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Source: *College Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Oral Fixations: Cannibalizing Theories, Consuming Cultures (Winter, 2001), pp. 84-104

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25112561>

Accessed: 08-03-2019 19:50 UTC

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Eating Their Words: Consuming Class a la Chaplin and Keaton

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[Steak] figures in all surroundings of alimentary life: flat, edged with yellow, like the sole of a shoe, in cheap restaurants; thick and juicy in the bistros which specialize in it; cubic, with the core all moist throughout beneath a light charred crust, in haute cuisine. It is a part of all the rhythms, that of the comfortable-bourgeois meal and that of the bachelor's bohemian snack. It is a food at once expeditious and dense, it effects the best possible ratio between economy and efficacy, between mythology and its multifarious ways of being consumed. (Barthes 1991, 63)

Eating is repeatedly associated with issues of social standing in the films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. The importance of this specifically oral activity in a cinematic era that was decidedly non-aural lies in the convergence of humor and criticism negotiated by these two comic per-

sonalities. The process of eating and the gags that surround that process stand in place of vocal critiques concerning class and, on occasion, ethnic distinction. In the end these silent scenes of consumption speak volumes about the implicit relationship between food and social position. Eating is a highly sensitized and cacophonous activity; it is seldom silent. Keaton and Chaplin thus explore the gastronomic process in a way that unveils the unspoken assumptions concerning social position that lay behind the exclusively visual consumption of their cinema's subjects.

The two directors/performers do, however, approach their topic differently. While Chaplin's food-based critiques are a direct outgrowth of his larger political concerns, Keaton's arise predominantly from his *personal* role as a Hollywood outsider. While a general notion of "class" is critical to both, Chaplin's explorations of the topic of food and its consumption frequently center on the laboring or sub-laboring classes and their want for food. Chaplin's Tramp frequently goes hungry, and below the surface of the comedy lies a sharp critique of the power structure that has given rise to this state of affairs. In Keaton's films hunger is less often at issue; in fact, Keaton frequently plays economically comfortable, even rich characters. His comedies of food revolve more frequently around the exclusive and familial space of the dinner table and his characters' usual inability to feed themselves stems not from class standing but from their naivete, stupidity, bad timing, or, most interesting to a biographical understanding of Keaton's roles, their inappropriate family name.

Where food is a common theme to the films of Charlie Chaplin, however, it is also an important *structural* and *organizational* device for Buster Keaton, whose allegories for human experience often follow the pattern of consumption, digestion, and expulsion. While both directors relied upon the common experience or *language* of food, it was for Chaplin a language of inequity expressed in terms of having and not having. Keaton's films more often depict their main character himself as a consumable product; an idea importantly related to Keaton's own feelings within the Hollywood machine.

To approach the cinema of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton academically is perhaps to betray both directors in a fundamental way. A strictly academic analysis of their films works against the basic precept of comedy, which intends to make spectators laugh (even if other emotional, intellectual, or political intentions may be present)—criticism, of course, rarely achieves this kind of response. This is not to claim naively that comedy cannot be analyzed, though it rarely is to a satisfying degree largely because humor is decidedly one of the more difficult human reactions to theorize. Rather, we would like to suggest that comedy deserves a different approach, one that resists creating for its reader the opposite effect intended by the films

themselves. That which is intellectual is often at odds with that which is comical. If this sounds not only very French, but very 1950s in its desire to maintain a critical playfulness, it is because it is.

In 1957 Roland Barthes published *Mythologies*, a collection of immensely readable essays on everyday French culture and the language that culture speaks. Barthes found in the everyday—"Steak and Chips," "Toys," "Plastic," just to name a few—a mythological linguistic model. Culture, Barthes suggests, speaks its own language and the mythologist's job is to translate but not to alienate. This article, while not itself a rigidly semiotic analysis, looks to the critical work of Barthes for inspiration and as a model for understanding the politico-comical role of consumption in the works of Chaplin and Keaton. Barthes, who sought to unravel cultural myths with an acute attention to the myriad subtleties of language and signs, also sought not to kill his subjects through a decidedly academic "critical distance." His is a style of writing that elegantly infused even the most mundane elements of contemporary culture with humor, irony (when irony had *meaning* but wasn't necessarily "mean") and, perhaps most importantly, affection, so that their value or "significance" might be assessed without the relentlessly icy veneer of critical scrutiny. We cannot (and do not) hope to replicate his voice, but the spirit of Barthes's passion for his subjects will, we hope, not be lost in what follows.

By turning to Barthes, specifically his 1950s writings that deal with images of food and consumption as nationally important signifiers, we mean first and foremost to demonstrate the ways that Chaplin and Keaton approached culture in a similar fashion. We therefore situate Chaplin and Keaton as earlier critical-comic cultural essayists, using a different medium but with very similar ideas about the ways in which signs can be employed to both comic and critical effect. Following Barthes's model, we propose that eating is a linguistically and culturally significant endeavor. Food is, in other words, a language. It is a recognizable and shared language of need, one that requires little verbal assistance to aid its signification. Our bodies talk to us when we need it, and when we're done with it. Food signifies much about class and ethnicity, as it does about the social conventions that surround it. One need only to think of caviar, a TV dinner, or as Barthes points out a steak to recognize that food is invested with an abundance of cultural baggage which requires little narration to comprehend. The consumption of food is thus one of the most basic and easily represented of human situations; no wonder, then, that Keaton and Chaplin should repeatedly return to this subject as a means of conveying emotion and social criticism on an almost universally recognizable level.

