Metaphors in Buster Keaton's Short Films

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Abstract

This article seeks to address the topic of metaphor in relation to the nineteen two-reel short films Buster Keaton made between 1920 and 1923. These films are characterized by a comedy of aesthetics and kinetics whereby the themes come across primarily visually through aspects of film style and Keaton's body as opposed to narrative. It is our claim that within these confinements of the imagery metaphor plays a crucial role in transferring thought and thematic meaning. In demonstrating this claim we shall fall back on recent developments within metaphor studies, in particular Forceville's newly introduced concept of multimodal metaphor which shall allow us to grasp the significant role of the body in identifying metaphor.

Résumé

Le présent article s'interroge sur la question de la métaphore dans les 19 courts métrages que Buster Keaton réalisa entre 1920 et 1923. Ces films comiques mettent l'accent sur l'esthétique et le corps en mouvement. Les thèmes sont rendus visuellement par le style filmique et le corps de Keaton, et beaucoup moins par la narration. Notre analyse permet de conclure que la métaphore joue un rôle crucial dans le transfert de pensée et de signification thématique. Pour étayer cette conclusion nous faisons appel aux développements récents dans les études des métaphores, notamment au concept de métaphore multimodale. Ce concept a été introduit par Forceville. Il nous permet de saisir le rôle important joué par le corps keatonien dans l'identification de la métaphore.

Dedicated to the Memory of Francis Ramirez

In the period from 1920 until 1923 Buster Keaton made nineteen two-reel short films. Rather than putting weight on dramatic conflict these films are characterized by a comedy of aesthetics and kinetics whereby the themes come across primarily visually through aspects of film style and body as opposed to narrative. It is within these confinements of the imagery that metaphor plays a crucial role in transferring thought and thematic meaning. However, this reference to metaphor in relation to Buster Keaton's imagery has largely been neglected by film scholars. It is our aim to foreground the concept of metaphor and to show how metaphor is an inseparable part of the aesthetic richness of Keaton's films. In doing so we shall fall back on recent developments within metaphor studies, in particular Forceville's newly introduced concept of multimodal metaphor which shall allow us to grasp the significant role of the body in identifying metaphor. For a review of the literature concerning conceptual metaphors and their application to non-verbal manifestations, and for definitions of concepts such as 'image metaphor', 'structural-conceptual metaphor', 'source domain', 'target domain' and 'modality' (on which this paper relies), we refer the interested reader to Coëgnarts and Kravanja (2012).

The metaphor as part of Keaton's imagery

In his excellent study *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping* (2007) the American art philosopher and film scholar Noël Carroll applies a visual approach to Keaton's *The General* (1926). In doing so Carroll refutes what he calls "the allegorical interpretation of narrative." This form of exegesis, which is deeply embedded in the literary tradition of criticism, entails the process of retelling or paraphrasing the story in such an abstract way that the film can be used or rather abused as an illustration of some *grand theory* (see also Carroll 1996). In doing so no call is needed upon the visual side of the work. One could easily deduce the principal allegoric themes from the plot description without resorting to the concrete display of images.

In applying this sort of analysis to the work of Keaton however one finds oneself guilty at eliminating everything that makes it so unique and worthwhile, namely the way in which the gags are visually presented to the spectator. For this reason, Carroll further argues, not the dramatic structure should be the primary level of thematic articulation, but the iconographical structure. In analyzing Keaton's work every search for thematic meaning should take in consideration its visual elements.

This predicament certainly applies to Keaton's short films, where the narrative component, due to its short duration and the central role which is given to the body, is even more negligible in comparison to his feature films. Likewise, the expression of themes has to be sought on the visual level rather than on the dramatic one. In what follows we shall see that within this field of visual articulation metaphors are operating in a significant way and as such are accessory to transferring thematic meaning. In considering the role of metaphor our analysis shall first shed light on one type of metaphor in particular, namely those metaphors which belong to the syntactical template of CONCRETE IS CONCRETE and are labelled image metaphors. This category appeared to be the most important one to come up with during our analysis. Using the thematic findings within this category as a starting point we shall then further elaborate on some examples of the ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE metaphor. (1)

Metaphors of the type CONCRETE IS CONCRETE

Keaton's short films contain numerous image metaphors that connect one concrete object to another concrete object. Let us discuss a few salient examples.

