

Romance, Crime and Disaster in Buster Keaton's Civil War Railway Comedy
The General (1926)*

Taina TUHKUNEN
Université d'Angers

The moment you give me a locomotive and things like that to play with,
as a rule I find some way of getting laughs out of it.¹
Buster Keaton

In her introduction to *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*, Lynne Kirby claims that many films have "made use of the train as a ready-made site of crime, disaster, and romance – in a word, drama"². Quite strikingly, these elements motivate one of the most thrilling and versatile railway comedies of the silent era, Buster Keaton and Clyde Bruckman's *The General*, a film set in the American South during the Civil War (1861-1865).

Before *The General*, Keaton had used trains to stage unexpected comic situations in *The Electric House* (1922) and *Our Hospitality* (Buster Keaton, John Blystone, 1923). In the former, Keaton plays a botany student hired mistakenly to equip a rich businessman's home with ingenious, time- and servant-saving devices, such as a tabletop train. Anticipating Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and Jacques Tati's gadget-filled American-style house in *Mon Oncle* (1958), the miniature train programmed to facilitate daily life ends up creating chaos, confusion, and endless comedy. The Keatonesque train narrative entered a new stage when *Our Hospitality* invited its spectators on a film journey aboard a rickety train, actually a replica of an early steam locomotive known as "Stephenson's Rocket"³. This railway satire on the American South of the early 1800s focuses on William McKay (Buster Keaton) who, upon returning to his Appalachian home from New York, gets caught between two feuding families. In 1926, *The General* extended the family feud into an antagonism affecting the whole nation. Contrasting with the existing Civil War movies, the great military conflict now also read like a homage to the early railway age as, more smoothly than the slapstick comedies of the teens, the railway plotline incorporated the gags into a fluid storyline.

Produced by Joseph M. Schenck for United Artists, *The General* was based on a real, historical incident: the train-jacking by Northern spies of a Southern locomotive in an attempt to destroy a supply railway line of the Confederate army. The film transformed the raid into a picaresque railway romance and a double rescue story: that of a locomotive and a young woman. Whereas the actual event ended with the hanging of some of the Yankee conspirators, it concentrates on an intense train chase-and-release operation conducted by Johnnie Gray – a brave and resourceful train engineer embodied by Buster Keaton, whose

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¹ Buster Keaton, Kevin W. Sweeney, *Buster Keaton: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 228.

² Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1997), 1.

³ Built in England in 1829, the "Rocket" was the most advanced locomotive of its day. The first train intended for passenger travel, it became the prototype for later steam engines, also in film.

heart pounds as passionately for his beloved locomotive as for his beautiful fiancée, Annabelle Lee (Marion Mack).

To enhance the film's dramatic and situational irony, Johnnie does not realize that he cannot enlist and wear the Confederate uniform because he is needed by the Confederacy as a locomotive driver rather than a soldier. Thus banned from classic heroism, and unfairly rejected as a coward by his Georgia sweetheart, Keaton's forlorn, yet always chivalric and humane railway driver sets out on an audacious train journey that leads him beyond enemy lines. After various derailments, shifts and jittery twists along the tracks, the Southern underdog's quest for the coveted army uniform and his Lady's hand ends memorably. The final gag of the film shows Johnnie and Annabelle sitting on the crossbar of the engine, but rather than focalizing on an archetypal, happy-ending embrace, Keaton combines it with a repetitive salute to the passing Confederate soldiers in a visual echo of the up-and-down movement of the locomotive wheels.

Ranked by today's film historians as one of the greatest comedies of all time, *The General* was found by most moviegoers and critics of the mid-1920s to offer little else than mockery of the Civil War, and despite its amazing chase sequences and death-defying railway stunts⁴, the film was a flop in the box office, practically ruining Keaton's career. Today this silent era train comedy of love and war seems surprisingly modern. Its stone-faced⁵, quick-witted engineer is inseparable from the other main character, the steam locomotive, proving the creative capacity of a train to maintain a film narrative in motion, nearly rivaling or bypassing dialogue-driven narratives of later sound movies.

This article argues that, while paving the (rail)way for other chase and runaway train films to come⁶, *The General* challenges the over-romanticized, frequently hackneyed representations propagated by the nineteenth-century master narrative regarding the American South as a "lost" yet "noble" world. A decade after D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film geared by horse power that conceals the Southern *antebellum* slavery system behind the façade of a "cavalier culture", and a quarter of a century before the technicolored "Old South" deployed in David O. Selznick's blockbuster *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *The General* puts into motion the figure of the "damsel in distress" and that of the noble medieval knight. Undeniably, *The General* relies on a far more modest setup than these "landmark" movies. A few locomotives and train cars suffice to create a different American South which, in its own loco-motored ways, anticipated later twentieth century reconsiderations of the classic, nostalgia-laden narratives on the presumably idyllic, rural South. By privileging the parodic mode over the epic and the melodramatic, the Keatonesque train narrative refuses to revolve around hoop-skirted Belles, leading the spectators zigzagging along railroad tracks and ravines in the outskirts of the mythic and Manichean "Southland".

Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to examine more precisely how *The General* goes about exploiting trains, locomotives, but also historical facts and, after replacing the

⁴ Keaton, who was once knocked unconscious on the set of *The General*, performed all his own flips, falls and high-risk stunts without stuntmen, special effects or camera tricks.

⁵ Buster Keaton was nicknamed "The Great Stone Face", somewhat unjustly, because rather than creating the effect of a mask, his face was far from expressionless or immobile.

⁶ Including films that focus more particularly on the loss of control of locomotive power, such as Tony Scott's *Unstoppable* (2010) about a runaway freight train.

Griffithean neo-romantic rural gentleman by a laconic locomotive driver of more modern times, pokes fun at the nineteenth-century genre and gender codes. A century after the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, this analysis of the elements of romance, crime and disasters found in *The General* differs quite considerably, from that of Mordaunt Hall, a film critic who in his 1927 *New York Times* review saw Keaton's silent movie as little more than "A Civil War Farce":

In spite of his bursts of speed and flashes of ingenuity, Johnnie Gray, the hero of *The General*, the new picture at the Capitol, is hardly the person who would be trusted with a locomotive. This role is played by Buster Keaton, who appears to have bitten off more than he can chew in this farcical affair concerned with the days of the Civil War.⁷

The actual raid – popularly remembered as "the Great Locomotive Chase" – was far more serious. It started in Georgia on April 12, 1862⁸ after a Southern locomotive – baptized "the General" – was hijacked by a band of twenty Unionist soldiers and two civilians who intended to strike deep into the Confederate territory by wrecking tracks and bridges along the Western & Atlantic Railroad (W&A) that linked Atlanta to Chattanooga (Tennessee). Led by a professional spy, James J. Andrews, the "Andrews raiders" as they would be called boarded the General after paying their fares in the town of Marietta masquerading as Southern civilians. During a stop in Big Shanty (now Kennesaw, Georgia), when the passengers and the crew were having breakfast at a trackside hotel, the band took off with three boxcars and the engine and headed north, seeking to cause as much mayhem along the W&A line to Chattanooga as possible, and thus change the course of the war.

In *Railways in the Cinema*, John Huntley provides a detailed account of the historical raid, telling how three men – Captain and train conductor William Fuller, engineer Jefferson Cain, and foreman Anthony Murphy – set out alone on foot to recapture the General, nothing daunting them "in putting muscle in competition with steam".⁹ In the course of the train chase, several other men joined the trio to try and get hold of the fleeing engine thieves, who deployed strategies similar to those used in the film (uncoupled boxcars, cut-off telegraph lines, torn-up rail tracks, etc.), to hinder William Fuller's progress. Fuller and his companions first used a handcar, then a less powerful locomotive named "Smith", before they took over a locomotive named "the Texas", as in the film.

At one point of the chase, during which the General and the Texas were at times within sight of one another, the raiders tried to destroy a covered railway bridge by leaving a burning boxcar on it, but the Texas managed to push it off the bridge. (In the film, structured in such a way as to create the impression of escalating disasters, this episode constitutes the final cataclysm, a train falling spectacularly from a collapsing bridge after an orchestrated accumulation of seemingly endless mishaps and disasters.) Finally, when, unable to stop for wood and water, the General ran out of steam and began to slow down, the railroad raiders (who failed to destroy a single bridge during the incursion) were forced to abandon the vehicle and take to the surrounding woods. After they were captured and handed to a Southern military court, eight of the men (most of whom from Ohio and Kentucky) were hanged as spies, including James Andrews. While imprisoned in Atlanta, some of the men

⁷ Mordaunt Hall, "A Civil War Farce", *New York Times*, February 8, 1927.

⁸ Exactly one year after the outbreak of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.

⁹ John Huntley, *Railways in the Cinema* (London: Ian Allan, 1969), 35.

escaped prison grounds, and only two were recaptured. The others reached safety, and their exploits would later form the basis for Buster Keaton's *The General* as well as *The Great Locomotive Chase* (Francis D. Lyon, 1956) with Fess Parker as Unionist spy James J. Andrews.

A century and a half later, the raiders are still commemorated today as Unionist heroes, and quite an unusual train-topped granite memorial with a bronze replica of the famed train celebrates their Civil War act of bravery at the Chattanooga National Cemetery. The pedestaled miniature locomotive also recalls how several of the raiders became the first recipients of the Medal of Honor¹⁰, the nation's highest honor for battlefield bravery. As for the original locomotive, the object of cinematographic homages in several films made after Keaton's railway comedy, it is the unquestionable star of a Civil War museum¹¹ in Kennesaw, near the location where the historical railway raid began.