The quote from Barthes that opens this introduction begins to establish the associations between food and class that will be explored in the rest of

this article through the works of Keaton and Chaplin. Barthes correctly detects a mythological significance in the form and function of steak—it is not just meat, one might summarize, but meat that *speaks* of its consumer and the culture of consumption. As Barthes notes, steak “is the heart of meat, it is meat in its pure state; and whoever partakes of it assimilates a bull-like strength” (1991, 62). The filmmakers examined here had similar notions of the subtleties of food’s abilities to signify, for their films repeatedly envision moments of consumption that are intended to express despite their characters’ relative silence. When the starving Chaplin character nibbles on a boot in his 1925 film *The Gold Rush*, he treats the moment as if he were biting into the steak of the bourgeois, savoring even the cobbler’s nails as if extracting from them the “raison d’être of steak” (62). What makes this scene so comic, however, is that his is literally the steak that is “flat, edged with yellow,” not just “like the sole of a shoe” but the sole of the shoe itself.

All of the films examined here play with the humor of filling one’s mouth when the technological possibility of speaking did not exist. Food and its consumption thus become alternative visual languages used to convey the filmmakers’ concerns with orality. Food is used to effectively and economically make the primarily class-based myths exposed by Chaplin and Keaton digestible to their audience through the “glazing,” to borrow another of Barthes’s culinary-based terms of comedic effect. In “Ornamental Cookery,” Barthes discusses the concept of “glazing” as a means to “disguise the primary nature of foodstuffs” (1991, 78); Keaton and Chaplin’s comedic rendering of consumption and class standing has a similar effect, for it disguises the often political (and always personal) nature of their critiques to make them more immediately palatable.

So let us now proceed to the meat of our analysis.

Charlie Chaplin

Down in Hollywood you will frequently hear people talk about Charlie’s tightness. Hollywood likes a good fellow who spreads his money like butter on toast. (Gehring 1983, 102)

Whether commenting upon the immigrant’s economic fragility or the mechanized fate of the modern factory worker, Chaplin repeatedly addresses social inequities through the metaphor of consumption. Chaplin’s personal experience with the plight of poverty and social disenfranchisement informed his depictions of the connections between class and consumption. In 1896 Chaplin’s family was forced to enter the Lambeth Borough workhouse in London where his life took on what Wes Gehring has termed “a Dickensian quality” (1983, 5). Perhaps this is why, as Barthes points out in his

brief section of *Mythologies* entitled “The Poor and the Proletariat,” “for Chaplin, the proletarian is still the man who is hungry” (1991, 39). Barthes is right to note that hunger—most often appearing in Chaplin’s film narratives in the form of an individual in pursuit of food—is the primary mode of political signification employed by Chaplin to this effect. This is, no doubt, largely a result of his own relationship to poverty and its consequences. As his mother struggled with her mental health during these impoverished years Chaplin interpreted her resulting insanity as her means of escaping the degradation of poverty. He would later negotiate his escape and ascension through the personification of the Tramp, a character who would serve as a constant reminder of these origins. For twenty-two years the Tramp’s iconography—baggy trousers, tattered coat, bowler hat, moustache, and cane—silently spoke volumes about making it in American culture.

Chaplin’s Mutual films, twelve in all between 1916 and 1917, brought him the phenomenal sum of \$670,000. Perhaps ironically, these films revolved around the figure of the Tramp whose chronic battles with poverty, unemployment, hunger, and social alienation are typically overcome through whimsical reversals or disruptions of fate. This is precisely what makes the Tramp funny in the first place—his ability to transcend the typically insurmountable barriers of poverty with a wink and a smile. All of these films confront class disparity in one way or another. *Easy Street*, released on October 2, 1916, tells the story of urban poverty through the Tramp’s humble beginnings at a hope mission to his eventual police beat on the toughest street in town. As an officer the Tramp not only cleans up the neighborhood through several comic run-ins with the mob of street rowdies, but also helps a poor woman to steal food from the local grocer. He is a sympathetic symbol of authority, a modern day Robin Hood, and, one might add, he acts in an ideologically communistic fashion. His interpretation of justice is tempered by his knowledge of the effects of poverty that here center upon the thematic of hunger driving the woman to criminal behavior in the first place. The Tramp thus decriminalizes the woman’s act by becoming an active participant in it; her poverty justifies subverting the capitalist exchange and procuring her food by any means necessary.

In a later scene, the Tramp assists a large family living in a one-room tenement during feeding time. Like a farmer feeding his chickens, the Tramp throws food to the kids on the floor. Transforming a scene of squalid poverty into a tragicomic analogy, Chaplin uses humor to arouse the pathos of his audience who laugh not at the conditions of the family but at the way the Tramp seeks to deal with their condition. Unlike Progressive Era reformers who sought to improve the conditions of the underprivileged through exposé tactics employed by individuals such as Upton Sinclair, whose novel

The Jungle sought both to advocate socialism and to expose working class slavery, Chaplin sought to convey his political attitudes through carefully calculated humor, not through graphic images of filth and poverty. In a tweaking of Sinclair's famous statement that he "aimed at the public's heart and by accident . . . hit it in the stomach" because his novel resulted in food reforms, not social reforms, Chaplin could very much be said to be "aiming at the public's stomach in an attempt to hit them in the heart." The Tramp's sentimental pleas often rely heavily on the drama of the impoverished dining room table and on his characters' necessary oral fixations.

