DAVID THORBURN: In this evening lecture what I'd like to do is continue a bit to expand on and complicate and maybe also deepen this idea I've been suggesting to you that I'm labeling the Fred Ott principle. Really a shorthand way of describing the immensely complex-- and from an intellectual standpoint, a historical standpoint-- immensely exciting and astonishing process whereby film went in an incredibly short time from being a mere novelty to being an embedded social formation in the United States and in other industrialized societies. And not just only a embedded social formation, becoming by the end of the 1920s one of the central media for the expression of art, and an artistic medium. So that he went from being a mere novelty, from Fred Ott's Sneeze in 20 years or so, 25 years, to being a medium of astonishingly rich and complex narrative art. That progress is part of what I mean by the Fred Ott principle.

And it might be helpful if I concretize that a little bit more by mentioning a bit more about what I mean about what I was implying or referring to when I spoke about that moment of imitation. Remember I said that there were essentially-- that the silent film-- and incidentally, I take it as a model for the way in which most new media systems develop in culture. You can apply this same basic schema to other forms of popular entertainment, including-- shocking as it may seem-- Shakespeare's public theater. And I'll come back to the implications of that analogy. The idea that Shakespeare was the movie of his time. That Shakespeare's theater was the Hollywood studio system of the Elizabethan era. It's a very complicated one. It's a very inspiring one. And it's complicated because it makes us reassess our inherited notions about what art is, and where art comes from. One of the subtexts in this course is precisely that, it has to do with what I call the enabling conditions of art. And I'll come back to that again as a theme, again and again in the course.

So part of what I mean by the Fred Ott principle is this roiling complex, partly unpredictable process, whereby an enlarging population incredibly hungry for the novelties being produced by this new technology create a kind of symbiotic relationship between the audience and the emerging medium. So that as the medium grows more complicated, in part because the audience-- OK, after 5, or 10, or 15 visits to the Nickelodeon, or-- after the movies moved out

of the penny arcades, and began to take their own space as some of you know, and as it's recounted in our reading for these early weeks, the movies first moved out into what were called Nickelodeons. They were storefronts for the most part. And admission was a nickel, that's where they were called Nickelodeons. And you sat in many of these on benches without backs, next to strangers. You didn't have private seats. And you would sit in there and see a series of short films. But the fact that the Nickelodeons emerged so quickly is a mark of how popular a film became, eve in its relatively primitive early form.

And then, of course, within a few years of the Nickelodeons appearing, what else began to happen? Theaters made specially for the showing of motion pictures that were longer than the early shorts, because film began to expand its length all through the period from 1910 through 1920. What's the great moment when the feature film is born in the United States? 1915. Who's the director? D.W. Griffith. What's the film? *Birth of a Nation. Birth of a Nation.* A very complicated example, because it's content is disturbing in some ways. It's a very reactionary, and in some respects racist film. It absorbs and carries forward what we might think of as the racial prejudices that were very widespread in American society at the turn of the century, and especially in the South. From which Griffith himself was a southerner, he was born in the South.

And his film was deeply influenced by a bestselling novel called *The Clansman*, which was a celebration of the Ku Klux Klan. So the content of *Birth of a Nation* is very unsettling and disturbing. And even when it was first released to the public-- to great acclaim because it expanded the possibilities of movies in all kinds of ways. From a technical standpoint it is an astonishingly important film. And from a content standpoint it's a very disturbing film. It's a wonderful reminder of the fact that this progress I'm describing to you is not an unalloyed triumphal story.

Even as the movies became more technically complicated, and more demanding, and longer, and more interested in character, they also nonetheless carried the lies, and prejudices, and hierarchical assumptions that were embedded in the society from which they arose. How could it be otherwise? Every media form does this. But it's important to make this point as a way of reminding us that the story we're telling is not, in some simple sense, just a kind of progress myth in which we're celebrating development and genius.

We're identifying and locating something more complicated than that-- the process whereby these cultural myths, and these stories that are drawn from inherited older stories, and from

the lore of the society more broadly, more generally, are transformed into this new medium. And they have a tremendous technical interest. But very often they also have a kind of cultural or sociological interest of a negative kind in the sense that what they reveal are the prejudices, the lies, the limitations of the society, the mythologies that sustain the society. Again this is a matter to which we'll return. One of the deep cultural functions of American movies, especially, was to promulgate a kind of mythology of America. And we'll talk more about this when we reach certain genre forms in the second segment of the course.

I said something earlier this morning that I want to make explicit, because I think another way of qualifying this triumphal story. It's hard because I'm enthusiastic about what I'm looking at. And there is some material that's so exciting here. In a way, what we're watching is we're watching the birth of the movies. We're watching the discovery of the language of cinema in these early films. And that's why even though from an artistic standpoint, some of these shorts are not very rich, I hope they're interesting enough-- that I've made them interesting to you from a historical standpoint. If you look at them closely, you can see the movies being born. You can see a language, a syntax for speaking in pictures, for new visual language, this new visual medium being developed. And if I have time this evening, I'll give you a few more concrete examples of that.