The loosely-adapted film scenario of *The General* is based on *Daring and Suffering: A History of the Great Railroad Adventure*¹², an account of the raid by William A. Pittenger (1840-1904), one of the Union Army soldiers involved in the 1862 raid who escaped execution. Keaton and Bruckman turned the Civil War episode into a two-fold train chase scenario by focusing on the train-napping, before narrating the recapture of the locomotive and its adventurous and eventful, ultimately triumphant return to the South after its release from the hands of "saboteurs". Like most films on the American South, and contrary to Pittenger's original tale, *The General* is told from the standpoint of the Confederates, depicting a Southerner trying to gain his dignity. Buster Keaton himself was convinced that the film would work better dramatically as an "underdog tale", with a happy ending for the loser. As he put it in an interview: "And you can always make villains out of the Northerners, but you cannot make a villain out of the South."¹³

In love with a Lady and a Locomotive

Like countless classic movies on the American South, *The General* unfolds on the eve of the outbreak of the American Civil War, when the South was still holding out hope of becoming "a land" of its own. But instead of opening on a plantation house, a Hollywood metonym for the immutable, segregative order of the "grand" Southern society, the first camera shots focus on another emblematic object: a steam locomotive swiftly pulling a string of carriages through the Georgia countryside.

Old world gallantry and chivalric imagery are by no means absent from the movie. They are used for parodic purposes during the numerous spoofs and gags that pivot on Keaton's quixotic gentleman-engineer, whose activities constitute an endless source of laughter and never a permanent model of manhood. In a similar vein, and unlike many other films on the American South, *The General* never precipitates on screen devilish iron horses,

¹⁰ As a civilian, James J. Andrews, the mastermind of the operation, was ineligible for the medal.

¹¹ The Southern Museum, <http://www.southernmuseum.org/exhibits/the-general/> (last accessed June 26, 2016).

¹² William A. Pittenger, *Daring and Suffering: A History of the Great Railroad Adventure* (Cumberland House Publishing, 1999 [1887]). See also Russell S. Bonds, *Stealing the General: The Great Locomotive Chase and the First Medal of Honor* (Yardly, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2007).

¹³ Kevin W. Sweeney, *Buster Keaton Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 227.

or monstrous engines ready to wreak havoc in the bucolic Southern garden. Instead, Keaton and his co-director and head gag-writer, Clyde Bruckman's emphasis centers on humorously mastered clashes and shocks¹⁴, as well as the jubilant companionship between the engineer and his locomotive. Contrary to the frontal attacks of Griffith's Confederate war hero, Ben Cameron (Henry Walthall)¹⁵, Keaton's Confederate railway engineer uses satire and parody to cushion reactions to the Yankee threat.

Already during the establishing shot, the speedy motion of the locomotor (etymologically associated with the power of moving from place to place) is underlined by a title card that recalls how rail travelling used to be considered as a form of "flying"¹⁶: "The Western and Atlantic Flyer speeding into Marietta, GA., in the spring of 1861", and indeed, several early railway companies used a winged wheel as their symbol. The locomotive then comes to a halt in Marietta, the home town of the train engineer's fiancée. A long shot of the main street of Marietta shows the train entering the frame from screen left, literally invading and blocking the town's main artery. In the foreground, a man is seen next to a horse and a buggy, struggling to calm down the restless, harnessed animal, which is visibly bewildered by the sight and sound of the arriving train.

As the Keaton expert Noël Carroll points out in *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping*, the arrival sequence of *The General* "prompts the audience to more than just a recognition of the narrative fact that the train has arrived"¹⁷. Indeed, from the very beginning, the scenario accentuates the contrasts between the old, whimsical horsepower and the new machine age which is taking over the world of horse-drawn vehicles – even in the South of the United States, known for its persistent backwardness compared to the technologically more advanced North.

But, as the spectator of this silent era Southern soon realizes, the break between the two eras is never complete. As emphasized by the picture of Annabelle – a young Lady whose photographic oval portrait adorns the engine room amidst its levers, pipes, pressure gauges, steam traps and valves – the train driver still has one foot rooted in the romantic world of the Old South. The message of the second title card ("There were two loves in his life") is explicit enough: Johnnie Gray loves Annabelle as dearly as the locomotive he is seen patting affectionately during his first screen appearance, flicking soot from the ledge of the cabin window. The pairing of the man and the train prior to the coupling of Johnnie and Annabelle reads as a shift in emphasis, a clear sign of renewal within the classic Southern narrative centered upon the ideal of rural permanence.

In her introduction to *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*¹⁸ on the complex and stimulating kinship between cinema and the railroad, Lynne Kirby asserts that "most

¹⁴ See the chapter entitled "Excursion: The History of Shock" in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*, translated from the German by Anselm Hollo (New York: Urizen Books, 1979 [1977]), 145-151.

¹⁵ For instance, during the most spectacular battle sequence in *The Birth of a Nation*, Ben Cameron is seen rushing towards the enemy line, to literally jam a Confederate flag down the gullet of a cannon.