Trying to figure out how to negotiate the urban landscape of poverty, the Tramp is always in danger of losing the fight against capitalist culture. In fact, his characters almost always appear oblivious to the basic tenets of economic exchange, acting quite naturally—one might even say instinctively—to procure a meal without adhering to the seemingly obvious rules of the capitalist market. In *The Immigrant*, released June 17, 1917, the Tramp arrives in the "land of liberty" on a boat full of immigrants, finds money, and then tries to eat in a restaurant. The first exchange in the restaurant revolves around the Tramp's confusion over the social convention of removing one's hat at the dinner table—something that is utterly lost when the waiter attempts to politely remind the Tramp of his impropriety. Their comic exchange is based upon a fundamental miscommunication: the Tramp is hungry and wants food, the waiter simply wants the Tramp to behave in a fashion befitting a public dining room. Upon eventually receiving his class-

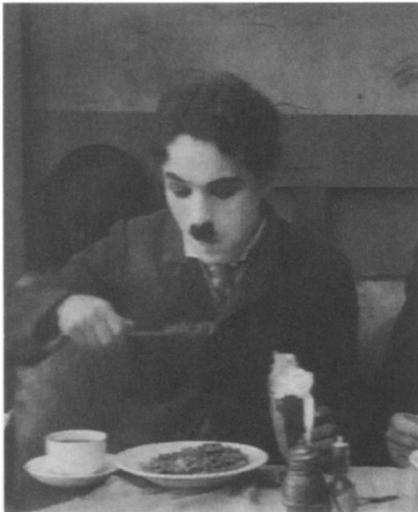


Figure 1: The Tramp finally gives in to his needs and madly shovels the beans into his mouth in *The Immigrant*.

marked serving of beans—a food item we might posit as the antithesis of the Barthesian bourgeois steak—the Tramp proceeds to eat them one by one until he succumbs to his hunger and begins to shovel the beans into his mouth. The gag is humorous precisely because the spectator intuits the irony of the Tramp's hunger in conflict with the restaurant's middle class conventions. His attempts at *genteel* behavior are thus thwarted by his *visceral* needs; he is hungry, not attempting to fit into the social conventions of public food consumption. But the Tramp character is not conscious of the critique that Chaplin the director is leveling through such a contrast; as Barthes notes, "ensnared in his starva-

tion, Chaplin-Man is always just below political awareness” (1991, 39). While the character may be blind to the social commentary building around him, his ignorance makes the critique all the more beguiling.

These different levels of awareness—the Tramp’s naivete, Chaplin the director’s ironic distancing, and the audience’s perception of both—converge around these moments of consumption in ways that mark the films themselves as semiotically aware. By this we mean to suggest that Chaplin produces a double discourse: as the Tramp he is the unknowing, perhaps ambiguous sign, but as Chaplin the director he is creating a critical and specific reading of that sign. In this latter role, Chaplin performs a kind of cultural work that is analogous to that of Roland Barthes. Chaplin is, in other words, acting as a cultural interpreter to his own performance, rendering his own on-screen behavior politically legible through comic intervention. To demonstrate this we return to the meal at hand and to the Tramp’s behavior towards another (female) immigrant attempting to satisfy her hunger. As always the Tramp is generous, even when possessing limited resources, here offering her lunch though he does not possess the financial means to follow through with this offer. The audience knows this; the waiter and the girl do not. But the Tramp’s actions are rendered excusably unlawful because they are rooted in the same fundamental needs that legitimize his thieving in *Easy Street*. As director, Chaplin creates a critical-comic moment *glazed*, as it were, by the antics of the comfortably familiar Tramp.

There is also a consistency to Chaplin’s stance, for those who need most are always the most giving to others in his films. Sentimental appeals, especially to Christian virtue, are at the heart of Chaplin’s narratives and the Tramp is always on the side of the spiritually benevolent. While the co-existence of communist and Christian ideology complicates an understanding of Chaplin’s politics, the films themselves ease any tensions between the two in favor of an idealized fantasy of plenitude and comfort for all. Such innate goodness is also always set in contrast to the avarice of the rich and the intolerance of the capitalist, here manifest by the waiter who beats up another patron for not having enough money, much to the Tramp’s dismay. After a series of failed attempts, the Tramp figures out a way to pay for their meals (using someone else’s money, of course) and even to leave a tip for the vitriolic waiter. Such triumphs over capitalism work because the Tramp is able to utterly subvert capitalism—he consumes, but does not pay and thus does not labor for his pay. Rather, his labor comes in the form of inventing a way around the need to possess his own capital in the first place.

Even when the Tramp does go to work for his wages, food remains a way to represent visually the disparities between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” In *Behind the Screen*, released on November 13, 1916, the Tramp is hired as a

stagehand on a movie set, an aptly self-conscious place to play out the drama of class and consumption. During the lunch hour, the Tramp unveils his paltry lunch of white bread—an unmistakable symbol of poverty not unlike the beans in *The Immigrant*. His boss, however, slowly unpacks a dozen or so pies and proceeds to consume all of them. The boss' consumption is on such a grand scale that the allegory of the overindulgent upper class would be difficult to miss. This hardly-veiled critique of economic hierarchy is further enhanced when the Tramp attempts to supplement his meatless sandwich by “borrowing” his neighbor's meat when he isn't looking. While on the one hand an utterly unreal comic situation, this transaction also subtly suggests a form of revolution by advocating the usurpation of goods—a common theme in Chaplin's films. The desperate worker is justified in whatever deeds he must do to get a square meal and Chaplin thus effectively eradicates the line between capitalism and criminality in reference to the plight of the poor.