But another way in which one can qualify this apparently triumphal story, it's not a triumphal story even though it is a story of refinement, development, and evolution of a kind that involves increasing complexity and technical perfection, technical mastery. It's not merely that, or not even primarily that. It's very important to recognize among other things, as I implied this afternoon, that not all the possibilities that are inherent in the nascent medium are necessarily exploited in a particular cultural moment. Or maybe ever exploited, depending on how things develop. That is to say.

I mentioned this afternoon how for instance, when Edison first conceive the apparatus before it was actually invented, of the motion picture projector, and the motion picture camera. His first idea was that he would create an item that would be a consumer item-- what we would today call a consumer item-- that would be sold to individual families. And the field would become an equivalent or a kind of a photo album, although it would have motion it. And as I suggested this afternoon, there's no reason why given the nature of the technology itself, that that vision of how film might develop was impossible. In fact, it wasn't impossible, it was just incredibly ahead of its time. It took half a century before something like that actually became available in

society. But there was no reason in terms of the possibilities of the technology that that needed to happen.

What I'm calling your attention to is what is a very widespread myth. It's especially pernicious and widespread at MIT. For reasons that are obvious and understandable we at MIT love to believe the technology will solve all problems. The primary thing I'm suggesting to you is that the evolution of the movies that I want you to be aware of, this process of increasing complexity and compression in which the movies become a more and more independent form of expression. In which the movies begin to discover the unique characteristics of the motion picture camera and of the environment of the movie theater, that the movies begin to explore. Those qualities in this new medium that are unique and special. That process is important, and I want you to be aware of it. But I don't want you to embrace that principle to uncritically. Because I want you to recognize that the technology itself does not explain this process. The processes explained by cultural factors, and social factors. And even sometimes individual's psychological factors.

What we're talking about here is the myth of technological determinism. The myth that technology drives culture. The myth that a new invention obliterates old inventions. The truth is much more complicated than that. One of the most remarkable things about this evolutionary process I've been describing, as I said earlier, is how swift it is. How fast it is. How we go from being a mere novelty, to becoming a significant social form by 1910 or so. And to becoming a virtually universal aesthetic and entertainment experience for the majority of the population in the country by 1920.

So when something like 20 or 25 years the movies go from being an absolutely unknown or trivial novelty, sharing space with fortune tellers, and strip shows in the penny arcades, to becoming not just an embedded social form, but one of the dominant economic engines of the society, employing tens of thousands of people in various direct and ancillary positions. And mobilizing virtually the entire population of the country in a regular routine, a habitual experience to which they return again and again. And because the audience is returning again and again-- remember I said there's a kind of symbiotic relation between the audience and the-- because the audience is returning again and again, what happens? That's also one aspect of the resources that are available to the medium. What begins then to develop are forms of storytelling that rely on the audience's prior memory of other shows.

So that one thing that emerges very quickly is what we might call a star system. In which

particular actors become identified with particular kinds of roles. And audiences want to come back to see those stars again and again. What also begins to happen is the establishment of a very rigorous kind of genre system. What's a genre? A category of story. The Western is a genre. The detective story is a genre. The elegy is a poetic genre. And the typical, the fundamental movie genres begin to emerge relatively early. There's a Western adventure story. There's a historical spectacle. There are certain forms of urban, crime narrative that became our detective and crime films at a later stage. And there emerge especially certain forms of satire and comedy.

So what genre system begins to emerge as well? And there are reasons of course why this kind of thing is useful to a mass production system, to an assembly line system. If the same movie studio makes seven Westerns, they can use the same horses again and again. They can use the same set. They can use the same hats. And this in fact happened, they might eve be able to use the same clip of film that shows a cattle stampede in seven different movies, because nobody would actually see it. So economies of scale become possible as the system begins to regularize itself. Once it stabilizes after that period of imitation and patent warfare.

And there's nothing noble, or artistic, or conscious about this development. That's part of what makes it so remarkable. And it puts out in touch with the paradox that's at the very heart of what I hope to make you aware of in this course. It's a paradox that-- I guess it animates my transition many years ago now, from a traditional literary scholar into someone interested in film and media.

And it's this paradox. Based on what I've been telling you about this evolution, this evolution of the medium, of the film medium. It's the paradox that capitalist greed-- the crassest of alliances between commerce and modern technology-- might be the enabling conditions of a complex narrative art. Where does art come from? It's not just about art though, eve about sort of social. Even if we forget the question of art, and just talk about the social and cultural importance of movie-going in modern societies. Leave out the question of whether it's an aesthetically valuable experience. It's so central to human experience, remains so central to human experience, that there's a tremendous paradox in this, that the crassest of alliances between commerce and technology. Nothing noble or admirable about it. Nobody's sitting down thinking, I want to make a new, great medium for art. Nonetheless this alliance becomes the enabling conditions for a complex form of social experience and of narrative art.

Well, that paradox at the heart of a lot of what we'll be looking at in this course. I hope you'll keep in mind as we go on. I'd like to say a couple of words, not too many, a couple of words about *The Great Train Robbery*. The very first film that you've seen. *The Great Train Robbery* is discussed in some helpful detail in David Cook's *History of Narrative Film*. And I urge you to look closely at his account of it. But I want to remind you about a couple of highlights.

