

While Buster Keaton's film The General is undoubtedly one of the comic masterpieces of the silent era, it is also much more if one cares to look closer. It is an attempt by Keaton to inject meaning and thought-provoking symbolism into an otherwise non-intellectual art form. The General has its share of slapstick, but also contains a message. This paper will deal with what I feel was Keaton's intended theme: war and its dehumanizing tendencies.

Intend to
And The General is a powerful commentary on war and its dehumanizing aspects: its mechanization of men into mind-
2 less robots that have no free will of their own. Keaton is also telling us that even the strongest of individuals will fall victim to this mechanization if he tries to link up with the system.

It is interesting to note that the film is based on an incident that actually occurred during the course of the Civil War. Union spies stole a Confederate train with the intentions of destroying the tracks behind them, thus crippling the South's transportation lines. However, the plot failed and the spies were overtaken and killed.¹ Keaton, striving for realism, used the actual locomotives that were involved in the historic chase.²

¹Walter Kerr, The Silent Clowns p. 247

²Blackhawk film print of The General

In the film Keaton uses trains as a visual representation of war. Both are mindless and without compassion. And both are man-made creations. Even the train's initials, W. & A. R. R. (Western and Atlantic Railroad) point to this relationship. This is why, in an early scene in the film, the train frightens a horse for no apparent reason while men standing near seem quite oblivious to it. In the same way that animals can sense upcoming disasters, the horse sees the train for what it stands.

The military men in the film (except for Johnnie Gray, Keaton's role) are as mechanized as the train. Like the train, they follow their leader's orders blindly, even if doing so means their death. Keaton plainly states this in the most famous scene in the film, in which the Union troops arrive at a bridge that Johnnie has set into flames. The Union engineer, seeing that the bridge is badly burned, hesitates to cross. But the Union officer in command says, "That bridge is not burned enough to stop you, and my men will ford the river." The engineer obeys his orders and attempts to cross. But the flaming bridge gives way, and

the engineer and the train fall to a thundering death into the water below. The men, following orders as blindly as the train, also find their death in the river when they attempt to ford it. They are just machines on the thinking equivalent of the brainless train.

Both men
Keaton

Johnnie, on the other hand, represents individuality. When Johnnie is giving chase to the military spies who have stolen his General, they do everything they can think of to try and stop him. They fail. Johnny, however, succeeds in stopping them in the reverse chase that follows later in the film. Keaton is letting us know that the creative individual will succeed when pitted against a slow-thinking machine.

Johnnie
Keaton

Keaton brings up individuality and the inefficiency of the war machine again in another scene from the film. Johnnie bends a switching track to slow his persuers down. When the Union troops arrive, their officers (played by Joe Keaton, Mike Donlim, and Tom Nawn) try and try to bend the track back, but to no avail. But a common man, alone and armed with only his ax and intelligence, fixes the problem

Keaton

not

Failure
in a minute. While this is also a commentary on the intelligence of the war machine, the point is made that a lone man, with a little brains and ingenuity can out think many.

But even Johnnie does not escape the mechanized, thoughtless machine of war. The more connected to the war Johnnie becomes, the more he loses his individuality. His treatment of Annabelle, for example, becomes less and less compassionate as the movie proceeds. In the beginning of the film she is an object that is something to be worshipped and adored. But by the time Johnnie rescues her from the Northern encampment, she is to be treated no better than the shoes that first occupied the sack she is hiding in. She is stepped on, and then dumped to the boxcar floor like a lifeless lump. But at this point Johnnie has not become completely "podded". When Johnnie finally makes it back to the Southern camp and warns of the impending attack, he is left behind by the Confederate forces rushing to meet the enemy. He is still

Success + 13
this
90.8

not fully accented as a part of the machine, and this is further illustrated with Johnny's treatment of a sword lying on the ground. He picks it up and proceeds to manipulate it into an antagonist, as Johnny the individual always somehow managed to do with "things". Even during the battle scene Johnny can't control the sword. Not until Johnny is promoted to lieutenant and thus officially becomes part of the machine can he handle the sword with ease. And that final induction scene, with Johnny enlisting this time as a "soldier" instead of an "engineer" Johnny's loss of character is evident.

And in the film's final scene, Johnnie, the new lieutenant, sits on the General next to Annabelle. He attempts to kiss her, but some soldiers walk by and salute him. Johnny, now part of the machine, must salute back. More soldiers walk by. More salutes. Finally scores of soldiers walk by. Johnny salutes them with what E. Rubinstein calls "piston-like regularity in perpetual, indiscriminate salute."³ Keaton is telling us that Johnny has

³E. Rubinstein, Filmguide to the General. Page 64

*the sword is
important
to the General
of the shoot*

fully become a cog in the machine.

The General is a powerful commentary on what a de-humanizing thing war is. And Keaton tells us, with that final scene, that even the most independant of individuals will fall victim to this mechanization is he allows himself to connect with the system. And the film is a brave attempt by Keaton to inject some intellect into an otherwise non-thought provoking film style- the silent comedy. And perhaps Keaton paid for it, as the film was not as successful as had been hoped. It has been only in recent times that The General has been recognized for what it is: a masterpiece of film.

*you have some good
ideas —
develop the comic
elements now
A*

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