The white bread sandwich also specifically locates Chaplin's critique of working class exploitation in the modern urban world. Unlike the famous boot-eating scene in his 1925 film *The Gold Rush*—a film that flirts with cannibalism jokes in rural prospecting country at the turn-of-the-century—Chaplin's Mutual Films depict the *mise-en-scène* of the city, a place in which anything can happen because the city itself allows for so much contact between the classes. These are often comedies of manners in which the humor is based largely upon the Tramp's unfamiliarity with the conventions of the bourgeoisie. In *The Adventurer*, released on October 17, 1917, Chaplin plays an escaped convict who by rescuing rich people ends up mingling with a class of society he is unprepared for. When served ice cream, the Tramp acts according to experience and treats the glass bowl as he would a cone. When

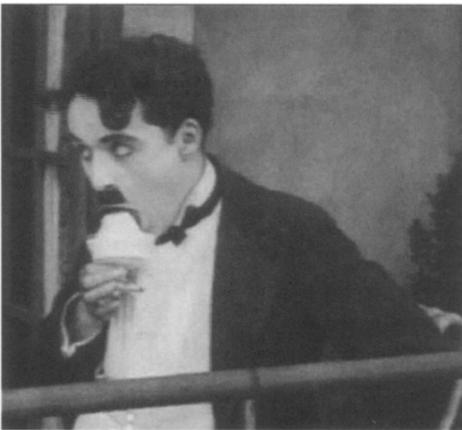


Figure 2: Mistakenly imitating the lower class conventions he's familiar with, the Tramp licks his ice cream out of a glass bowl as if it were a cone in *The Adventurer*.

the Tramp attempts to mimic his companion's proper use of the spoon it results in the ice cream's ending up down his pants, a mistake that literally (and humorously) cools off any of the lower class man's unspeakable desires. A subtler version of the pie in the face gag, Chaplin's ice cream in the lap demonstrates the comic disparity between the worlds of the immensely rich and the immensely poor while also humorously demarcating sexual boundaries. The Tramp, this scene reminds us,

makes little sense amongst the upper classes and less sense still in situations in which a sexual transcendence of these classes might occur.

A similar series of class-based behavioral discrepancies occurs in *The Count*, released on September 4, 1916. Masquerading as the secretary to a man masquerading as a count, the Tramp dramatizes a series of public misinterpretations of etiquette at a dinner party. First scratching his head with a fork, the Tramp proceeds to struggle with the consumption of both spaghetti and a watermelon. While being quite inventive in his methodology, the



Figure 3: In *The Count*, the socially outclassed Tramp uses his spaghetti fork to scratch his head in a perplexing table gesture.

narrative takes advantage of the others at the dinner party by providing reverse shots of their laughter. The Tramp's innocence and bumpkinesque pleasure are thus mediated through the eyes of the wealthy, genteel class. The Tramp becomes a jester-like spectacle who is scoffed at for his ignorance of the most basic rules of the table. However, Chaplin has transformed this scenario into another opportunity to enact an ironically distanced social critique because the spectator's sympathies always lie with the Tramp, whom we know to possess a kind of spiritual and emotional goodness that is virtually absent in any of the cultural elite who deride him. Unlike the others at the table, the Tramp wants merely to consume the food in front of him—his is a meal of necessity, not a meal of elitist display. His oral fixation, in other words, has merit while theirs—based upon superfluous conventions—does not.

In the Tramp's final cinematic appearance, *Modern Times* (1936), Chaplin bids his alter ego farewell through a narrative involving the familiar tropes of poverty and unemployment. This "mostly" silent film cleverly sums up the

concerns of this analysis by linking the process of eating and consumption to poverty, the working class, and the seemingly unstoppable impulses of modernity. Throughout the film the Tramp is constantly in trouble because of food, so much so that appetite appears to be linked with guilt and criminality as a condition of modern culture. In one of the film's best-known scenes, the Tramp is subjected to a test of a newly developed feeding machine. As the "mechanical salesman" explains on the record that accompanies the machine, it is "a practical device that automatically feeds your men while at work. Don't stop for lunch—be ahead of your competitor. The Bellows feeding machine will eliminate the lunch hour, increase your production, and decrease your overhead." Chaplin's critique is transparent here as he derides the Taylorization of America through the working man's stomach.

Including features such as the automaton soup plate, the hydrocompressed sterilized mouth wiper, and the revolving plate with automatic food pusher, the feeding machine both infantilizes and injures the Tramp during the trial run. When the machine shorts, the men ignore the Tramp who is bearing the brunt of the machine's malfunctioning because they are focused on trying to fix the machine; they, too, are blinded to human suffering by their pursuit of the almighty dollar and the power of the corporate sale. When they get the machine up and running again, soup is spilled on the Tramp; when they try again, food is thrown in his face, bolts are accidentally fed to him (making him a proto-cyborg of the working class), and a pie is put in his face (a clever final nod to the low-comedic tradition from which Chaplin himself emerged). The final analysis made by the bosses—"It's no good—it isn't practical"—understates the utter disregard for the human component in this equation by solidifying Chaplin's understanding of the intersection between humor and capitalist critique.

The working man played by Chaplin thus remains unsatiated by the corporate-driven machine. Several sequences later, however, the Tramp uses his appetite and his economic frailty not only to his advantage, but in a fashion that allows Chaplin to point out the ironies of capitalist culture. Realizing that in jail one is given both shelter and food, things that in the real world are much harder to come by, the Tramp sets out to get arrested. His method of pursuing this goal suggests that the getting of food is to a certain degree inherently criminal in nature. In these scenes the Tramp plays the role of the pre-capitalist hunter and gatherer lost in a modern world but aware of the fact that he will be "rewarded" for this behavior by being brought to a place in which he is given three square meals a day. A similar concept is driven home in a later scene when a group of bandits try to rob a department store the Tramp is supposed to be guarding, claiming ironically and incorrectly that, "We ain't burglars—we're hungry."