In *One Week* (1920) the image metaphor CEILING IS TRAMPOLINE precedes the image metaphor BALUSTRADE IS LADDER. This sequence executes as follows. In a particular scene from the film Buster vainly attempts to move a piano to his living room using a chandelier and a rope. The chandelier hereby functions as a kind of lifting device supporting the shoving rope, tied with one end to a heavy musical instrument, the other end held by the drudging protagonist. At the same time we see a parallel sequence showing a decorator establishing himself on a chair in the middle of the room right above the space where Buster dwells. The comedian, obviously unaware of any danger, pulls the rope but instead of putting the piano in motion, the ceiling is put under huge pressure. The construction does not hold but bends down as if it were made of elastic building material! When Buster is confronted with the unfortunate result of his actions, he releases the rope. Its elasticity sends the ill-fated man in the upstairs room with his head through the roof. As a result, Buster runs outside and a single very long shot offers us a general image of the backside of the actor in relation to the front side of the strikingly cubist house. Three things are remarkable in this image: the white balustrade of the house that runs parallel with the bottom of the frame, the opening in the roof and the absence of a ladder. For the viewer as well as the protagonist these images seem to suggest the following problem: how can the man who got stuck in the roof be reached, while there is no ladder available? The clear-cut position of the BALUSTRADE within Buster's (and also the viewer's) scope almost instantly leads to the image metaphor BALUSTRADE IS LADDER.

At the end of *The Scarecrow* (1920), when Buster proposes his girlfriend on a motorcycle and the priest who descends from the sky asks him where the WEDDING RING is, the young man – being the romantic soul he is – screws off a SCREW and puts it on the ring finger of his beloved. (2)

When his girl – an artist specialised in free diving – threatens to become the victim of drowning in *The Play House* (1921) Buster releases her by smashing a glass mirror to pieces with a hammer. This, however, causes the vaudeville theatre to be flooded by a tidal wave. To get back on the dry, Buster's ingenious brain transforms a DRUM and a VIOLIN to objects of a completely different order: a BOAT and an OAR. Note that the evocation of these instruments only occurs physically through his bodily relation to the items. That is why the idea of a boat is not summoned before he settles within the opening of the drum. This originates from the physical act of sitting in relation to the drum and the water.

A similar incident in soaked circumstances can be found in *The Boat* (1921), in which a BATHTUB functions as a LIFE BOAT. Previously a STEAK was cleverly used as COVER CLOTH during a futile attempt to block the water pouring into the ship through the openings in the hull of the ship.   When in *The Frozen North* (1922) the driver (a heavyset Joe Roberts) runs off with the last pair of flat SNOW SHOES, Buster can think of no other solution than confiscating two GUITARS lying about in the igloo. When several minutes later he actually manages to seize real SNOW SHOES, the metaphorical chain, however, does not end: as it happens, one of the shoes is reduced to a TENNIS RACQUET through the way it is physically approached and applied to cast off snowballs.

One of the nicest examples occurs in *The Paleface* (1922). After Buster, a friend of the Native Americans threatened by the landowners, has personally confiscated the black suit (complete with top hat) of an opponent and subsequently changes, this superficial clothes-based transformation is reacted upon by the Native Americans with a rain of arrows. When the first arrow strikes and lands in the grass next to him, the oblivious Buster stretches out his hand to verify whether it is raining or not, thus reinforcing the image metaphor ARROW IS RAINDROP. Again, this does not indicate the end of the metaphorical chain: this ARROW is applied by Buster as the quintessential accessory of his 'civilized' male contemporaries: the WALKING STICK.