One is that although *The Great Train Robbery* seems very primitive to us, it's important to realize that even *The Great Train Robbery* is already a refined text. Most of the most fundamental principles of what we might call the syntax or grammar of the movies is already embedded in *The Great Train Robbery*. And what that means is that the five or six year period before that, when there was all this practicing with non-narrative forms, lies behind *The Great Train Robbery*.

And what also lies behind *The Great Train Robbery* is this experience of audiences going in first to the penny arcades, then to the Nickelodeons that begin to open up by the turn of the 20th century. And becoming impatient with repeated scenes that simply show jokes, hoses going off in people's faces, or trains coming into a [INAUDIBLE]. After a while the novelty wears off. But of course, the people who are making films are also interested in what they're doing. You can feel especially, if you look at D.W. Griffith's shorts, and you will have looked at two of them in this course-- *A Beast at Bay,* from last time, and *The Lonedale Operator*, which you'll see tonight before we turn to the Keaton films.

And you'll see these are just a sampling of his early work. But if you look closely at those where you can feel Griffith's own excitement at discovering the possibilities of the cinema. In many cases Griffith is doing some things with the camera, doing some things with the shaping of narrative in cinema that had never been done before. And you can feel his own excitement at the possibilities of this astonishing technology.

Well, the most important discovery that *The Great Train Robbery* shows us-- and again it seems so obvious and so embedded that we wouldn't even think about it today. We absorb these principles so deeply into our DNA that we don't even think. We learn how to watch movies in this way from the cradle, in some ways. Because by the time most people today are five or six years old, they've been subjected probably to more audio/visual images than anyone alive in 1900. And we're just cognitively different in terms of our capacity to process audio/visual information. But imagine an audience that's completely illiterate in these things,

that has to learn this system as the system itself is evolving. That's part of the excitement of looking at these early films.

And the most important discovery in *The Great Train Robbery* is the discovery that the shot, the single uncut shot of film, however long it lasts, and it's dependent on the decision you make about when to edit it. So it can go on for a long time, or it can be very short. And the length or the shortness of cuts also affects sort of the rhythm of your experience in the film. And this is something that you can see Griffith practicing with, even as early as *A Beast at Bay.*

If you think about the great climax of the *Beast at Bay* where you have the woman being threatened, but you also have this race in the automobile to try to get there on time. And then the race to rescue her by a variety of people. What Griffith does is he cuts back and forth. He creates the principle of parallel action. And what he realized, what he discovered was that the audience will recognize this kind of cutting as showing you simultaneity. Showing you things that are going on at the same time.

What he discovered were in a certain sense how we would cognitively process certain kinds of gestures on film. And what he discovered of course, is that if he cuts, if he edits more quickly, if he creates a fast rhythm he creates excitement. And what he began to discover was something that-- in later, directors like Hitchcock would carry, to an almost evil pitch-- a capacity to manipulate and control the audience's reaction by the speed with which particular images appear or disappear.

So even at this early stage, you could see Griffith discovering important principles. The most fundamental principle in a *Great Train Robbery*, which is not a Griffith film, it proceeds Griffith, is the discovery that the shot is the basic unit of action. Why is that a great discovery? Well, if you think of the movies as a device or as a medium that grows out of especially a theatrical dispensation, grows out of other things as well, novels feed into it, visual art feeds into the movies. But it's certainly true that most of the major ways in which directors first conceive how to think about the experience of what the camera is looking at, they would have been influenced by their own experience of theater.

And if you think about it for a moment, what you can see, even in *The Great Train Robbery*, an impulse to treat the camera as a stable thing. There are panning shots in which the camera will go like this. But the camera will not track. It will not move back and forth, or sideways, off,

in *The Great Train Robbery*. That's a discovery that Griffith is going to make and will exploit. And you can see it in *A Beast at Bay*. But in *The Great Train Robbery*, we haven't got that far yet, but what Edwin Porter did discover was that the shot is the basic unit of action.

And what this means is it's not simply what the camera sees, but then how the shots are edited afterwards that is so crucial. So what he came to understand was that the making of any movie is always a two-stage process. There's the shooting of the film, and then there's the editing the film. And that itself is a fundamental discovery. But the idea that the shot is the unit of action instead of the scene was hard for movie makers to get. What they would do, they would set the camera up, and then actors would walk in front of the camera, they would do what they had to do, and they would walk off. What's going on there? They're conceiving of cinematic space in theatrical terms. As soon as the camera is liberated, taken off its tripod, moved around in some way, allowed to backup or come close, even allowed to move laterally.

What we're beginning to do was to explore more systematically what the camera's unique features are. How the theater is different from the movies. How certain effects are possible in the movies that would not be possible in the theater. When you watch the Keaton films that you're going to see tonight, watch for the ways in which Keaton repeatedly sets up situations such that when you see a particular gag of his, a joke, what you realize is that the joke could not have happened in the theater. It could not have been told to you verbally. The joke is visual. The joke involves motion. The joke involves a recognition of the powers of cinematic representation to tell stories. You'll see many examples of this in the Keaton materials that you'll be looking at tonight.

