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Camera Man: Buster Keaton, the Dawn of Cinema, and the Invention of the Twentieth Century, by Dana Stevens. Atria Books, 2022, 432 pp.

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During his lifetime, Buster Keaton faced many comparisons to Charlie Chaplin; it is therefore ironic that now, many years after his death, he is on the receiving end of various reappraisals that compare him favourably to his great rival. For instance, the late director and film historian Peter Bogdanovich championed Keaton in his last years, making him the subject of a 2018 documentary, *The Great Buster: A Celebration*. Dana Stevens, the well-respected chief film critic of *Slate*, goes even further with her book, which seeks to link Keaton to early twentieth-century progress. Though Chaplin lived longer, Keaton's life in its vastness, stretching nearly a century, as Stevens points out, invites approaches from a historical perspective. James Curtis's book *Buster Keaton: A Filmmaker's Life* considers Keaton once again in terms of biography, rather than simply examining his output. In terms of Cinema Studies, Keaton has been well analysed. Since positive retrospectives in the 1960s, comprehensive studies of his work and detailed analyses of each of his films have been compiled by Turconi and Savio, as well as chronological approaches by Jim Kline and Sainz. The existence of an International Buster Keaton Society also ensures that despite the relative saturation of Keaton material, this book will surely find an audience among Keaton devotees.

Keaton biographers face a complex task ahead of them, managing Keaton's persona as a stuntman along with his acting ability and role as an auteur. One of these facets might be preferenced over the other; Stevens's book navigates the complexities of Buster's limitations as an actor while approaching his work from the perspective of Keaton's role as director.

Stevens, in her chronological narrative of Buster's life, applies a considered amount of historical context that allows the reader to see Keaton's life against a backdrop of wider events. While Keaton is not directly linked to such occurrences as the First World War, Stevens shows the impact events like these would have had on the decisions he made as an artist and on his life. In early chapters, for example, by establishing Buster's early years as a child performer at a time when no child endangerment laws existed preventing the young Keaton from attempting or, as Stevens contends, being forced by his parents to attempt, similar stunts on stage to those he would perform as an adult. Stevens uses meticulous research into the historical climate at the time, using a cultural methodology to assert the influence of background historical events on Keaton's own life. Conversely, she uses Keaton to tell a broader story of twentieth-century progress, both in film history and in history. There is some precedent in film biography for this: for example, Gary Wills's *John Wayne's America*, a book similar in structure to this one, uses Wayne as a way of exploring other key figures in the western such as John Ford and Harry

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Carey, but also as a way of exploring cultural issues such as the Second World War on film and the Vietnam War through Wayne's filmography. While Stevens is limited by Buster Keaton's limited use of twentieth-century events in his filmography, though *The General* takes place at the time of the Civil War and some have argued *Steamboat Bill Jr.* appears to reference the Mississippi Flood, she makes the convincing case that Buster Keaton was both influenced by his time and that time was influenced by Buster Keaton. Stevens uses a late-career increase in image product licensing as one example of how Keaton sought to ensure his legacy.

There is also some discussion of how Keaton's stunted childhood affected his adult persona and a detailed exploration of how his relationship with his father impacted his later films. Stevens reads biographical detail in films such as *Steamboat Bill Jr*., arguing the plot's climax in which Buster rescues his father-surrogate from a storm is a dramatisation of the rescue Buster never gave his father. Stevens notes that the "figure of a hulking older man" (241) recurs in Keaton's work, usually as the villain, and almost always played by familiar collaborator Joe Roberts, and she identifies the routine of the authority figure bullying the put-upon Buster as something present in, and perhaps deriving from, the Keaton family's vaudeville routines where Keaton Snr would take the role of the bully and Keaton Jr the role of the victim: "In the 1920 short *Neighbours*, the punishing paternal figure was none other than Joe Keaton, with some tricks drawn from their old familial knockabout" (241).

These observations make *Camera Man* something close to a psychological biography of Keaton, although Stevens draws clear distinctions between Keaton's filmography and his personal life when it comes to Keaton's personal relationships on-screen: "[i]nterpersonal relationships of any kind—even the romantic courtships that drive nearly every Keaton plot—are rarely the subject of his movie" (241). Furthermore, previous Keaton biographies have come under scrutiny for attempting to tie the films too closely to their creator. For instance, Rudi Blesh's book, *Keaton*, drawn from interviews with the filmmaker, has been criticised for its reliance on interviews with its then-elderly subject who may have misremembered details fifty years in the past.

Stevens' chronological approach diverges only for chapters on themes in his work that require a larger discussion, for instance, Keaton's approach to race receives a chapter ("The Darkie Shuffle") handling his use of minstrel comedy. The book's subtitle, "The Dawn of Cinema and the Invention of the Twentieth Century" is justified by the focus on prominent individuals Keaton interacted with such as Chaplin, obviously in *Limelight* (Chaplin, 1952), Roscoe Arbuckle—an early and tragic benefactor—and more overlooked figures like Mabel Normand, who Stevens uses to digress on the role of women in Keaton's Hollywood-era around the early twenties, taking in filmmakers like Alice Guy Blanche and Lois Weber. It is in sections like these that Stevens accumulates the necessary research to justify the book's subtitle, placing Keaton within the context of silent cinema at the time in regards to filmmakers like Weber and Blanche that some such as Helen O'Hara, in her book *Women Vs Hollywood* have argued are traditionally overlooked by film scholars. That this book links Buster Keaton to the wider filmmaking landscape of the early twentieth century by invoking these figures signals both how this academic atmosphere is changing as well as Stevens's own unconventional but comprehensive approach to their subject.

In this way, Stevens can weave Buster Keaton's life into a compelling tale of early twentieth-century filmmaking and culture, placing him at the centre of it all. This is not unlike how others have written of the actor's "stoneface" personality and how, in his films, he is often perceived as being affected by events rather than a driving protagonist. The most famous

example of this perhaps is the storm sequence in *Steamboat Bill Jr*. where the film and Keaton are suddenly dominated by an overbearing tempest. Others such as Josh Larsen have written of this moment as defining for Keaton's star persona, arguing that at this moment he exemplifies the calm in the middle of the storm. "In the midst of the frantic silliness surrounding him, Keaton would carve out a contemplative centre" (131). Both Stevens and Larsen dispel the notion of Buster as an unemotional presence and make the case for him as an actor of great dramatic depth. Larsen represents Keaton as being "chaotic and mediative" (131), whereas Stevens describes Keaton as a "pathos-averse director" but "wonderfully expressive" in terms of how he used his eyes (255).

The book ends with a chapter focusing on Keaton's wife, Eleanor, and how she cared for the book's subject in his final years, while speculating on what Keaton would have done if, like Chaplin, he had survived even longer. Among the issues Stevens raises are the "art house film explosion of the mid to late 1960s" and the abolition of the Hays Code—which she attributes to the career demise of Keaton's mentor, Roscoe Arbuckle—around the same era. Stevens's focus on Keaton's wife is typical of the book's method of examining figures on the sidelines of the silent star's life, making a strong case for a collaborative career rather than one driven by what critics at the time of Keaton's death would call "auteurship".

In terms of adding to existing literature on Buster Keaton, this last point signifies the book's unique insight. While other comprehensive volumes examine Keaton's career with a singular focus, this book is original in not only making the case for his collaborators but in dedicating entire sections to them, sometimes breaking off from Keaton entirely, to build up a comprehensive study not only of Buster Keaton but, as the title says, of "The Dawn of Cinema and the Invention of the Twentieth Century".

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