



# THE CAMERAMAN

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY TIMOTHY BROCK CONDUCTING STUDENTS FROM THE SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

DIRECTED BY EDWARD SEDGWICK, USA, 1928

CAST Buster Keaton, Marceline Day, Harold Goodwin, Sidney Bracey, Harry Gribbon, Edward Brophy, and Vernon Dent PRODUCTION Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer PRINT SOURCE Warner Bros.

You'd never know it, but *The Cameraman* was a bitch of a movie to make, being the first Buster Keaton made under his new contract at MGM, and the first with which he had to suffer the dumb know-nothing interference of a now-forgotten middleman producer (Lawrence Weingarten). MGM's head man, Irving Thalberg, liked it well enough, but the political structure of MGM, plus the coming of sound, sounded the death knell right at Keaton's peak. He survived the ensuing decades by making B-movies, shorts produced by an industrial film company, taking cameo bits and even a gig as a gag writer, in 1950, for the Red Skelton redo of *The Cameraman*, *Watch the Birdie*.

All of which can, if we let it, lend *The Cameraman* a sense of sadness and apprehension—how we all might wish for an ideal alternate cinema history, where Keaton had not reaped the mediocre box office that was often his fate, had not gone to MGM (“the biggest mistake of my career,” he later said), was not sacrificed to the caprices of talkies (which, however, might've been inevitable, given Keaton's unique performative register), and did in fact thrive for decades, perhaps in the way Chaplin did, with infrequent but beloved passion projects that ferried his silent-clown persona into the new era.

Ah, well. The nimbus of fate that surrounds Keaton, making him a figure that Billy Wilder absolutely had to include in the cemetery lineup of *Sunset Boulevard*, is inseparable from the dazzling inventiveness and precise heroism of his best films, like the wistful disappointments of adulthood that give the memories of youth their golden hue. In any event, *The*

*Cameraman* caps a small wedge of cinematic legacy we should always be thankful for: in a breathtaking five-year period (1923–1928, following his two-reeler apprentice stint with Fatty Arbuckle and Al St. John, and his first handful of solo shorts), Keaton master-minded eleven elaborate features and a dozen or so shorts, each of them still a gift to us in any time of great need. Maybe we could look at it that way: Buster was sacrificed, his career as an auteur essentially over by the time he was thirty-three, destined to play out the remainder of his decades in Hollywood as a grumpy ghost of the *Way It Once Was*, for the simple sake of a clutch of the most daring and graceful silent comedies ever made.

Keatonians will not blink at the hyperbole. *The Cameraman* may not be a tour de force in the manner of *Sherlock Jr.* or *The General*, but take care to appreciate its variegated charms and achievements, from the proto-Jackie Chan stunts clambering aboard the outside of moving vehicles, to the subtle (and, for Keaton, rare) explorations of contemporary social-sexual mores. Oddly, the metafictional possibilities of the film's primary setup—breaking into the nascent dog-eat-dog world of newsreel photography, that is, struggling to turn life into images in a manner that, in 1928, was newer to earthlings than the iPod—are only hesitantly explored.

Keaton's archetypal nebbish-hero is first seen as an itinerant tintype photog, hawking the old novelty on the sidewalk. That's soon subsumed with a crowd, and battling movie cameramen, rubbernecking over a visiting celebrity, who happened to be, in news footage, Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim

the English Channel. His eager transformation into a newsreel-man, in order to win the attention of the news firm's secretary, never allows for the representational slippage that bloomed in *Sherlock Jr.* where movies, dreams, and fantasies took turns masquerading as each other. Here, "reality" remains real as it's captured on film, in the spirit of the medium's first years—despite the hilarious fact that Keaton's scrambling go-getter never focuses or frames or even aims his lumbering tripod-borne camera, acting as a simulacra of dumb, haphazard human witness.