After the Tramp at first fails to achieve his goal of incarceration by unsuccessfully trying to take the blame for stealing a loaf of bread, he enters a cafeteria and loads two trays of food to the brim. Intercut with a scene of the Gamin (Paulette Goddard) being arrested for her role in the loaf-stealing, the Tramp proceeds to consume a humanly impossible amount of food before strolling up to the cash register and, en route, inviting a police officer to join him through the window. With the officer as witness, the Tramp is unable to pay the bill and he is dragged off, though not before grabbing a toothpick with which to clean his teeth as he is escorted out the door. When the officer is momentarily distracted, the Tramp also decides to cap off his meal with a cigar—one that he can't pay for, of course—just to ensure that his criminality will be properly rewarded.

Food feeds the appetite. Yet in Chaplin's world the appetites are multiple, layered, even confused. The Tramp feeds himself in the above sequence, but physical satiation is hardly the point. The Tramp seeks in his quest for jail simplicity, regularity, and consistency—not abundance or extravagance. His "hunger" is a distinctly socialist hunger, an idea that is playfully hinted at when the Tramp is arrested early in the film for accidentally "participating" in a socialist rally. Nonetheless, food is the Tramp's mythologically signifying language of revolt. It is through his disruption of and intervention in the mediated and economically grounded distribution of food that the Tramp is able to communicate larger ideas about social inequity. The comedy of this sequence also relies heavily upon the Tramp's invitation of a policeman to witness his performance of criminality—his social commentary turns upon the spectacle of an individual intentionally defying the law in order to be saved from the rigors of capitalist culture through incarceration. This exchange—of freedom for imprisonment, of starvation for nurturance—speaks to the nature of society from a perspective that sees culture as operating on a Darwinistic model of survival. For the little guy, it is safer to be locked up than out in the wilds of the real world.

While the Tramp's quest for incarceration is realized, it is perhaps the film's fantasy sequence that best brings together the ideas of class, food, consumption, and myth. The scene begins when the Tramp and the "Gamin" witness an exaggerated scene of domestic bliss, with a Tramp "spoken" intertitle that reads "Can you imagine us in a little home like that?" The Tramp's question initiates a fantasy in which the Gamin is a housewife, neatly attired in an apron and bustling about her own home. Interestingly, this is not an extravagant home—the Tramp's fantasy is based in realism and the modesty of the home reflects this. In the fantasy the Tramp has also undergone little transformation—he is still a worker, still dressed as the Tramp. The fantasy sequence thus imagines a world that is little more than working class. But the

house is not entirely everyday, for it is a symbol of plentitude and this symbolism is termed, not surprisingly, in relation to consumption. In the sequence the home is bustling with food-related items: the Tramp picks an orange off a tree that is hanging literally into the window of the house, and plates decorate the mantle in the living room. The house becomes increasingly ridiculous in its abundance. In the kitchen, the Tramp summons a cow to the door and the cow milks itself while the Tramp nibbles on grapes hanging at the back door as the Gamin fries up a steak. This relay of food suggests a fantastic abundance, and one that is clearly intended to invoke the kind of mythological associations discussed by Barthes. For in the fantasy even the house itself is figured in terms of food—its comical accoutrements are, for the most part, edible.

Most important, however, is that the fantasy scene ends before they actually get to eat their meal. Here the reality of poverty and hunger is unmasked through a disruption of the abundance of food. Much as the fantasy itself is untenable, so too is such oral plenitude for these utterly disenfranchised characters. While the Tramp of the fantasy is making motions of cutting meat on the table, the shot dissolves into “reality” where the Tramp is making cutting motions in the air—suggesting, of course, the fate of all such fantasies. Though he is smiling, clearly satisfied by the fantasy to a certain degree, the Gamin is shot staring directly into the camera in a rare engagement with the spectator. She rubs her stomach and clearly mouths the words, “Boy, I’m sure hungry,” though the intertitles elide this bit of dialogue. This elision is fascinating, however, for it again reminds us of the effectiveness of the metaphor of consumption. As a filmmaker Chaplin was quite aware of this potency—that the universal nature of food as a language negates the need for more traditional means of communication (here, the intertitle). Furthermore, the fantasy has clearly been only that for the Gamin, and when the Tramp sees the immediacy of her hunger he decides (comically, of course), “I’ll do it! We’ll get a home, even if I have to work for it.” The Tramp has conflated food and domesticity but perhaps rightly so. For while hoping to satiate the Gamin’s hunger, the Tramp vows to get a *house*, not a meal. This slippage suggests the Tramp’s confusion and is also central to the film’s social critique; the various signifiers of class (clothing, shelter, food) converge in the film—they, in a sense, are the film’s *mise-en-scène*. All of these items surround the Tramp; he works in a department store and a restaurant in the film. The items themselves, however, remain (except through his always excusable criminal behavior) just out of reach.

Buster Keaton

An aficionado of great food, Buster Keaton was known to tuck into a plate of just about anything so long as it was well prepared. The dishes he liked least were stews and macaronis, probably because he associated them with the boardinghouse fare of his early years in vaudeville. (Meade 1995, 309)

Chaplin believed that communism was going to transform society by abolishing poverty and hunger. Then children the world over would have full stomachs and shoes on their feet. That was all he wanted, he said.

Keaton stared at him.

“But Charlie,” he said, “do you know anyone who doesn’t want that?” (Meade 1995, 112)

Chaplin, both by his contemporaries and in current film scholarship, is acknowledged as a politically and socially conscious director/actor whose wide-angle social commentary has already been discussed in the first section of this article. Buster Keaton was less socially and politically concerned, and in fact harbored a certain resentment toward Chaplin’s political views, as the above conversational fragment indicates. Keaton’s comedy is more personal in its intent and its scope, concerning itself primarily with the “politics” of fitting in or not fitting in—issues that haunted Keaton’s personal life. If Chaplin’s concerns can be characterized as *wide-angle*, Keaton, both in the formal and metaphorical sense, relied more heavily upon the *close-up*. This is not to imply that Keaton was an innocent. In fact, his very personal humor in retrospect provides the sharpest of cinematic social commentaries; like Chaplin’s, these visual commentaries revolve largely around things oral. The under-explored political implications of Keaton’s comedy, however, are complicated and, at times, the concentration on the personal runs the risk of re-affirming many of the classist myths Chaplin fought against.

