategies add up to?

Beginning with an analysis of Keaton's highly determinate long-shots – long-shots that draw the viewer's attention emphatically to selected points in the visual array – we noticed that Keaton deploys this technique for a recurring purpose: to direct audiences to the pertinent physical variables in scenes and events in order to facilitate and even to prompt seeing with understanding how those events came about. The itinerary of the eye assigned to spectators by Keaton's extremely directive long-shots with their pronounced diagonals and subtle angulation is one that is predicated upon making the events, notably the physical events, that transpire in *The General* visibly intelligible, where visual intelligibility is a matter of enabling viewers to see how and

to comprehend how events, especially at the level of physical processes, unfold. Whereas, for most purposes, filmmakers aspire mostly to assuring that viewers know that the pertinent events happen – what we call knowing *that x* – Keaton, through his particular use of the long-shot, manifests commitment to showing how events, particularly physical processes, evolve. This concern with visual intelligibility, as initially located in Keaton's long-shot, moreover, can also supply a persuasive explanation of the other recurring, characteristic cinematic forms in *The General* – the long-shot field reversals, the camera angulation, the detailed causal editing patterns, and the editing in-the-round. These all contribute to the visual intelligibility of the film, most of them with respect to the evolution of a physical event, like a train derailment.

But what is the purpose of this stylistic preoccupation in *The General*? Does it have some larger point? In response to this, I advance the hypothesis that the cognitive state engendered in the audience by these cinematic techniques is an analog to the concrete intelligence exhibited operationally by the character of Johnnie Gray in the course of the sort of insight gags discussed in the previous chapter. That is, the concrete operations engaged by the Keaton character as he negotiates various and sundry challenges posed by the physical environment and its objects presuppose the mental reorganization of the physical factors that beset him. This is not a matter of reflection, but of what Merleau-Ponty might call "bodily intentionality." Nevertheless, it is a species of intelligence. Keaton's cinematic techniques, then, make comparable cognitive experiences available to the audience by making the pertinent physical variable and their relationships salient, thereby affording the audience, nonreflectively and automatically, the kind of insight and bodily understanding of the physical environment that is presupposed by the character's successful concrete manipulations of troublesome objects.

For example, cutting to an angulated shot is a literal means to reorient the visual field, serving as an analog to the processes of mental reorganization that Keaton's successful adaptation gags presume. Likewise, Keaton's highly determinate long-shot compositions may be seen as returning, at the level of stylistic presentation, to the concern with concrete intelligence that dominates his gags. Visual intelligibility as a stylistic theme ideally promotes a certain cognitive state in viewers that is the formal correlative of the insight demonstrated by the Keaton character at the level of the comic content of his successful adaptation gags. Keaton's visual approach manages the physical environment in terms of a cognitive-perceptual style that parallels the sort of concrete intelligence the insight gags imply. In this way Keaton's cinematic

stylization matches and reinforces his thematic fascination with concrete intelligence and the operations that embody it. It bequeaths to the viewer the kind of concrete organization of visual field the character needs in order to negotiate it.

Keaton's highly determinate compositions are intended to elicit heightened audience awareness of, sensitivity to, and a nonreflective or bodily grasp of the key physical variables and interactions in Keaton's material environment. Since Keaton's attention to physical detail occurs in contexts that are non-comic, the compositional clarity one finds in *The General* is not reducible to comic functionality. Instead, I argue, Keaton gives salience to key physical details through highly determinate compositions in order to engender in the audience an alertness to and a concrete comprehension of the environment, which is precisely that which Keaton's characters lack in the failure gags in *The General*, but have in abundance when they excel. Thus, visual intelligibility as a stylistic theme advances the concern with concrete intelligence explored in the behavior of the characters which constitutes the most important content of the film.[16]

Just as the purpose of Keaton's ensemble of cinematic techniques can be illuminated via the relation of the concept of visible intelligibility to the theme of concrete intelligence in *The General*, so the cultural significance of the film's devices can be specified by reference to what was said in the last chapter about the ways in which the content of the film enlivens and reawakens faculties of judgment and thought that, though commonly available through labor at the height of the steam, steel, and industrial culture of Keaton's childhood, were beginning to disappear for many by the 1920s and perhaps for most in contemporary American culture. Keaton explores that species of concrete intelligence through his gags, but also celebrates it through a series of coordinated cinematic strategies that virtually incarnate a concrete intelligence about things through the point of view advanced by the shooting and editing. In this respect, *The General* – in terms of both its subject matter and the manner in which it is presented – offers a powerful emblem of compensation for viewers whose lives have alienated them from any sustained intelligent interaction with things *qua* things.

NOTES

1   Quoted in Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968), p. 490.
2   Quoted in Rudi Blesh, *Keaton* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 150.

3   See E. Rubinstein, *Filmguide to The General* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 68; and Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and The Movies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 130.

4   See Rubinstein, p. 69.

5   Raymond Rohauer, "On the Track of *The General*," in *The General*, ed. Richard J. Anobile (New York: Flare Books, 1975), p. 7.

6   André Bazin, *What Is Cinema*?, tr. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), vol. I, p. 52.

7   Buster Keaton with Charles Samuels, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), pp. 168–9.

8   Quoted in Rubinstein, pp. 67–8.

9   Keaton, p. 93.

10   Ibid., p. 174.

11   Rubinstein, p. 67.

12   Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 123.

13   Mast, pp. 130–1.

14   Ibid.

15   The fact that throughout the chases the camera is generally mounted on moving vehicles also enhances one's sense of the geography of the film. That is, the continuity of offscreen space and onscreen space is constantly reconfirmed by these moving shots, for at the edges of the frame adjacent spaces are always being added or subtracted. Thus, besides dynamizing the image, the recurrent moving shots in the film also engender a sense of the continuous geography of the world of the film.

16   That is, Keaton's style of presentation itself is a contribution to the theme or content of *The General*. This way of putting it, moreover, may be one way, albeit a moderate one, of understanding Merleau-Ponty's assertion that form cannot be separated from content. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The World of Perception*, tr. Oliver Davis (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 96–7, 101.