Or, the film's comically slipshod regard for cinematographic technology could be seen as Keaton's ironic swipe at the mainstream belief that seeing is in fact believing, and that reality could ever be captured at all. Maybe, but Keaton's comedy was always contingent on us seeing what remarkable thing did

in fact happen, without cuts, and so the movie walks a fine and wiggly line between irony and literalism, allowing for racy detours (being accidentally naked in a public pool filled with women), familiarly Keaton-esque set pieces (the repurposed crane shot up and down multiple staircases as Keaton bolts up and down), and even a springtime idyll, as Buster finds himself alone in an empty ballpark and pantomimes an entire home-run hit-and-dash for his own amusement, pretend-playing like the kid he always seemed to still be in some way. (This was shot, like other key scenes, in New York, at Yankee Stadium.) If you think about it, Keaton's art was always close to what movies are in their most basic molecular spirit, making believe, which is why we admire him even as we laugh, just as we'd be wowed in mid-play by our bravest and nimblest childhood friend doing with a blank face what we'd never dare.



*The Cameraman* has a capaciousness to it, and a casual lack of urgency, that Keaton's other films don't—virtually anything, cinematographically-associated or not, could find its way into its narrative, even the last act's explosion of Yellow Menace racism, with our hero (now saddled, or blessed, with an organ grinder's monkey who handles some of the camerawork) suddenly in Chinatown, in the middle of an outrageous depiction of a Tong war. However inappropriate, it's a frantic action set-piece that blows the top of the movie's head off, as machine guns are matter-of-factly planted all over Mott Street (or the studio equivalent) and sheer crossfire mayhem ensues, giving Keaton's protagonist the opportunity of a scoop, even as his equipment is torn to bits by gunfire.

Keaton examines the Vickers machine gun.

In the center of it all, there's Buster, implacable and modest and therefore heroic. Here's another way to think of Keaton's achievement, amid the noise and crazed showmanship and slovenly spectacle that is and was Hollywood: as a cinematic expression of *shibui*, the traditional Japanese principle of restraint and astringency. It's an aesthetic idea most often indexed in discussions of the filmic form of Ozu (and therefore Carl Dreyer, Robert Bresson, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, and other so-called minimalists), but it can also be seen as a matter of voice (in fiction, you could point to Hemingway's much-unsaid, leaning-out prose style as well), and, on film, a matter of presence, acting, reacting, personality. Keaton's famous on-screen affect resonates still because of how it requires us to watch actively, leaning in, empathizing with his hapless, dogged, guileless heroes because they do not in fact demand our attention or comradeship. Famously, there is no moment of nodding in our direction; rather, when Keaton looks into the camera, he's only gazing dumbfounded out into the abyss. He is alone, and self-reliant, and tireless. We cannot help him.

Which is the essence of dramatic entertainment as a form—ideally leaving us sequestered in our black-box theater, separate and watchful. The distance that's erased by a single Chaplinesque wink is crucial. Writing in 1969, theorist Stanley Cavell retells an old anecdote in which a Southern yokel instinctively jumps onto the stage during a performance of *Othello* in order to save Desdemona from the homicidal rage of a black man. Cavell doesn't even touch on the scenario's inherent racism. He instead looks at the man's reaction as the antithesis of what it means to partake of and participate in dramatic art. The yokel in question first doesn't understand the rules—the difference between reality and pretend—and second doesn't understand that there is no reason to act or interfere, because there is absolutely nothing a spectator can do to help either Desdemona or *Othello*. It is precisely our inability to alter the course of the story that guarantees our emotional investment and cathartic

involvement. The yokel of the story didn't understand, in the end, that the feelings of alarm and empathy the play mustered were for him and him alone, and they were the reason for him to be there. We can care about Desdemona. But we will never be able to save her.

So it is with Keaton, whose searching visage is one of movies' deepest invitations into their capacity for human involvement. Because he asks so much, we tip forward, to try to occupy his hope and despair. He is our better angel.

— *Michael Atkinson*

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