Keaton’s relationship to the concept of orality is likewise complicated. Keaton himself was practically illiterate, a fact that troubled him through most of his life. He was also nearly deaf (at times completely so), which made communication with other parties, especially educated parties, even more difficult. Keaton’s inability to converse intelligently made him feel occasionally outclassed and like an outsider among the Hollywood elite with whom he was quickly grouped in the 1920s both because of his cinematic success and his marriage into Hollywood’s then-reigning matriarchal family, the Talmadges, with whom he would never feel entirely comfortable. A rather infamous practical joker, Keaton’s communication skills were confined primarily to his physical presence, his “body language”—an important part of silent film in general, to be sure, but especially important to the verbally and aurally challenged Buster Keaton. It is not coincidental that his cinematic

body language often focused on the consumption of food—another form of orality that seemed to level the playing field for Keaton.

Much critical attention has already been given to Buster Keaton's body, from his lanky acrobatic grace to his startlingly beautiful and comedically perfect deadpan expression. Where Chaplin seemed not Chaplin but "the Tramp" in his comedies, Keaton is surprisingly un-made up (except around the eyes) and relies less on worn props for his comedic effect (his porkpie hat being the only real exception). Keaton *is* Keaton in his comedies—in fact, his hero is often identified in the title cards as "Buster Keaton," further illustrating the very personal nature of Keaton's comedy. His comedy comes not only from the contortions he subjects his body to but his remarkably vacant facial expressions. Facial expressions, as opposed to more "bodily" physical humor, are intensely personal and typically rely on the close-up for their effectiveness. This deadpan that has so delighted movie fans and scholars is also interestingly related to Keaton's directorial technique. Both are governed, it seems, by a logic of detachment and constraint.

Keaton's actual physical body, its diminutive qualities, is exactly opposite Fatty Arbuckle's notorious body of excess. In the early 1920s Fatty helped launch Keaton's career and also loaned his oversized pants to Chaplin's tramp costume. When scandal befell Arbuckle over the death of Virginia Rappe in 1921 (it was speculated that the corpulent Arbuckle had sexually assaulted Rappe, resulting in her death), Fatty became quickly targeted as a symbol for what was wrong with Hollywood—its excesses of consumption. Keaton's personal life never became the subject of controversy in the same way that Arbuckle's, or for that matter Chaplin's did. Both his reputation and his physicality were characterized by lack. His body, however, and his comedic attempts to provide for that body in his films also seemed to critique the culture of excess through the critical placement of personal denial.

There is, however, complexity to the simplicity of Keaton's life as there is to his comedic narratives. As Daniel Moews has pointed out:

Keaton's comedy of fixation, of unmoving motion, is characteristically created through the arranging of movements into either repetitive or symmetrical forms. A symmetrical uniformity is the cause of the laughs in many short gags and also contributes to the continuing comic ambience of many long sequences and even entire films. (Moews 1977, 21)

Moews's comments begin to suggest that Keaton, who is frequently cited as the more formally aware of the two directors explored in this analysis, is interested in the idea of food not only as a topic but as a formal structure. The "repetitive or symmetrical forms" Moews identifies are curiously analogous to the process of consumption. Keaton often relied upon the metaphor of digestion for his narrative structure—the hero is often consumed by an

unfortunate situation, usually within some complex structure, only to be expelled by story's end. Even more than Chaplin, Keaton is figured in his films as a digestible *product* at risk of being wholly absorbed into the structures that consume him, whether they be familial, social, historical, or economic. Further, a number of Keaton's repetitive and symmetrical gags, like Chaplin's, revolve around the purchasing of or consumption of food.

Early in his career Keaton directed and starred in *The Goat* (1921). This twenty-three minute short begins to explore themes that became central to his feature comedies in the late 1920s. It is a comedy of mistaken identity; Dead-Shot Dan, a notorious gunslinger, is sitting for a police mug shot when Buster walks by and peers through the bars of the jailhouse. Unlike Chaplin's films where crime is frequently what good people are reduced to because of a bad system, the criminal element in Keaton's comedy is precisely that. The category of "criminal" is, however, one into which the unsuspecting might fall. Dan, seeing our unfortunate hero, leans forward and releases the camera's shutter, taking a picture of Buster in his place. When his own picture is to be taken, he covers the lens and escapes shortly thereafter. The wanted posters all about town now have Buster's face on them and the film thus turns its comic trick on a play with visual fixations and misrepresentations.

But this largely slapstick chase comedy begins with a food gag. Along "Millionaire's Row" the camera spies a bread line—for Keaton, an unusually clear indicator of the film's period and the economic situation of that period. Buster walks to the front of the line and is told to go to the back of the line like everyone else. Buster waits patiently but the line doesn't move.

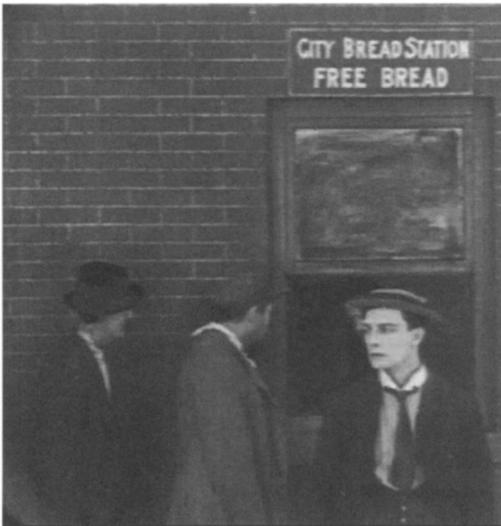


Figure 4: By the time he realizes his mistake, Buster's misreading of signs has cost him his daily bread in *The Goat*.