Such misunderstandings are an essential component of Keaton's short films. In *Convict 13*, for example, the metaphor ALARM BELL IS LUNCH BREAK BELL is suggested when Buster is shown to be incapable to distinguish the two. The film shows the comedian, accompanied by his black caddie, while playing golf. This series of images on the golf course

is broken up when a police officer rings the alarm bell because a convicted criminal (the titular Convict 13) has escaped. The alarm bell seems to have no influence whatsoever on the behaviour of either of the men on the green. Assuming it is lunch time, the black man checks his watch, sits down and takes his meal. Buster tries yet another failed attempt at golf.

A nearly identical situation occurs in *The Boat* where a HUMAN SCREAM is mistaken for a WHISTLE SCREAM. At one point in the film, Buster is shown busily preparing his boat and while doing so he lifts a steamer and unwittingly puts it on his son. The little boy screams, triggering Buster to start looking for the origin of the sound by pulling the cord of the whistle connected to the steamer. The absurdity increases when Buster starts knocking the steamer on the side and holding his ear to its flank. Like a doctor wielding a stethoscope he tries to catch sounds and vibrations within the patient (the steamer). The STEAMER is given the status of a LIVING ORGANISM through Buster's physical interaction with the object.

Finally in *The Goat* (1921) a STORE MANNEQUIN is mistaken for a PERSON. In the opening shot, introduced from an iris with the words *City Bread Station*, we can see Buster trying to capture the attention of a person distributing free bread, ignoring the queue of waiting people. He is told to wait in line like everyone else. The last person in the queue is standing by a clothing shop. Buster moves to the end of the queue but instead of waiting behind the last person, he puts himself behind two mannequins. His body language and shifting feet betray his anxiety and frustration as the 'queue' remains immobile. A wide shot shows the horizontal distance between Buster and the lifeless mannequins on the one hand and the waiting queue on the other, which has already shrunk down to just a few people. When Buster at last realizes his mistake, he finds himself standing in front of a closed booth. Like the steamer in *The Boat*, human qualities are given to an object.

What can we learn from these examples? Within the global category CONCRETE IS CONCRETE we can discern a distinction between two kinds of image metaphors: those metaphors which are illustrative for Buster's successful adaptability with the surrounding environment and those metaphors which are not. The environment creates various obstacles for the comic protagonist, some of which he can adapt to. The metaphors in this case are linked to Buster's successful contact with the physical world around him. The following pattern can then be discerned: Buster starts out with a particular intention such as getting married, climbing, rowing, running away, surviving and so on. To achieve this goal he is in need of a particular item. He needs a ladder to climb, a ring to get married, an oar to row. These tools are not available – a lack which stimulates his practical mindset. Buster goes looking for a substitute to take the missing instrument's place. The world is a giant arsenal to

acquire resources from, with each object evaluated in terms of its use. This gives rise to a large number of image metaphors: a screw becomes a ring, a violin becomes an oar, a drum becomes a boat, a balustrade becomes a ladder. The metaphorical power rests in the transference of qualities from the visually absent source domain (such as the oar or the ring) to the present target domain (e.g. the violin or the screw).

Buster's practical and pragmatic way in taking care of 'things' (from the Greek term *pragmata*) brings to mind Heidegger's notion of 'handiness' (*Zuhandensein*) from his famous analysis of the *Dasein*. According to *Being and Time* (1927/1996) the world appears to man first and foremost as a coherent whole of tools for him to use in a "caring way". Tools are not available objects one stares at and perhaps studies. They are 'handy' (*zuhanden*). Man has a practical relation to an object without thinking about its precise qualities. The tool is never there for its own sake but always "in order to". Heidegger illustrates this by the example of the hammer. The hammer has meaning to us because we use it in an obvious way for a specific task (and not because we establish a theoretical relation to it such as in a phrase like "this hammer weighs one pound"). As Heidegger (1927/1996: 65) puts it: "The act of hammering itself discovers the specific 'handiness' of the hammer." This dynamic is the reason why one is often inclined to disregard the tool itself. The tool coherence is inconspicuous and non-thematic. The tool and its entire context only appear in a familiar, unnoticeable way that one hardly considers. It's only when a tool is damaged or missing, for example, that a breach is made and the tool becomes noteworthy *an sich*. Heidegger (1927/1996: 70): "When something at hand is missing whose everyday presence was so much a matter of course that we never even paid attention to it, this constitutes a *breach* in the context of references discovered in our circumspection. Circumspection comes up with emptiness and now sees for the first time what the missing thing was at hand *for* and at hand *with*." The deficient 'handiness' of this one tool is the first occurrence to bring the tool relation to the foreground and makes it explicit, although the caring person was already familiar with the tool relation before the deficiency arose.