So one of the very first discoveries that's made is the discovery that the shot is the basic unit of action. A second discovery is the recognition that you have to cut between scenes. You do you're editing between shots. Mostly what you do is you let scenes play out, even though you might abruptly cut a scene before the action is completed.

That's another discovery that was made, if you cut the scene-- a person starts to walk toward the door-- the first, earliest films, they would show the person walking all the way to the end, walking out of the door. Then, filmmakers discovered, wait a minute. There's a way of creating a kind of quickness here. Because if I show Thorburn walking toward the door, starting, and I cut. And he knocks his glasses off. And then I cut, and I wait till he gets to the door, and we see him leaving the door. I don't have to watch him take those 17 steps. So what's been discovered is a basic principle of cinematic syntax. It seems so obvious to us, but of course it's

really a great discovery.

The properties of the medium have to be understood before you can really begin to explain them. And that's why I've asked you to look at some of these short films. None of the short films I've shown you are completely without some technical interest. And even though of course they're the only films I'm showing you that I wouldn't sort of make arguments to defend them as works of art. But I certainly would make arguments for them as technically fascinating documents. And I hope you'll look at them in that light.

So the shot is a basic unit of action cutting between scenes. And a couple of other things that I think are important in *The Great Train Robbery.* One is that you can see in *The Great Train Robbery*, they're beginning to discover the value of camera placement. What happens when you place the camera in a particular position. Especially if action's coming toward the camera, that you might not want to place the camera directly in front of the action that's coming towards you, that something happens if you place it slightly forward it, so it could see it at a slight angle. It creates a greater illusion of depth in the image, for example. And it does other kinds of things. It let's the action get closer to you before the scene has to be cut. So camera placement is something that you can see is beginning to be learned, beginning to be mastered in the great trick in *The Great Train Robbery*, or camera position.

And finally, one might mention one other thing that a again establishes a principle that then is continuous being useful 50 or 75 years. And that's the principle of the process shot. You can see in *The Great Train Robbery* that some effects have been created by tricks. That there's back projection used in that. It looks crude to us, we can see through it. But the early audiences would not have recognized that. We're so used to location filming that we can pick out-- we today can see through the process shots of earlier films.

This in fact damages some of Hitchcock's films very badly today. Because Hitchcock used a lot of process shot effects in his films. When he made them the audiences were used to it. There was a convention of film going. Today because cameras are so much more mobile and light, and so much has been learned about how to-- even about filming in low light and so forth. That there's much less use of process shots. A new kind of process shot, I suppose, is emerging with digital animation. And one could say it's sort of a return to the idea of manipulating the image in illegitimate ways.

But in *The Great Train Robbery* we can even see the beginnings of the use of process shots.

Of recognizing that you can create effects in the movies that are unique and special, that no other medium would allow you to do. And what's embedded there is science fiction. What's embedded they are all the kinds of imaginative, not just science fictional. All the kinds of imaginative movies that have been made that maybe take you inside people's nightmares or dreams. Where what the film is showing you now-- what is embedded in that process shot? Even more fully embedded in Melies', the French director's films, like *Trip to the Moon,* where he explicitly goes into a realm of fantasy. It's not only that the film is the most profoundly realistic medium that was ever invented. It may also be the most expressive medium for the rendering of non-realistic states of dream, of nightmare, of fantasy. Because of the freedom that the film medium allows. And even these implications are at least embedded in the use of the process shots in Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*.

The other short that you're going to see tonight that is not by Keaton is called *The Lonedale Operator*. It was made in 1911. In a way it's the most advanced film of its time. And what I hope when you look at it, you'll watch especially for how much more complex it is than, let's say, *The Great Train Robbery*. And there'll be a kind of small measure of this Fred Ott principle that I've been talking about. Let me mention a couple of things about *The Lonedale Operator*.

Between 1907 and 1911, most films consisted of no more than 24 separate shots. Between 1908 and 1913, led by D.W. Griffith and his company, The Biograph Company, many more shots were introduced into a single reel of film. And in *The Lonedale Operator*, there are 98 shots, six intertitles, one main title, and two written inserts. All within a 17 minutely length. But think of just the access of complexity that has occurred just in less than 10 years.

It's such a complicated film that one of the things we realized, even looking at it if we look closely is that it actually required a kind of attentiveness that earlier films did not. As filmmakers began to make these things, and began to make them longer, and began to make them more complicated. They realized that they couldn't just bring the camera out and start shooting. They began to develop the formal rationalizing strategies that led to the making of movies as we understand them. There was a four day shooting schedule created for *The Lonedale Operator*. It was one of the first films to have this format. And of course it's the format that is followed today with virtually every film in different aspects.