An extreme long shot indicates that Buster is standing in front of a tailor's shop and that the "men" in front of him are actually clothes dummies. By the time this routine is worked out, the bread is gone and our hero leaves hungry. In this gag, contained within a film about mistaken identity, Buster has misrecognized his surroundings, mistaking the plastic dummies for actual human beings. In this sense, Buster has very quietly hinted at the de-humanizing effects of poverty. The gag, however, is unusual in its setting

and its potentially broader social commentary. Most of Keaton's food related gags occur within the home, suggesting a more personal form of unwelcomeness that reflects Buster's own troubled personal life and the failure to reconcile class with domesticity. The labor implications of the breadline scene illustrate that Keaton was not unmindful of comedy's larger social potential or of food's leveling effects. But, as is so often the case, Keaton's character is of precisely the same class standing as those around him in the scene. The hunger of the queued masses is not provoked further by, for instance, a corpulent, wealthy, and ungenerous member of the upper-classes (as it might be in Chaplin's work). Rather, it is the inattentiveness of our hero that leaves him, by the end of the gag, in precisely the same hungry state he began in. It is the more familial space of the domestic dinner table, however, where Keaton's work more frequently finds itself.

A major turning point in the film also revolves around food, or the promise of food, and is more "traditionally" located. A young girl whom Buster saves early in the film invites Buster to dinner. At the table, Buster feeds bits of food to the family dog, not noticing the entrance of the girl's father whom we recognize as the plain-clothes policeman who has been pursuing him. After the food is blessed the women are ordered out of the room and Buster is cornered. At a key moment, however, Buster leaps on to the table and out of the transom and the chase begins again, this time indoors and involving elevators and staircases. The table in this film functions as an "invitation only" family location and as a space in which Keaton's identity is fragile, and about to be exposed at any moment. Keaton, in spite of the abundance of food, is made unusually vulnerable to the father's violence in this location. There are implied rules, however, in this domestically sacred location. The women are excused and the men rise from their seats before the father may react. The table is also Buster's secret weapon here, in that he uses it as a springboard to make his escape. Buster's unwelcomeness at the table is, of course, predicated upon a mistake, however, and has nothing whatsoever to do with class or ethnicity. Food, in this film and elsewhere, serves to remind the hero of his "place" or his "welcomeness" in a given *social* situation. The breadline sequence, while clearly suggesting ideas about class, does not rely on the comedic value of inequity, as it might in Chaplin, but on the hero's simpleness and bad timing.

My Wife's Relations (1922), the most autobiographical of the Keaton shorts, is a thinly veiled joke about Keaton's actual marriage into the Talmadge family and involves the idea of personal displacement in ways that reverberate in his feature films. Keaton was always uncomfortable about the fact that he had married into one of Hollywood's elite families and the Talmadges made him feel his alienation acutely. Keaton, however, replaces the

class issues that separated him from the Talmadge family with issues of ethnicity. Once again, much of the humor (and much of the plot) turns on food. Buster is described in the opening title as “a young artist pulling to get ahead.” What he is pulling is taffy and it is at his candy shop that Buster’s troubles begin. Candy is important to a later feature, *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), where a young projectionist, in an attempt to impress his girlfriend, changes a price on a box of candy. Candy in *My Wife’s Relations*, however, is not a necessarily “classed” commodity—it is not assumed to be the “fancy” food of the well to do. Buster is laboring in what we take to be the working class section of town, but the conditions under which he works are not exposed for criticism and, in fact, are abandoned rather early in the film.

The “foreign” part of town, a card tells us, is populated by speakers of so many languages that confusion is bound to occur. After a series of linguistic misunderstandings—again, a seeming autobiographical statement about Buster’s own linguistic troubles—Buster the candy shop worker finds himself married to an unwitting, rather hefty Irish woman. The woman lives with her father and three brothers, all rough looking Irishmen who instantly begin to mistreat our hero, joking that he won’t possibly last a week in their family. At the dinner table, a good deal of comedy revolves around Buster’s attempts to feed himself—and, again, the comedic effect is achieved cinematically through the use of medium close-ups of our hero’s face. Seated at the middle of the table, everything is passed through Buster who tries to sneak bites of food between passes but cannot do so. Contrary to the class-dynamics of a Chaplin film, however, Buster, it is implied, is of the same social class as the others at the table. But his not being a part of the family and his unfamiliarity with the table laws of this family make his position at the table fragile. He becomes a laborer for the feasting family and is unable to feed himself.

But Keaton’s inventiveness saves him from starvation in the end when he realizes that in order to partake of the food he must learn first how to trick the family in a language they can understand. Grace is said before the meat is served. The family all have their forks poised during the prayer and, at the word “amen,” all but Buster jab away and snatch a piece of meat for themselves. Exasperated with the whole thing, Buster rises and tears Thursday off of the calendar and draws the family’s attention to the day, horrifying the Irish Catholics who return their meat to the center of the table, giving Buster his pick. Once again, Buster turns the tables *at the table* and finds himself in a temporarily advantageous position. His placement within the domestic scene, however, is still quite tenuous—Buster’s expressionless face reveals that he is never comfortable, even in his minor victories. This uncomfortable food humor relies on displacement and misunderstanding, to be sure, but appears not to be class related. Our hero is of the same working class as the family he



Figure 5: Trying to get at the meat of the matter in *My Wife's Relations*, Buster is left behind during the pre-meal utterance of "Amen."

has unwittingly merged into and, in spite of their physical appearance, they are not villainized or in any way responsible for the hero's position. The inequity of the table, it seems, is not an inequity of privilege but one of skill, speed, and aggressiveness.