It is here where Keaton provides an interesting addendum. As formulated earlier, certain items are missing in his short films. This emptiness is almost immediately filled by another object of the same pragmatic status. The comic character's adaptability immediately offers a substitute for the deficient item. One item takes another item's place. The absence of a ring is compensated by a screw, a ladder is replaced by a balustrade and so on. The tool relation, the reference of a thing to another thing, is revealed in Buster Keaton's short films not so much through a breach but in the form of a metaphorical relation of the type CONCRETE

IS CONCRETE. For Keaton circumspection does not arise with emptiness, but with metaphor. The metaphor constitutes the tool relation, where the "in order to" structure from the absent source domain is mapped onto the present target domain. As such, the structure "in order to climb" is metaphorically carried over from the balustrade to the ladder.

Habituation dulls our awareness to tools. In different ways then, both Heidegger and Keaton claim that wonder can be renewed. (3) For Heidegger this discourse of wonder comes with the absence or breakdown of equipment which allows us to experience it afresh. Keaton on the other hand describes a metaphorical path toward this heightened perception. Much in the way of Shklovsky's notion of de-familiarisation, he employs aesthetic means "so that the familiar becomes strange and can be rediscovered in its sensual specificity and vividness" (Gunning 2003: 45). For Keaton, metaphor takes up the struggle against this loss of sensual alertness. Metaphor then "removes objects from the automatism of perception" (Shklovsky 1965: 13).

Opposed to this group of image metaphors we can distinguish a second group that emphasises Buster's failure to adapt. In this case the image metaphor is launched by carelessness, such as in the recently discussed examples where Buster is unable to distinguish a PERSON from a MANNEQUIN, an ALARM BELL from a LUNCH BREAK BELL and so on. The fact that this carelessness even flirts with death is obvious from the rain hypothesis from *The Paleface*, discussed earlier. What these metaphors seem to be suggesting thematically is Buster's inability to relate to his external environment correctly. For example, it is only after a long pause that Buster realises that what is falling from the sky are no raindrops but arrows. This effect, also known as *slow burn*, reflects Buster's automatic responses and the simplicity of his thought process as a mental system that operates independently from the environment around him.

Noëll Carroll calls this Buster's *one track mind* (analogous to the locomotive so ubiquitously present in many of his films). In his analysis of *The General*, Noël Carroll postulates that *concrete intelligence*, approached from the Darwinian principle of *adaptability*, is the central thesis of this film. From here two kinds of gags are developed: on the one hand there are the *automatism/inattention gags*, where concrete intelligence fails, and on the other hand there are *succession gags*, where Buster's thinking matches the world around him perfectly. Quoting Carroll (2007: 60): "Keaton approaches the subject matter of concrete intelligence from two directions, one positive and one negative. His character is always involved in a process of adaptation, sometimes successfully and other times

disastrously. Intelligence is the crucial determinant." Our analysis allows this conclusion to be extrapolated to Keaton's short films and further on to appreciate the central role of metaphors.