And this also required a preplanned shooting script. They had to preplan all of their shooting, all of their shots, all of their camera angles. They need a shooting script, a written script. Films

didn't have written scripts at first, but *Lonedale* did. And it also required in order for them to make their schedule, out of order shooting. That is to say they had to shoot certain things not in the sequential order. And that's one of the most basic principles of filmmaking. Because once you set up the camera for a shot of a particular environment, if that environment shows up later in the film, it's unbelievably more expensive and time consuming to reconstitute that whole set. So almost all films to this very day are still shot out of sequence in order to maximize the time you have, in order to work at your most efficient. It's not an efficient way to make a movie to shoot it sequentially, to follow the to follow the script in its chronological sequence.

And *The Lonedale Operator* is maybe the first film have to have all of these features that we would associate with a modern or contemporary film. You might notice in it's an immensely complex films, even in terms of its content. And I won't talk about that much now except to say this, watch the way in which the film tries to deal with what we might call hierarchies of gender. The film is partly about how a woman takes on a man's job. I think it's guess it's her father, isn't it? Her father is ill. And she has to take over running the train station. And so there's a certain sense in which one of the things that's dramatized socially is a woman moving into a masculine realm. Taking on a role that's more aggressive than is appropriate for the gender ideologies that are dominant at the end of the 19th century in the United States.

But the film was pretty clever about this, like many such popular texts. Because although it does grant this woman a certain kind of masculine authority and competence, it also has other things in the film that balance that. That remind us that she is still nonetheless a weak vessel. That she is still a damsel in stress like the typical Victorian construction of women. And what you can see is that the movie exhibits an anxiety about gender roles that's also an anxiety that's resident in the society itself. And I won't talk more about this now. We will develop this aspect of the movies as a reflection of social anxieties and social problems as the course goes on.

But I do want to call your attention to certain technical things that you can watch for, to at least one technical item in the film. It contains what might be called rhyming scenes. In which at one point in the film you'll see a sequence of scenes in a particular shot. And then, later in the film, almost exactly the same shot will reappear. And the effect of this, of course, is to create a sense of coherence and a sense of familiarity in the audience. It's actually a very subtle and careful strategy that Griffith himself devised. It creates a kind of continuity and clarity to the

whole film.

Watch, for example, how the doorway to the Lonedale station is photographed when you first see it. How this image anchors the film's spatial relationships. And how the film has a certain trajectory of movement that is repeated as the film goes on. So that for example, early in the film, we see the heroine go from the exterior to the interior of the ticket office, and then to the inner office of the telegraph operator. We see her do this. And then, this sets up a basic location and basic action for the entire film. It's as if what happens in that moment sets up, creates a familiarity for the audience with it, the geography of the movie. Because a lot of the action then will depend on our understanding about geography.

And then there at least four different times that Griffith repeats that basic three-shot trajectory, from the exterior to the interior of the ticket office, and then to the inner office of the telegraph operator. It happens four times in the film. So the film has a kind of visual coherence. By the time you come to it the third or fourth time, it's as if you were intimate with the physical geography of the movie. This is actually a structural feature that is easy to miss it, but it's actually very artful. And we can see it's a mark of how far film has come, even by 1911, that this level of attentiveness is available to us in the film. There's much more that could be said about *The Lonedale Operator*, but I will leave it to your intelligence and your attentiveness to try to pick out more things. And again we're only talking about a 17-minute film.

Well, Buster Keaton's career could be said, in some degree, to enact in small the larger processes I've been describing. He comes into film late. And in fact, if we were working perfectly chronologically in terms of when Chaplin became a director, he would precede Keaton. But I've organized the film according to the dates of the feature films, and the general is much of a decade earlier than modern times. Which is the last, quote, "silent film." It's not really a silent film, but it's the last silent film in a deep sense that was ever made. It was made in the sound era, in 1936. And next week we'll talk more about the implications of that, and why that was a very daring thing for Chaplin to do. Something like almost a decade after the advent of sound he made a movie that essentially had no dialogue in it.

So Keaton came a little later. Keaton comes into movie making a little few years after Chaplin. But his career has a similar trajectory. He began his career in legitimate theater, in vaudeville and on the performance circuit. He was an Acrobat from a very young age, from the age of two or three was in his parents stage act. And in fact, he learned a lot of his acrobatic feats on his parents stage act. One very famous passage in his-- his father used to take him, he was

just a young kid, three or four years old, five years old, he would take him by his legs and swing him back and forth, like this. He had very long hair. And he would sweep the floor with his hair. And then, swing him two or three times-- this would happen life-- he would swing it like this and let him go. And the kid, five years old, would fly against the wall and fall down. It would look terrible.

And later in his life, Keaton talked about this. There were actually some cities in which the societies the prevention of cruelty to children came in, shut down the act, wouldn't allow the act to go on. Not stupid, because his father was a drunkard and sometimes performed drunk. And Keaton was sometimes injured. He was also injured when he made his own movies, because he was such a daring acrobat. And Keaton recounts that when he first began to perform in this, he would make faces, faces that indicated pain, or happiness, or relief, when his father was manipulating this way. But he found that the audience responded much more comically, much more immediately, if he just kept his face expressionless. And that's where they're developed, the probably mistaken label for Keaton, of the great stone face. And in his films very often you'll see this young man facing monumental catastrophe. His face would look out at things without ever changing expression, and there is something kind of comical about that. You'll see some examples of this in the general.