¹⁶ "The greater the ease and speed with which the train is flying (a typical nineteenth-century term for rail travel) the more acute the fear of catastrophe becomes", Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 83.

¹⁷ Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 88.

¹⁸ See the chapter on *The General*: "Narrative Agency and *The General*" in Kirby, *Parallel Tracks*, 121-131.

train films, from the beginning to the end of the silent period, are about gender and its relation to the machine”:

Set up as bracketed experiences where anything could happen between departure and arrival, many train films stage a recurrent scenario of coupling, uncoupling, and perversion with respect to the romantic, heterosexual couple.¹⁹

In classical narrative cinema, the train was often given “the role of integration and linkage, of stabilization, especially in terms of American national identity”, Kirby pursues, before adding that this ideology “supported a stable white male subject by controlling the instability that was associated with femininity and ‘foreign-ness’ or ‘otherness’ in the broadest sense, including, crucially, a racial sense.”²⁰

While classic binaries certainly underlie the narrative of *The General*, it seems necessary to nuance the film’s attempt “to define the woman character in relation to the temporal logic of the photograph, as opposed to that of the film, i.e. mobilized photographs”²¹. For, even if Annabelle does emerge as an inert image, “as a photograph, a still image, an object of visual contemplation”²², her function as a “time-stopper” freezing the narrative flow remains debatable, especially when *The General*’s two other protagonists are considered. In a sense, the film becomes innovative and eye-opening when it deepens its focus on the male lead’s repeated and humorously-exposed failure to fit the coded ideal of a Southern gentleman²³. Rather than simply positing Annabelle as the “icon of the past, the body of the South, the civilization for which the war is being fought”,²⁴ it should not be overlooked that the deliberate highlighting of Keaton’s unconventional, hilarious inability to come to terms with uniforms and other codes and customs ultimately breaks with *déjà-vu* binaries, opening up the plot to more contemporary readings.

To fully understand Keaton’s transgressive loco-motivated pictures which exploit the steam engine and the crisscrossing railway tracks as guiding elements of his film narrative and comic visual style, we need to keep in mind the fixed nineteenth-century iconography of the early filmic representations of the *antebellum* South, and above all, the powerful visual legacy of the first major Southern film, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* where the white woman’s purity and delicate domesticity are presented as the linchpin of a well-ordered, perfect society. According to this racist and gendered rhetoric, the white masters were to remain at the top of the social and moral ladder, and although *The General* reveals no explicit traces of Griffith’s oversexed, savage black “bucks” or villainous mulattos²⁵, the intertextually and interfilmically active movie reflects, through its caricatured, warped mirror images, an awareness of discriminatory typologies.

Right from the start, Annabelle’s father (Charles Henry Smith) and brother (Frank

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks*, 123.

²² Ibid.

²³ Parodied versions of the stock character of a Southern gentleman are found in later Civil War comedies, such as Edward Sedgwick’s *A Southern Yankee* (1948), a semi-remake of Buster Keaton’s *The General* (1927) with a Southern undercover spy named “The Grey Spider” (Red Skelton). Keaton served as technical advisor for this MGM film.

²⁴ Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks*, 124.

²⁵ Contrary to Chaplin, Keaton never introduced any explicitly political ideology to his films.

Barnes) are set up as typically “noble” representatives of the white Southern master class, but the two flat characters disappear fairly quickly from the screen, evidencing their lack of dramatic complexity in Keaton and Bruckman’s eyes. This is not the case for the film’s other stereotypically Southern character, Annabelle.

Johnnie’s would-be bride is first presented as a photograph – like Elsie Stoneman in *The Birth of a Nation*, played by the silent-era star Lillian Gish, known for her capacity to embody the feminine frailty Griffith so eagerly opposed to male bravery²⁶. In *The General*, the coupling of Keaton’s railway driver with Marion Mack’s Annabelle Lee (less typecast than most female characters in Keaton’s movies), turns the latter into something more inconsistent and erratic. Without a doubt, a decade after Benjamin Cameron (presented as the future founder of the Ku Klux Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*) became enamored of Elsie whose daguerreotype image he discovers when walking through his father’s cotton fields (another classic Southern *topos*), Keaton’s Southern Belle conveys a different, far-reaching message. This is not merely because the photograph of the young woman is first spotted among the engine room devices of a train, but due to a later scene where Johnnie offers a photographic portrayal of himself to the Dixie damsel in a gesture that seems to displace the young woman as *the* iconic object of the South. *The General*’s departing from Griffith’s strongly polarized, essentialist vision of the South becomes even more obvious with the foregrounding of the triangular alliance between Johnnie, Annabelle and the eponymous, and somewhat anthropomorphic, train engine. It is the circular motion of these three protagonists within a scenario marked by love, crime and disasters that ensures the rhythmic rotation of the film, as the plot pulsates from one gag and one ingenious comic sequence to another.