A second conclusion is related to modality and concerns the form or medium in which both terms of the image metaphor are depicted. The (present) target domain is in most cases depicted visually: on the screen there is indeed a balustrade, screw, violin, bath tub and so on to be seen. These objects belong to the diegetic story world of these short films. Concerning the (absent) source domain, the situation is somewhat more complicated. No ladder, ring, oar or lifeboat is shown along with the target domain. These concrete objects are brought to mind differently, more specifically through Buster's physical interaction with the present target domain items. For example, the horizontal BALUSTRADE is rotated in an actual physical act to serve as a vertical LADDER and the screw is *physically approached* by Buster as if it were a wedding ring. The same applies to *The Blacksmith* (1922) where TOOLS FROM THE SMITHY are given the identity of TOOLS FROM A KITCHEN through the comic character's concrete actions. In a similar way Carroll (1991: 30-33) speaks of 'mimed metaphors'. Because the target domains are however still depicted visually we shall label them *visual-mimed image metaphors* as part of the generic group of multimodal image metaphors.

In *The Paleface*, the problem of how to evoke the image metaphor RAINDROP IS ARROW, is resolved through a simple gesture: the palm of Buster's hand stretched out to suggest the rain, or rather the question whether it is raining or not. The intentionality of the body – the body's directedness to a specific item – visually evokes the absent source domain. This need once again establishes the body as a carrier of essential information. (4) It is therefore no exaggeration to state that many metaphors are initiated by a *physical* encounter between Buster and various items. As we are dealing with two different modalities, the visual on the one hand and physical behaviour on the other, these could be called multimodal metaphors, following Forceville (2002, 2009).

Buster's behaviour however does not always trigger the absent source domain, as can be demonstrated with the opening scene from *Cops* (1922). This short film is misleading to the viewer when it uses camera distance to evoke an image metaphor. A semi-wide shot shows Buster addressing his beloved from behind bars. These bars metonymically refer to a prison, suggesting the protagonist is incarcerated. This hypothesis is immediately countered by the following image: a wide shot of Buster standing behind a large cast-iron gate belonging to a fence around a house. As such, the viewer was fooled. The image metaphor BARS OF A GATE ARE BARS OF A PRISON is created, where the metaphor is not initiated by the body but by a filmic parameter (camera distance). As such, it is a filmic metaphor (see Rohdin 2009).

Metaphors of the type ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE

In the preceding part, the category CONCRETE IS CONCRETE was divided into two groups of image metaphors based on the success or failure of Buster's adaptability. This part will show that each branch on its turn can be translated into two major structural-conceptual metaphors each of the type ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE. More precisely, it means both Buster's CONCRETE INTELLIGENCE and THE AUTOMATISM OF BUSTER'S THINKING are clarified as abstract target domains by use of concrete source domains.

The metaphoric transition of the first category can be initiated by the following question: to which conceptual source domain does Buster's CONCRETE INTELLIGENCE appeal in order to manifest itself as an abstract target domain? First of all, the imagery seems to suggest the concept of the BODY as the primary realisation of the source domain. As suggested earlier, the clarity and power of Buster's thinking is made tangible through the almost perfectly symmetrical relation of his body to reality. Also, the apparent physical ease with which Buster masterfully challenges and manipulates Newton's laws betrays a mental organisation precisely attuned to the dance of forces surrounding him. Each morsel of resistance and counterforce is resolved in a deceptively simple and weightless ballet of spatial configurations. Buster's consciousness – here thematically typified as CONCRETE INTELLIGENCE – appeals to the divine of which his puppet-like alert physicality seems to be an objective reflection. (5)

Translating this to the form A IS B, the structural-conceptual metaphor CONCRETE INTELLIGENCE IS AN ALERT BODY (I) arises. The body in question is an aspect of the ante-filmic dimension. Buster's acrobatics and physical dealings with the world of objects belong to that which was happening in front of the camera when the footage was shot. In addition, a secondary source domain can be identified, situated on the filmic level. The externalisation of concrete intelligence is not limited to Buster's body as this mental content is also manifested through a crystal-clear visual presentation. Carroll uses the term 'visible intelligibility' in this regard, implying that the theme of concrete intelligence is successfully initiated to the audience if the viewer is capable of grasping physical processes and mechanisms. This primarily requires a presentation that serves the purposes of showing and making visible. One parameter in particular presents itself as the quintessential means by which this visibility is made possible: the long shot. Both his short films and his feature-length films prove Keaton to be a more than gifted master of this technique. By maintaining a large distance between the camera and the character, the importance of the individual's relation to the environment is