Well, you'll see in the two short films that Keaton began to make that he enters film at already a relatively sophisticated time. And the shorts I'm asking you to look at are very interesting, remarkable films in their own way. And one of the things they teach us, and one of the reasons I want you look closely at Keaton is they show us yet again another aspect of what I mean when I talk about the Fred Ott principle, this development of evolution and increasing complexity. Because if you look at *Cops,* or if you look at *One Week*, what you will see Keaton doing in those films is learning how to link jokes together in some sort of a coherent way. And there are wonderful coherent sequences in these films. But still one doesn't feel that there's a real character in them, that there's a sustained, coherent, fictional universe being dramatized. Maybe in *Cops* one does feel this. This much more sort of textual coherence in *Cops.*

But what we can see Keaton doing is beginning to move from the idea of a single joke to a sequence of jokes. And then, by the time we get to the general, moving from a single joke to a sequence of jokes to a sustained narrative, which incorporates within it various kinds of comical jokes, and also sequence jokes. Because Keaton's best jokes are not single jokes at all, they're one liners, but the joke will be told again and again. Or really, what will happen is he

will do something, and you'll think how could. And then, the next step will top what he's done before. Then, the next step will top. You think that he got to a point where it'd be impossible to add another comic complication to what he's done when he, of course, does it.

And this becomes one of the deep principles of Keaton's comedy. There are numerous examples of it in both the two shorts, and in the longer film *The General.* But let me mention an example from *The General*. Very early in *The General,* there's a sequence-- it's probably the quintessential Keaton sequence, and I won't go into such detail as to spoil the film for you. But let me just say, it involves a cannon, and it involves Keaton. Keaton plays the engineer of a locomotive, a locomotive engineer. The general of the title is not a military general, it's a locomotive, the locomotive is called the General. And the film recounts a historically true story of a time when the Union Army came into Confederate territory, and stole a locomotive belonging to the Confederacy. And Keaton, in a comic vein retells this story.

When you watch this cannon sequence, you'll see exactly what I mean. And this sequences at the heart of James Agee's essay on the silent film comedy. When you read that essay, you'll see even more clearly what I mean by a trajectory joke or a sequence joke. Which builds, and builds, and builds, and keeps topping itself. Well, this cannon sequence is a perfect example of that. And it's a perfect example of it not only because we see the joke getting more complicated as it goes on, but as the joke becomes more complicated something else happens. The joke becomes more than a joke, it becomes a kind of comment on experience. It becomes a kind of comment on what life is like. That is to say, we move from something that simply makes us smile to something that makes us think about the world, that comments on the world, that imagines the world in a coherent way. I'll try to be more explicit about this in a moment.

So in Keaton's career, we see him doing astonishing things as an Acrobat. And we would admire him just for his acrobatic performances in these films. In *The General* for example, the way in which when he's piloting his locomotive, chasing the people who have stolen his original locomotive, how he's the only one on the train. And he crawls all over the train. While the train is running he'll crawl up to the front of it. He'll run to the back of it to put more fuel in. And also, you can see this stuff happening, really happening. It's not faked in any way, because there's a camera following the train as it's moving. You can see it's really moving, because you can see it. You can see it moving on the track, and you can see the world behind it. And you can tell that Keaton is not taking these effects.

Well, this cannon sequence is a sublimely rich example of this complex process I've been describing. And it has to do in part with what I call the multiplicity principle, Which I will define in a moment. So we see Keaton as an acrobat actor. As a man, much more than Chaplin, interested in the technology of motion pictures, and of cinema. And you'll see a couple of examples in the films you going to look at tonight in which we see Keaton exploring in a somewhat systematic way the nature of the illusion of motion pictures.

There's one remarkable comical moment in *One Week*. In which the heroine gets into a bathtub, and it looks like she's sitting in the bathtub. She's starting to get up, and looks like you're actually about to see some unmentionable parts of her body. And just as that's about to happen, a hand comes in front of the camera and blocks you. And it's actually a very disturbing moment in a way, because it interrupts the narrative flow. It's an intervention from the outside. Whose hand did it? It's not a character in the film. It's the director's.

Very bold moment, because what it does is it reminds you of the film as an artifact. It reminds you that the film is an artifact. In other words, it's a moment of self-reflexiveness self-consciousness that you would never seen a Chaplin film, but shows Keaton's astonishing interest in the technology of motion pictures. I had many examples that Greg and I had ready, but I don't have time to show to you. Maybe you could put up, while I'm talking, *The Playhouse*.

One of his most famous examples of this is a film called *The Playhouse,* in which he ends up playing every role in the movie. And the way he did was incredibly interesting. He would shoot the film, but he put masking tape over the lens of the camera. And only one little, tiny part of the lens of the camera was what would expose the film. And he would shoot that, then he would rewind the film. And then, if he were over in this corner for that shot, then he'd move over, and sit in the other corner. He'd put a new kind of tape on the camera, film it again. And the film you're going to see will show this. And you can see, they're all Buster. Again what it shows is he's a technician. He's interested in the technology of the motion picture camera, and what kinds of manipulations are possible. He's the conductor. As it turns out, he's going to also end up being the only person in the audience.