From *The General*’s initial courting sequence onward, the timeless rural Southern society is derided as Keaton’s Johnnie Gray makes his way to Annabelle’s house surrounded by a charming garden and a fence. The setup may recall the opening sequence of *The Birth of a Nation*, but instead of paying homage to a static pastoral civilization about to be “gone with the wind and the dust”²⁷, *The General* wastes no time introducing its main male character who, according to the Aristotelian idea of the comic, represents a “lower” type (not a “higher”, tragic type) of hero: a “mechanic” as underlined by the French translation of the film (*Le mécano de La Générale*), rather than a melodramatic master of a lost plantation of the kind embodied by Ashley Wilkes (Leslie Howard) in *Gone with the Wind*.

Applying the number-one rule of visual comedy, the protagonist-driven film tells its story mainly through physical action. After sticking Annabelle’s photograph into his pocket, the railway driver heads, “locomotive-like”, towards his Lady’s house with two young boys trotting and winding behind him in the manner of railway cars, looking neither right nor left. Quite as mechanically, he stops at Annabelle’s front door, quickly adjusts his jacket, flicks specks off his coat, rubs his shoes briefly against his pant legs, straightens his tie, and takes off his hat before knocking at the door. To add another comic touch to this portrayal,

²⁶ For the genealogy of Southern female characters in American film, including the subsequent fragmentation and multiplication of the portrayals of the “Belles”, see Taina Tuhkunen, *Demain sera un autre jour: Le Sud et ses héroïnes à l’écran* (Paris: Rouge Profond, 2013).

²⁷ Expression used by the anonymous, off-screen narrator of *Tobacco Road* (John Ford, 1941) when commenting on the dilapidated mansion inhabited by a shiftless Southern family who has lost their land to the bank.

Annabelle has joined the train-like procession, observing Johnnie and the boys like a spectator of a moving picture. And meaningfully enough, due to his “tunnel vision”, Johnnie fails to see her, providing yet another proof of his one-track mind and machine-like gestures that make him look like an automaton. Once inside the house, he sits down in an awkward pose next to the young woman on the sofa. When he realizes that the boys (who have been mimicking his body language since the railway station) have followed him into her living room, he gets up, puts on his hat pretending to leave, and once the boys are out on the porch, closes the door on them, takes off his hat and sits down, just as quirkily, next to his fiancée.

During this preliminary sketch where each gesture is articulated with extreme (technical) precision and (romantic) courtesy, Johnnie remains the object of Annabelle’s gaze. This also applies to the film’s second photograph, offered by Johnnie to Annabelle which shows him standing in front of his locomotive, the other “she”²⁸ of the movie. Viewed by Annabelle, the photograph momentarily deprives the locomotive driver of Keaton’s kinetic, visceral comedic action, to highlight the triangular love story – never a drama – of *The General*.

A Train-jacking and other transgressions

When viewed through the lens of more contemporary railway romance and crime films, the allusive locomotive language of *The General* appears far more bashful than the innuendos found, for instance, in Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959 – another famous film dealing with trains, spies and unstable identities where an innocent man is confronted with love and crime. In comparison with Roger O. Thornhill (Cary Grant), a U.S. government agent who, like Johnnie Gray, finds himself on a sudden journey against crime and corruption, Keaton’s civil nineteenth-century *persona* proves exceedingly chaste despite his tendency to satirize the manners and mores of the Old South. Even so, this should not hinder us from viewing *The General*’s train scenario as a wink to earlier train films – *A Kiss in the Tunnel* (George Albert Smith, 1899), *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903), etc. – or as a forerunner for *North by Northwest*, a film full of double-entendres which ends when, after a harrowing chase, the train transporting Thornhill and Eva Kendall (Eva Maria Saint) plunges into a tunnel in a witty, deliberately erotized sleeping-car shot.²⁹

Any phallic or transgressive post-courtship symbols beneath the numerous gags of *The General*’s *amour courtois*-inspired railway love story are told in symbolic film language. The sexual metaphor of a train entering a tunnel is present, but here the phallic gag is more like a solitary sex act. The sequence captured in a long shot coincides with the only true low point of the film, after Keaton’s engine driver has been turned down by Annabelle. Disheartened, Johnnie sits down on the cross-bar connecting the wheels of the locomotive and, thus abandoned to his solitary thoughts on the coupling rod, fails to realize that the engine is starting slowly, the large wheels rolling smoothly behind his back lifting and lowering him up gently. When the stone-faced engineer finally understands that the train is gradually picking up speed, instead of panicking, he seems soothed by the sluggish up-and-down movement

²⁸ The feminine pronoun “she” is commonly used in English when referring to ships, cars, planes and trains.

²⁹ See Rebecca Franklin-Landi’s article « The Symbol of the Train in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *North by Northwest* (1959) » in this issue.

generated by the rod. And despite the blank look on his face, the puppet-like man who vanishes into a dark tunnel (here a backstage-like storage space for railroad vehicles) seems already preparing for the next episode of this buoyant movie.