In situating moments of inequity in this fashion, Keaton climbs a slippery slope. His films, especially when viewed with Chaplin's political consciousness in mind, run the risk of being categorized as reactionary or maybe even thoughtless. The politically questionable argument that skill, speed, and aggressiveness will save the lower classes is one that Chaplin dealt with far more carefully in his own films. Matters are complicated further by the film's reliance upon race and religion for its comedic effect. The ambiguity here is frustrating: what exactly is Keaton suggesting? The film's depiction of the satiated and scheming Irish Catholic family is troublesome. Keaton's comedies, however, are less political than physical, maybe even biological. They are about endurance and stamina within the consuming situation and not about righting wrongs that extend far beyond the realm of the personal. Irish Catholicism is not *wrong* in the film, nor is it, on its own, especially funny. The hero's delayed understanding of the situation he finds himself in, however, and his ability to use his knowledge of the precepts of Catholicism for personal gain *are* funny and result in one step further in the hero's progression toward expulsion from the uncomfortable situation. Where Chaplin situated his films within the physical realm in order to point to political imbalance, Keaton's films remain within the physical and food is the literal and not the symbolic equalizer.



Figure 6: Keaton's Willie McKay in *Our Hospitality* comes close to suffering the turkey's fate when Mr. Canfield's broad carving strokes threaten to decapitate his famous deadpan.

Our Hospitality (1923) is a prequel of sorts to Keaton's 1926 masterpiece *The General*. Again, the plot revolves around issues of place and displacement. The story traces the feud between the Canfields and the McKays in the 1800s. Willie McKay (played by Keaton) inadvertently falls for the young Canfield girl and therein lies the comedy of displacement. The young girl invites him to supper and, of course, the Canfield boys resolve to kill him; but such acts of violence can't take place while he is a guest, or so reads the code of honor. At the dinner table the ensuing violence is hinted at by the father's turkey carving technique which involves long, expansive and nearly fatal sweeps of the knife in an arch quite close to Willie's neck. Again, the comedy revolves around the hero's not being welcome in the house for reasons that are not only utterly absurd and exposed to ridicule but even more importantly, for reasons that are utterly beyond his control.

Here Keaton again plays the role of the unknowing and unwanted outsider who has invaded the sacred domestic space of the dining room table. It is his family name, though, and not his class standing that marks him as "other." This point is especially relevant given the fact that several of Keaton's film's, unlike Chaplin's, trace the misadventures of uncomfortable, ill-at-ease members of the upper classes. *The Saphead* (1920), an early film directed not by Keaton but by Herbert Blaché, stars Keaton as the son of a successful Wall Street mogul perpetually out of step with other members of his so-called "class." The fact that Keaton returned to this early topic suggests that within his cinematic world "advantage" is understood in more than simply econom-

ic terms. Once again, the topic has interesting biographical reverberations for Keaton who long after his success and even well into his 1960s rediscovery, always felt personally out of place with other members of his “class.”

Both Keaton and Chaplin frequently returned to the subject of eating for its comedic and critical effects. But where Chaplin’s use of food is decidedly and overtly political, Keaton’s is extremely personal and seems to reflect his own uncomfortable position within Hollywood’s elite circles. For Keaton, the comedy of food also allowed for a strangely sophisticated form of social criticism that suggested that class standing alone and access to edible or inedible goods would not necessarily result in comfort or equality; it could equalize, but its effects were temporary at best. Food continued to be important to Keaton beyond his cinema, and later in life he would impress his Hollywood friends with elaborately prepared dishes; his Beverly Hills barbecues were legendary and, in fact, a section of Meade’s 1995 biography of Keaton is dedicated to his recipes. Feeling unwelcome himself, Keaton fought back by making others feel welcome and food was the common, though unspoken means by which he learned to communicate.

Even before his career took off, food was of great importance to Keaton. During World War I, his biographer tells us that:

In France, Keaton thought of food day and night: bloody sirloin steaks, rib roasts, great swirling hills of mashed potatoes drowned in gravy, bacon and buttery fried eggs. When he wasn’t dreaming of food he was combing the town in search of it. With his first paycheck he marched into an inn and engorged himself on a meal of rare beefsteak, french-fried potatoes, and wine straight from the caraf.” (Meade 81)

We have come full circle back to the blood-red steak that Barthes analyzes in *Mythologies*. While Barthes speaks of these items—steak, “chips,” wine—as being French items of immense symbolic experience (he even goes on to suggest that steak possesses a “national glamour”), Keaton’s concern is mythically common like the characters both he and Chaplin played. He is hungry and seeks to fill his stomach and sees that process as extending no further in the symbolic order. Where Barthes is interested in these particular food items and their relation to French nationalism, Keaton and his character are interested not in belonging to a nation but to a more immediate community—a neighborhood, a family, a dinner table. The entrance of food into the cinema of Keaton reinstates that food with a different sort of symbolic importance. True, food is a means to an end in these films, but the situations are also always filled with social and familial significance. Both Keaton and Chaplin returned to hunger so frequently not only because they experienced it themselves, but because they realized it was a shared and basic human state that signified on a variety of levels, much as Barthes realized that food possessed

a quality of collective national significance. Though Barthes says that steak is “a food which unites, one feels, succulence and simplicity” (1991, 63), it is clear that he also means to state simply that steak is “a food which unites.”

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