And then finally, what I've already implied is that Keaton's jokes and his technical interest also end up making him a metaphysician, a philosopher, an artist. Now Keaton himself could never articulate his own ambitions in this way. If you said, Mr. Keaton, your vision of the absurd universe is more complex and rich than Jean-Paul Sartre. As in fact, it is incidentally. He would

laugh. He wouldn't even understand what you were talking about. Not only because he'd never read Sartre, since he died before. He was alive live when Sartre was alive, actually. But the universe that he projects has a kind of content or a meaning that's a function of how intelligent he is about exploiting his medium, and telling his stories, as if his jokes express a vision of life, a sense of experience. What you're looking at is sort of minor Keaton here, but it shows his technical interest.

So let me explain what I mean basically by the multiplicity principle. This process of accretion and complexity I've described-- at a certain point you get to a point where what began as a gag or as a mere entertainment takes on a density or a texture that makes you think, wait a second, the vision of experience that's projected in this text is intrinsically interesting. That is to say, there's an understanding of life that's embedded in the story. When you reach the point where the text itself embodies some sort of understanding of life, and an understanding of life that's coherently presented, powerfully presented, what you're looking at is what I call art. You might just call it more intelligent entertainment.

But this is a way of distinguishing between entertainment and art. At which there's a certain point at which entertainment becomes so complicated that it's more than mere entertainment. When does that occur? Well, one way to tell when it occurs is to watch for I call the multiplicity principle. When events in the film play more than one function, do more than one job. When they forward the story, but also declare for character. When they make you laugh, but also express a vision of life. And at the same time are consistent with the character's psychological nature. That multiplicity, that density, that texture is what we associate with works of art. A bad example would be you are familiar, I hope, with the kind of bad soap opera line in which a character comes into something like this, oh, hello, John, my long-lost brother who just got out of the insane asylum after 15 years of unfair misery. What's wrong with that line? Why is that a stupid line? Although we hear them all the time. What's wrong with it?

AUDIENCE: Sounds excessive, and awkward exposition.

DAVID THORBURN: It's very awkward exposition, but why is it so awkward? What makes it so awkward? Its intention is clear. It wants to present information to the audience. But in order to do that, what has it violated?

AUDIENCE: It ceases to be something that follows the nature of the character.

DAVID It ceases to be something that honors the character's nature. Exactly right. That's a very good

THORBURN: answer. What's your name?

AUDIENCE: Michael.

DAVID THORBURN: Michael. Thanks, Michael. That's very good. I want to give information to the audience. In order to do that I'll compromise the character's basic nature. No sister talking to a brother would recount the brother's history to the brother. That just wouldn't happen. So in order to accomplish one task, the text has compromised itself on another task. But imagine a story in which this information emerges in dramatic ways. Two characters are talking, and Mary says to John, oh, John, my brother's coming back from the asylum. And she says, really? I didn't even know he was in the asylum. And Mary pulls back and says, I don't know if I should tell you. OK. So we have a dramatic scene, in which the information that the audience is supposed to have is presented in a way that maybe tells us something about Mary's nature. And maybe tells us something about John's nature. That is multiplicity. That's what I mean by the multiplicity principle.

You will see many, many instances of what I'm calling the multiplicity principle in Keaton's work. And you will especially see it in these astonishing, repeated sequences, and I'm talking now in a way about *The General*, in which we see the Keaton hero. Who sort of is steadfast but also a muddler. He keeps doing the same things. They're not really likely to help them. And then, he gets help from the outside. Keaton's jokes repeatedly depend upon the idea of accident in a certain way. And I'll come back to that in a second. So think about the multiplicity principle, the difference between entertainment and art. Again this is a principle I'll come back to, and try to illustrate with greater concreteness and greater leisure in later lectures. But I want you to be aware of these issues.

So *The General* can be understood as a kind of culminating text in at least two ways. It's a culmination of Keaton's career. That is to say the jokes and gags that are enacted in the film recall many earlier Keaton films. And the basic character of *The General* is the basic character of the Keaton hero. A steadfast, unremarkable young man who perseveres in the face of catastrophic difficulties with mostly comic expectations, very small expectations of success. Who often models through almost despite himself.

But I say, almost despite himself. And this is where the complexity of Keaton's vision of life comes in. Why I'm saying that Keaton moves from being merely a jokester, or being merely a great entertainer, to being an artist. His jokes embody an idea of what experience is like, and

it's a very powerful, mordant, mature idea of experience. Because what happens again, and again in the small jokes, the sequence jokes in Keaton's work, especially in *The General*, and in the larger film, what happens again, and again, is an adventure in which a steadfast, relentless, young, hero does everything he can to accomplish his goal. And it's obvious that he's up against forces far beyond himself, that he could never-- there's an unbelievable miss mismatch between this minuscule, tiny, figure and his powers, and the forces he's fighting against.