magnified and the protagonist's concrete intelligence is given the possibility to reveal itself in all its physical polyvalence and causality. In the short films, the screen size is usually motivated from the deeper theme of concrete intelligence. Other attributes contributing to the visible intelligibility of actions on the screen are diagonal composition, causal editing and the interplay of foreground and background. An analysis of these filmic aids would currently go too far, unfortunately. (6) It is sufficient to mention that an analogy can be discerned between the purely visual aspect of filmic imagery on the one hand (clarified by concrete intelligence) and the filmic parameters on the other, where the crystal-clear formal style seems to express the successful mental organisation of the character vicariously. More specifically, the clear qualities of cinematographic texture are applied to give a concrete form to concrete intelligence as an abstract target domain. This produces the structural-conceptual metaphor CONCRETE INTELLIGENCE IS VISUAL INTELLIGIBILITY (II). (7)

Also, the AUTOMATISM OF BUSTER'S THINKING can be typified metaphorically. The filmic imagery again suggests the concept of the BODY (concrete) as the primary source domain to give shape to the simple direction of his thinking (abstract). In analysing *The Paleface* this structural-conceptual metaphor can be made more intelligible. The opening scene shows Buster as a butterfly catcher walking into an encampment of a Native American tribe. His attention is fixed on his activity to such a degree he is not aware of the tribe's hostile attitude toward him. In his fervent search for butterflies, all else is abstracted to him, the tribe's hostility in particular. This autistic attitude is given form by the way Buster physically carries himself. In contrast to the previous category, his body is not tuned to a multitude of stimuli in the physical world. The intentionality of his body, such as the way he moves his head, is limited to a single aspect of his surroundings: the butterfly. This results in a comical and poetic beauty where his body and the butterfly net as an extension of his arm seems to suggest the flapping flight of the winged insects. The directed intentionality of Buster's body implies the structural-conceptual metaphor AUTOMATISM OF BUSTER'S THINKING IS AN INTENTIONALLY FIXED BODY (III).

In conclusion, both the CONCRETE INTELLIGENCE and the AUTOMATISM OF BUSTER'S THINKING make use of the concept of the BODY as source domain. Since both target domains belong to the same sphere of consciousness or mind in terms of their content, the two opposed qualities can be unified under this label. The archetype so created is the basic metaphor of MIND IS BODY (I+III) (see Lakoff and Johnsson 1999).

In addition, the filmic imagery seems to support the interpretation of a secondary source domain on the ante-filmic level: the presentation of Buster as a sort of projectile or

ballistic object. The AUTOMATISM OF BUSTER'S THINKING can indeed be clarified by the concrete image of A PROJECTILE BEING FIRED (IV). Many instances can be found in these short films where Buster is launched through the air like a bullet. Again, *The Paleface* provides an apt example. When Buster is running from the Native Americans and emerges from a wooden shack, he slides down from a hill. Due to the ever increasing velocity, when he reaches the foot of the hill he is launched into the air and winds up in the top of a tree. And so, the image of Buster as a projectile is presented for the first time. When the tribe is gathered under this tree later on, they spread a blanket and for the second time, the structural-conceptual metaphor of Buster as a ballistic object is formed. The agile daredevil jumps down and the elasticity of the blanket throws him up again, only to have him land on the same hill ridge that served as a launching track earlier. The circle is now complete. Note that the sources of the forces that launch Buster as a projectile are of a metaphorical nature themselves. More specifically, they take the form of the type CONCRETE IS CONCRETE. As such, the HILL RIDGE and the NATIVE AMERICAN BLANKET can be identified as a SLIDE and a TRAMPOLINE, respectively. In other words, the type CONCRETE IS CONCRETE precedes the revelation of the type ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE, where the mappings of the latter can be outlined as follows:

Source: Projectile

Target: Automatism of Buster's thinking

- The projectile as material object   => Buster as body

- The singular track of the projectile   => The singular direction of Buster's thinking

