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| **Tier 2 Vocabulary** |  |  |
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**Knowledge Organiser Film Studies Component 2 – Global Filmmaking Perspectives Section C – Silent Cinema – *Buster Keaton shorts***

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| **A: Context** | |
| **1. The Silent Era** | a) Sound as an element of film form and ‘talkies’ (as they used to be called) have only existed since 1929, and before the advent of sound, it was accepted that cinema should be regarded as purely a visual medium. The early period we now call Silent Cinema lasted from around 1894 to 1929.  b) Films produced from around 1920 onwards were considered a high point of the era, with filmmakers becoming adept at telling stories in purely visual terms, with great skill and creativity. Films of the 1920s are considered among the greatest masterpieces created in the history of the medium. At the time, film was considered a new, innovative, visual art form.  c) Silent filmmakers pioneered the visual art form to the extent that virtually every style and genre of film-making of the 20th and 21st centuries has its artistic roots in the silent era. The film movements of Classical Hollywood, French Impressionism, German Expressionism, and Soviet Montage all began during the silent era.  d) The silent era was also pioneering from a technical point of view. Three-point lighting, the close-up, long shot, panning, and continuity editing all became prevalent during this era.  e) In fact, most scholars agree that the artistic quality of cinema decreased for several years, during the early 1930s, until filmmakers adapted fully to the new “talkies” in the late 1930s.  f) Filmmakers and critics despaired with the coming of sound at the end of the 1920s as the unique dimension of film had been discarded. Dialogue-driven narrative was perceived as dragging cinema backwards as a form of theatre, rather than as the new visual art form it was meant to be. |
| **2. Modern misconceptions about Silent Cinema** | a) The visual quality of silent movies, especially those produced in the 1920s, was often very high.  b) The misconception that they were poor quality comes from carelessness on the part of the industry. Most are poorly preserved, leading to their deterioration, and many exist only in second- or third-generation copies, often made from already damaged and neglected film stock. Many are played back at the wrong speed or suffer from censorship cuts and missing frames / scenes, giving the appearance of poor editing. Only around 20% of films made during the silent era still exist.  c) Colour was far more prevalent in silent cinema than in the first few decades of sound films. By the early 1920s, 80% of films could be seen in colour, usually in the form of tinting or toning (colourization) but also with real colour processes such as Technicolor.  d) Traditional colourization processes ceased with the adoption of sound-on-film technology as it interfered with the high resolution required for built-in recorded sound. The innovative three-strip Technicolor process also ceased as it was considered too costly during the early sound era, which meant colour would not have the same prevalence in film as it did in the Silent Era for nearly four decades.  e) Silent films were actually silent: Screenings almost always featured live music by a guitarist, pianist, organist or even a full orchestra depending on the size of the venue. This music was either improvised on the spot to match the drama on screen or compiled from classical or theatrical music. At the height of the silent era, movies were the single largest source of employment for instrumental musicians in the United States!  f) Scores used in current reissues or modern screenings of silent films are reconstructions, although there has been academic debate about this practice. |
| **3. Buster Keaton** | a) Widely acknowledged as one of the greatest comedians of all time, Keaton was a hugely accomplished performer as well as a true auteur as his films have a distinct visual style.  b) A major star on the vaudeville stage at the age of 5, he then worked in films from 1917 until shortly before his death in 1966.  c) Today he is best known for the nineteen shorts and ten features he made at his own studio, Buster Keaton Productions, from 1920 to 1928, which was set up by film executive Joseph M. Schenck who gave Keaton complete creative freedom in writing, directing and acting.  d) American silent film comedy flourished in the 1920s as it combined slapstick (visual gags, stunts and physical comedy) with narrative cinema.  e) The star system had become institutionalised by the 1920s, with Keaton one of the three great silent comedians of the era (alongside Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd).  f) Each of these silent comedians had a distinct persona and style. Keaton was certainly the most surreal of the three, known for his ‘impossible / cartoon gags’ as well as his deadpan expression and incredibly physical slapstick. |
| **4. Social / Historical** | a) 1920s America was a time of accelerated change, and Keaton’s films often reflect the challenges faced by the everyman living in this age.  b) The ‘Frontier’ idea of America was still fairly contemporary, with the American Dream often referenced in the narrative of Keaton’s films.  c) The economic boom meant affordable, accessible housing, satirised in the DIY house kit in One Week. This film is actually a parody of Home Made, an instructional film produced in 1919 by the Ford Motor Company promoting prefabricated housing.  d) The gap between the rapid expansion of city life and rural life in the early 20th Century is apparent: the impossibly-small farmhouse in The Scarecrow, the exterior settings characterised by haystacks and wheat fields, and the more rural character types.  e) Marriage and married life would also have been idealised at this time and is also satirised often. Traditional conservative views on marriage, patriarchal family structures and elopement are explored in the romantic plots.  f) The 1920s saw a significant rise in women’s liberation and independence, often exemplified by Sybil Seeley’s characters. The one-liner in The Scarecrow – “I don’t care how she votes – I’m going to marry her” is a topical joke making reference to the recent granting of the vote for women. |