As this example illustrates, unlike the beast-like engine in Jean Renoir's *La Bête Humaine* (1938), Keaton's locomotive machinery remains strangely human, receptive as well as responsive, endowed at times with an amazingly graceful velocity. It is not mechanical tics that prevail here, or the machine's dehumanizing power over factory workers whose robotic bodies express machine-generated spasms in Chaplin's *Modern Times*, but the ability of the anthropomorphic engine and its coupling rod (also called "coupling arm") to convey compassion. As Keaton seems to suggest when endowing wheeled machines with a power of enchantment and projection, mechanisms possess not only a *kinetics*, but a *poetics* of their own, which undoubtedly takes us back to the very first rotations of the locomotive wheel on screen. In her essay "Lumière, the Train and the Avant-Garde", Christa Blümlinger begins with the following words: "The history of cinema began with a train, and it is as if this train has been driving into film history ever since", before pointing out the affinities between locomotives and a movie projector:

In the figure of the locomotive, an aspect of the formal process of film is represented metaphorically – slowing down, bringing to a halt and winding up again. Both machines, the steam locomotive and the projector, incorporate the principle of repetition and availability: they are switched on, set into motion, pause and begin to rotate once more.³⁰

On the other hand, and while the railway tropes of *The General's* multi-track scenario certainly emphasize the film's reliance on trains as ready-made *loci* of romance and crime, they also create a series of transgressions in terms of character typologies and the film's generic affiliation. In this respect, it is worth recalling briefly how the assaults *of* and *on* trains were used after Edwin S. Porter's 1903 *The Great Train Robbery* by what was to be named the "Western genre", despite the fact that Porter's proto-western (shot in New Jersey) contains no actual references to the American West. Against this background, the exploitation by Keaton's Southern railway film of similar themes and motifs (a train robbery, a chase, a final shoot-out, with "hold up" and water-tower sequences) could be read as a deliberate appropriation or misreading of the code, for, when applying the already successful cinematographic format to a Southern setting, *The General* clearly deviates from the train scenarios whose final destination is an Eldorado, literally "a place of fabulous wealth or opportunity".

In a typical film set in the South, no such future destinations appear in the horizon, for the "perfect place", the utopian (plantation) farm is always already in the past, and in the absence of a shared "Manifest destiny" – a pre-destined, God-granted route across the American continent – Keaton's Southern train journey seemed chaotic and unruly in the eyes of the 1920s' moviegoers and critics whose reception of *The General* was lukewarm at best. Neither did Johnnie Gray's amusing efforts to try and save a Southern locomotive and maiden equal John Ford's solemn representation of Abraham Lincoln's dream of a railroad joining the eastern and western coasts of the United States in *The Iron Horse* (1924). To add to the general uneasiness, rather than stressing the spreading of "loco-motivated" ideas of

³⁰ Christa Blümlinger, "Lumière, the Train and the Avant-Garde", in Wanda Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 245.

progress and civilization over the wild continent, the diversions of the Keatonesque train encouraged laughter at generic features and regional identities on all sides. Consequently, for Keaton's contemporaries, accustomed to more unity, formality and gravity when facing filmic recreations of American history, the parodic visions were simply too much. They did not capture the ironic undertones of the railway movie, nor the way *The General* rewrote the Southern master narrative of the "Lost Cause" by pushing it beyond the boundaries of fixed icons and storylines.

The fact that *The General* was inspired by a real event hardly helped its reception, the scenario being understood as a proposal to use Civil War history as a source of dubious entertainment. Even today, despite the development of genre theory, the film does not easily fit existing generic categories. *The General* does, indeed, belong to "at least four movie genres: comedy, war, history, and chase", as Gary Giddins notes in *Warning Shadows: Home Alone with Classic Cinema* after his following observation: "The comedy is rich but deliberate and insinuating. It aims not to split your sides but rather to elicit and sustain – for seventy-eight minutes – a smile and sense of wonder, interrupted by several perfectly timed guffaws."³¹ Keeping in mind, as other film theorists have argued, that Civil War films do not belong to one single genre, the Civil War legacy remaining "a work in progress", the Keatonesque Civil War hero could not *but* be transgressive regarding the rigid cultural representations and filmic typologies which the American South relied on in the teens of cinema history.

***The General's* comic disaster management**

Buster Keaton's wish to turn the Southern loser into a hero whom the spectator could side with was completed by a love interest added to Al Boosberg and Charles Smith's script. Incorporated into the original railway chase scenario, the romantic subplot rendered the train-jacking and the subsequent rescue operation more breath-taking, and also set the film's tone and rhythm, alternating between romance and military mishaps.