- The target of the projectile as one end   => The focus of his thinking on one end
 (e.g. tree, hill,…)   (e.g. catching butterflies)

- …   => …

In conclusion, both CONCRETE INTELLIGENCE and the AUTOMATISM OF BUSTER'S THINKING, both of the type ABSTRACT, can each be typified by two source domains of the type CONCRETE. The first target domain clarifies itself through the ante-filmic source domain of AN ALERT BODY (I) and the filmic source domain of VISIBLE INTELLIGIBILITY (II). The secondary target domain, on its turn, appeals to the ante-filmic source domains of AN INTENTIONALLY FIXED BODY (III) and a PROJECTILE BEING FIRED (IV). (I) and (III) can be further classified under the archetypal metaphor of the MIND AS BODY (I+III).

All of these metaphors of the type ABSTRACT IS CONCRETE seem to share the common trait of a perfect symbiosis between form and content. The metaphor is the bridge that enables this convergence. In their far-reaching concreteness and aesthetical refinement, Buster

Keaton's short films illustrate that which Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset claims modern poetry has become, being *a higher algebra of metaphors* ("*la poesía es hoy el álgebra superior de las metáforas*").

Footnotes

1. When a *grand theory* (e.g., Freud, Lacan, Althusser, Deleuze, etc.) is applied to a particular film, the answers (the interpretation) invariably precede the questions (the filmic images and sounds). This does not imply, however, that our approach is entirely devoid of concepts. Without concepts one is blind, cf. Kant and his *Critique of Pure Reason*. To analyse films, therefore, we *do* need concepts as well. In analytic philosophy, however, a distinction is made between *thin concepts* and *thick concepts* (or substantial concepts). The conceptual framework offered by Charles Forceville, among others, is of a thin nature. His detractors consider this to be a major problem, whereas from our minimalistic point of view it is precisely a major advantage. Also, we obviously cannot 'see' (Kant) more than these concepts allow us to see (and under the assumption that our eyesight is infinitely sharp). Although we do not exclude the possibility that other (preferably thin) concepts offer additional insights into Buster Keaton's short films, we do hope that the reader will be charmed by the amount as well as the quality of the results obtained in this paper. Finally, it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the way in which the *viewer* reacts to the metaphors (placed within their diegetic context) – a research problem perhaps best tackled by cognitive psychology applied to film comedy.

2. This example once again illustrates the thematic insignificance of the dramatic dimension in Keaton's short films. The romantic situation of the wedding is merely an excuse for the success of the gag, here linked to the metaphor.

3. Tom Gunning (2003: 45) writes: "A discourse of wonder draws our attention to new technology, not simply as a tool, but precisely as a spectacle, less as something that performs a useful task than as something that astounds us by performing in a way that seemed unlikely or magical before."

4. This brings to mind the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). This phenomenologist considered the body not a mindless object, a thing among things, but rather a subject formed by the sensory experience provided by one's own body. Discussing the body, he does not merely refer to its physiological aspect but rather the dynamic body one lives and experiences: *le corps vécu*". In light of the application in

the medium of film, see among others Annette Michelson's (1969) excellent essay on Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, entitled "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge" as published in the February issue of the art magazine *Artforum VII*.

5. This brings to mind the Hegelian concept of the "Absolute Mind". According to this German philosopher, art is the expression of the inner spirit. Works of art allow us to catch a glimpse of the thought process. A closer look into the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel as it relates to Buster Keaton's cinema can be found in Kravanja (2007).

6. For a more extensive treatment of these techniques in the context of *The General* (1926), see the second chapter ("Style in *The General"*) of Noël Carroll's (2007) book.

7. The question remains whether this reasoning also applies to the *failure gags*. Is there a troubled or lacking visibility when Buster's adaptability fails? This suggestion of symmetry seems less convincing. Keaton tends to opt for a style that serves clarity and visibility in all cases, including the visualisation of failure gags. The opening scene from *Cops* can be seen as an exception, as noted earlier by Carroll (2007: 106).

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