His one Keaton film called *The Navigator*, in which the Keaton character-- even more than with the locomotive in *The General*-- has to navigate an ocean liner. And he's alone on the ocean liner. And you see running up and down into the engine room, back up to the bridge, running all over the ocean liner in great difficulties. There's a wonderful film, late film made in 1928, just his last silent film called Steamboat Bill Jr. In which he dramatizes an astonishing hurricane. And a long, extended sequence in which we see him trying to escape the hurricane, trying to contend against this natural force that's so gigantic.

So *The General* is a culmination in the sense that it gives us another version, and the richest version so far of the adventures of this kind of Keaton hero. But what makes it metaphysical or philosophically interesting is that what this joke repeatedly does, and what the structure of the whole film repeatedly says is something like this, we get through, we make it through life. We get through life mostly not because of anything we've done but because of accident. We live in a contingent universe.

The idea of contingency is at the heart of Keaton's jokes. We could call them jokes about contingency. The word contingent is interesting. Remember it means libel, but not certain to occur. It means possible. It means dependent upon, subject to, conditioned by. In law you can say that something that is contingent is dependent for its effect on something that may or may not occur. As in a contingent estate or legacy. In logic, the same thing, dependent upon some condition, or upon the truth of something else. Not true a priori, not necessary.

So what Keaton's jokes constantly do is they show us two things. They show us a world in which human agency matters. Because if this should schmendrick didn't keep-- that's a Jewish word for schlemazel, clown-- If this schmendrick did not keep on so steadfastly, he wouldn't survive. But he's keeping on so steadfastly still wouldn't make him survive if there weren't the intervention of mere accidents, stuff he has no control over.

This one magnificent moment in *One Week*, for example, where he's standing at a certain place, and the house behind him falls down. And he's happens, just by accident, to be standing by the open window, and the house falls, so he doesn't get hurt. He used this joke more than once in other films because it's such a great one. But it's a perfect example of what I mean, a partial example of what I mean. Because he is not responsible for the fact that he escaped. On the other hand, because he was trying to get away from difficulties, maybe he was in that particular position because of acts of his own.

So what this joke and vision says about the world is something that's true. We all love the idea that we've gotten to where we are by our own acts, by our own conscious control. The truth of the matter is that life is much more contingent than that. It's partly accident, it's partly luck. And something deeper than that. Keaton's vision of the universe is one which suggests that while the universe may screw you up sometimes, it won't always do that. The universe in Keaton's world is not angry at us, it's indifferent to us. It doesn't give a damn about us. It's not aware of us. It's too big for us.

You can't come away from Keaton's films without a simultaneous sense on the importance of human action, of human agency. But also of the inadequacy of human agency. Of how contingent every experience, every adventure, every personality is. And that and that meaning, that idea of the world is a profound one, I think. So that even though Keaton is telling a joke, embedded in the joke is a kind of interpretation of life. And embedded in the film is a kind of interpretation of life. When you're looking at *The General*, I think you will see multiple examples of this kind of thing.

Let me say one last thing, I haven't mentioned anything about the structure of the film, I'm a little out of the way there. Watch how the film is structured. It's a much more complex variation on what I said about *Lonedale Operator*. The film begins with him going up the track. And then, the second half of the film has him going back down the track. You may not be aware of it, but actually the film in a certain sense has its tail its mouth. When he goes up the track, he has a series of adventures. When he comes back down, he has a series of adventures that in a certain sense replicate what's happened before. The film mirrors itself in a way, repeats itself. It's incredibly elegant structure. And the elegance of the structure reminds us also-- its own way, also reminds us of this principle of contingency that's at the heart of Keaton's vision of the world.

Let me conclude by reminding you again what I said earlier. When I call Keaton a philosopher,

and a metaphysician and a wise person about the world, I do not at all mean to suggest that if ask Keaton to explain how we thought about the world he could do this. That that's the job of professors and literary and film critics. What I'm saying to you is that Keaton, like many great artists, had an intuitive understanding of the world. Which he expressed with greater, and greater complexity in the medium of the cinema. And in *The General*, we have what is ultimately a culminating instance of that.

One last point about the film as a culminating example. It's not just the culmination of Keaton's career. It's a culmination of silent film as a whole. Keaton would have expected his audience to recognize the degree to which this film was a parity or a mockery of famous historical films made by D.W. Griffith. It puts down the pretentiousness and the martial valor that's celebrated in so many of the historical spectacles that Griffith and other serious directors were making at the time.

And it also goes back in a certain way to the very roots of film. What was the very first narrative film? Or one of the very first? Also a film about a train robbery, called *The Great Train Robbery*. Well, this is about a train robbery, too. And who is the central character in this one? Really, a train is the central object, the central-- more interesting in some ways than the character himself. And there are many other ways in which the particular features of the general allude to, and in some sense summarize, the history of silent film. And all of the original audience coming to see *The General* would have been, of course alert to these connections. Would have been literate in these connections. Wouldn't have needed footnotes or professors to tell them about it. Because they would have lived through the history. They would have been through the history of the previous 20 years. They would have seen other Keaton films. They would have seen D.W. Griffith. They would have the history of the medium of movies in their heads when they sat down to watch *The General*. So that's another way in which *The General* is a profoundly culminating text.