After the slow-paced courting sequence at the house of the Southern Belle, the story literally hits the rails when Johnnie realizes that Annabelle (travelling to the front to see her injured father) is trapped aboard one of the cars hauled away by the stolen locomotive. In other words, Keaton's comic railway drama – with its inevitable crashes and (amorous) crushes – does not get under way until there is a "damsel in distress" somewhere on board the train.

Just as the General pulls out of sight, Johnnie Gray takes off instantly to chase the train against all odds. First on foot, then on a handcar found in a track-side shed, then on a clumsy and shaky, old-fashioned bicycle, and finally on another locomotive – all of these sequences recalling man's age-old efforts to master the wheel and its power of rotation. From this point on, the *mission impossible* is already drifting away from a mere "Civil War movie", and as Keaton later said about the second half of the movie: "The original locomotive chase ended when I found myself in Northern territory and had to desert. From then on it was my invention, in order to get a complete plot. It had nothing to do with the Civil War".³²

³¹ Gary Giddins, *Warning Shadows: Home Alone with Classic Cinema* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 227.

³² *Ibid.*, 228.

All other male heroes are left out so as to highlight the burlesque engineer's brave, solitary struggle to free his captured sweetheart, thus reinforcing the romantic and quixotic dimensions of the movie. In the process, Johnnie Gray's quick, impulsive decisions which prove counterproductive during the first half of the film, turn out to be the right approach to unexpected events in the latter part of the movie.

Early on during the pursuit, Johnnie reaches a Southern encampment where troops are getting onto the flatcars of another train. He promptly alerts them about the high-jacking, gets on the locomotive, but before departing, forgets to hook the flatcars to the engine, and dashes out alone along the tracks. When, after some enthusiastic waving and gesturing, he realizes that the army is not behind him, *The General* offers its spectators one of the most memorable illustrations of Keaton's "stone-facedness" as his blank and basically expressionless face conveys the shock of Keaton's "everyman" stoically facing a new disaster along the railway line. Both a typically American hero for his bold, enterprising engineer spirit and a more universal, epic hero, Keaton's lonely comedic character wastes no time finding seemingly absurd solutions to overcome the obstacles he is up against. The Keatonesque crossbred hero may espouse the outlines of a loser after a series of flops, at the end of the twisted railway journey, the picaresque underdog ends up gaining the upper paw. This could hardly have been possible without the picaresque mode of story-telling which tends to dismantle the exaltation of superior types, allowing incongruity to take over inflated characters and discourse.

As for the female lead, according to contemporary gender conceptions, Annabelle's contribution towards narrative agency in *The General* seems very modest, owing to her presentation as a helpless, male-dependent female. She is bound and gagged by the Northern spies in the baggage car, and even Johnnie, disguised as a Unionist soldier, carries her in a bundle, later on stomping over her body when trying to find her from among the gunnysacks stacked in the storage room of a train. During the return journey to the South, the young woman's less passive presence aboard the train, however, complicates the plot, as she participates in the maneuvering of the engine alongside the Keatonesque engineer.

Yet, rather than judging *The General's* "disaster damsel" from today's viewpoint, she should be approached in the light of other female protagonists of silent-era train films; namely the best-known railway damsel in distress played by Mabel Normand in Barney Oldfield's *Race for a Life* (1913) where a mustached villain hijacks a train, and rushes towards a young woman attached to the tracks. Parallel to this prolonged sequence which reads, through its allegoric railway language, as a rape attempt, the hero of the film is shown rushing towards the track-bound woman in an automobile, a vehicle associated with modern American lifestyle and culture (running parallel to the railway tracks at the end) to rescue the woman. When weighed against these distressed, dramatically staged, track-tied maidens in the early railroad movies, the Keatonesque Belle appears as far less affected by essentialist notions of female vulnerability and "natural" victimhood. Here, even when captured, trapped or locked away, the helpless female object at the mercy of male villains seems to leave room for creative companionship.

Whatever the case, Keaton's railway film subverts the nineteenth-century conviction that velocity was detrimental for the feminine body, overcoming the concomitant belief according to which the railroad and the cinema were thoroughly unhealthy experiences for women. Annabelle may be gagged and bound, she is ironically unfettered so as to play

gendered roles aboard a moving train. Though far from today's empowered action heroines, Annabelle can hardly be equated with the Victorian "Angel of the House", since, onboard the General, she is seen not only sweeping the floor with a broom, but tossing wood into the locomotive fire, among other acts to hinder the pursuers. Although her character is not developed more fully, Miss Annabelle Lee can no longer be equated with a "still image" or a "nonnarrative delay, pause, or freeze"³³; instead, from the victimized women foregrounded by early railway silents, she evolves into "a partner in action", blocking finally a bridge with Johnnie Gray.

The transitional quality of Southern characters is more obvious with Johnnie, Keaton's hybrid locomotive driver who straddles two spaces and ages. As a curious mixture of courteous old-world manners versus more modern, less civil ways, the loco pilot-cum-Southern gentleman could also be viewed as a ludicrous fusion of the romantic, always somewhat "ashen" and anemic Ashley Wilkes whom *Gone with the Wind* contrasts with the vibrant blockade runner, Rhett Butler (Clark Cable), a man whose borderline activities and attachment to Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) render him unworthy to wear the gray Confederate uniform.

On the narrative level, *The General's* exploitation of the railway as a ready-made site of drama becomes increasingly manifest as the plot evolves from a singular train-napping into a series of escalating adversities and disasters, until the final cataclysm: the climactic battle sequence of the film, and the spectacular collapse of the Texas from a bridge into the Rock River deep below.

Like the first railway movie, *The Great Train Robbery*, associated with the American West, *The General* was not shot on location in the South that it was meant to emblemize, but in Oregon. During the film's most spectacular sequence – said to be the single most expensive shot in silent era movies – five hundred extras were hired from the Oregon National Guard. Dressed up in Union uniforms, they were filmed moving from left to right; then from right to left after changing into Confederate uniforms. More importantly, during the battle sequence, a real train was filmed falling from a bridge into a gorge after Johnnie had constructed a pyre of firewood logs on the tracks to try and cut off the Yankees. To shoot the sequence, the Texas was driven onto the burning bridge, prior to its collapse. The locomotive wreck was left in the river bed and became a kind of tourist attraction, before it was collected as scrap metal during World War II.

The fact that *The General's* hero was no longer a figure from the static patriarchal, agricultural past certainly facilitated the scenario's pulsating movement from one disaster and railway gag to another. Keaton's little engineer distanced himself from the overdramatic "little Colonel" (Ben Cameron) of *The Birth of a Nation*, moving towards the Chaplinesque "little man" of the modern world, without falling under the dictatorship imposed by the clock that rules *Modern Times*. In *The General*, the world of trains still escapes the tyranny of preset schedules and mechanically measured time.

Conclusion

In spite of its amazing stunts, spoofs and acts in "disaster management", *The General*

³³ Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks*, 9.

was both a critical and a financial fiasco. A few years before the silents were eclipsed by the talkies, Keaton's extremely costly, last independently-produced film was a notorious flop in the box-office. After the ill-starred film, Keaton accepted to make a few films for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, but his acting style and creative imagination received little attention and understanding from the studio, and coupled with personal problems, trouble with marriage and the bottle, his career took another disastrous turn.

"The greatest of all the clowns in the history of cinema", as Orson Welles once called Keaton who was born with the cinema and grew up in a vaudeville family, however, never gave up playing disaster-prone heroes. Nor did he forget about trains, when appearing in TV-commercials or the 25-minute travelogue *The Railrodder* (Gerald Potterton, 1965) made for the National Film Board of Canada with the co-operation of the Canadian National Railroad, in which Keaton is seen travelling across the continent to British Columbia on a railway-track speeder. During one of the most memorable shots, Keaton stops in the middle of the Canadian Prairies to enjoy a cup of tea while a few bison look on. Before that, he had worn the Confederate uniform once more, but only to promote Alka-Seltzer as an old Southern soldier with a stomachache who needs a painkiller to improve his sprits.

The General proved Keaton's capacity to draw on multiple American and European sources to serve his parodies, as well as on warfare. From this perspective, and as a possible response to criticism for his treatment of Civil War memory in the 1920s, Keaton's cinematic South-telling seems to resonate less with history books than with the kind of characters found, for instance, in the works of Mark Twain, the Southern writer known for his "tall tales" on delightfully exaggerated folk heroes. Similarly to Twain, Keaton refused to reduce life to small-spirited antagonisms. His comically comingling characters bring forth a variety of traditions, including the carnivalesque, perceptible through his parodic, pacifist play with military uniforms, when he derides romantic ideals and medieval codes of courage. This is demonstrated at the end of *The General* when the railway engineer is promoted to a Confederate army lieutenant: much as Johnnie Gray desires the status ensured by the (oversized gray Confederate) uniform, the trouble he has managing his sword proves that he never definitely fits into *one* posture.

As we have seen, *The General's* ultimately triumphant anti-hero turned his back to the representation of the Confederate States so infamously glorified a decade earlier in *The Birth of a Nation* in which D. W. Griffith re-appropriated Sir Walter Scott's medieval knights and the figure of the "damsel in distress" in his technically brilliant yet despicable effort to white-wash the Ku Klux Klan. In this respect, *The General* resonates more intensively than Keaton's contemporaries might have imagined with cultural history than it does with military history. For not only does the film reveal a wish to recreate Edgar Poe's "Annabelle Lee" (1849) and to deride excessive hero worship, this free-flowing railway parody also resonates with Cervantes' seventeenth-century hero in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*. If this were the case, the crisscrossing of tracks by Keaton's resourceful New World railway engineer could open another chapter in the counter-history of the Civil War, as he liberates his own Dulcinea on an "iron horse" of a new species, a ludicrous filmic avatar of the Old World Rosinante.