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| **C: Meaning and Response** | |
| **8. Aesthetic** | a) Keaton was interested in the **geometry** of a gag. His films seem to occupy a two-dimensional world, and the use of frames, parallel lines and circles often create patterns, symmetry (or asymmetry) which augment the physical impossibility of a scenario.  b) The ‘cartoon gags’ are surreal and function almost as magic tricks. As the films are often not bound by narrative constraints, this gives them a dream-like quality, where one action or gag simply follows another.  c) Keaton’s fascination with the workings of mechanical objects can be seen in the mechanical (rather than photographic) effects. |
| **9. Represen--tation** | a) Women often function as romantic interests and an integral part of the plot. Sybil Seely is often both his equal and foil to his gags and retains a certain amount of independence.  b) Conversely, Keaton represents a subversion of idealised masculinity, as the obstacles he faces (such as building the house in One Week) cause him to lose control and even begin to struggle with simple tasks.  c) Police were often presented as bullies and/or figures of fun in silent comedy. |

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| **B: Key Elements of Film Form** | |
| **5. Cinema-tography** | a) Prevalence of wide angle shots and close ups (usually wide shot followed by close-up).  b) The wide angle allows the audience to look around the scene and see the gag for themselves (there is usually a focus on something problematic in the environment or setting).  c) The close-up allows the audience to see the reactions and emotions towards the gag – usually of Keaton whose ‘deadpan’ expression adds to the humorous effect. |
| **6. Mise-En-Scene / Performance** | a) Sets usually take on a life of their own and can function as characters, often serving the antagonist function.  b) Props are an important element of Keaton’s films – the use of tricks and traps, often similar to that of a stage magician, add to the surrealist, ‘cartoon’ quality by often seeming to defy the laws of physics.  c) Keaton’s performance mixes incredibly physical stunts with his iconic deadpan reactions. |
| **7. Editing** | a) Long takes during the various segments to create the ‘unedited’ visual gags and stunts and allow the audience to marvel at Keaton’s acrobatic virtuosity and stunt work.  b) These scenes are sometimes sped up, again to allow for the real, unedited stunt to be performed at a non-lethal speed, rather than rely on camera trickery. |

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| **E: Key Scenes** | |
| **20. One Week** | a) The reveal of the finished house is both expressionistic in itself and also satirises the Cubist abstract art movement of the time.  b) The most alarmingly ‘expressive’ moment in the film is probably the bathroom scene which draws attention to the camera. Keaton exposes the illusion of cinema as the cameraman’s hand covers the lens, censoring Sybil Seeley’s nudity. This fourth wall break is unexpected and interrupts the narrative flow, and demonstrates Keaton’s ability to play with the flexibility of cinematic rules and draw our attention to cinematic devices, even as early as 1920.  c) The train gag is shot in one long take at a wide angle to create restricted narration. The wide shot builds up the gag before it occurs and the scene plays with expectations as train misses the house, punctuated by a rare panning movement. Cut to Keaton’s relieved reaction and then the ‘double bluff’ as the second train hits, creating an ironic and sophisticated visual gag. |
| **21. The Scarecrow** | The kitchen / breakfast sequence, in which the props all have a duel function – the bookshelf is a refrigerator and the salt and pepper pots dangle from the ceiling. Keaton’s preoccupation in the geometry of a gag can be seen as the characters sit at the table at each end of the frame in symmetry and the hanging pots create horizontal, vertical and diagonal patterns. |
| **24. The High Sign** | The trick house with trap doors and escape mirrors exemplifies Keaton’s trademark ‘mechanical comedy’; and the early example of a ‘split screen’ (actually a full-sized constructed set in which two, then four, rooms are shot in long take and wide angle) allows the audience to marvel at Keaton’s stunt work around the set and stage magician-like tricks, creating practical visual humour at its most sophisticated. |
| **25. Cops** | The framing and cut are used to create the gag in the opening – the mid-shot makes it appear that Keaton is behind bars in prison, then the cut to a wide shot reveals he is only behind the iron bars of a garden gate behind a wealthy drive. The cut demonstrates how Keaton is not locked in prison but locked out from the upper-class world his girlfriend inhabits. |

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| **D: Specialist Study Area – Critical Debates: Realist vs. Expressive** | |
| **11. Lumières and George Méliès** | a) The divide between the Realist and the Expressive has existed since the beginnings of cinema. Louis and Auguste Lumière and George Méliès were key pioneers of early cinema.  b) The Lumières pioneered what became known as the Realist approach; they favoured recording found reality and in so doing encouraging the spectator to gaze freshly on a world that might otherwise be taken for granted. They used the camera as an instrument to record the world as it was. Their films are the earliest examples of documentary realism, tending to film people in recognisable environments, focusing on the natural movement of things which would have fascinated spectators.  c) By contrast, George Méliès Méliès pioneered what became known as the Expressive approach; hemade fantasy films of great imagination and creativity, staged almost like a theatre production with props and sets, and no attempt to construct an imagined ‘real world’ (diegesis). Méliès demonstrated the possibilities of the camera to create tricks and defy the laws of the real world. His most famous short film, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) is one of the first examples of science fiction cinema. |
| **12. Realist vs. Expressive and Hollywood** | a) In the early days of cinema, the divide between the Realist and Expressive modes was a lot more evenly balanced: Expressive styles such as Soviet Montage and German Expressionism were prominent in the 1920s, while early Classical Hollywood tended to favour the Realist mode.  b) By the dawn of the ‘talkies’ in 1930, Hollywood had completely adopted the Realist mode, due in part to the new sound technology meaning films had to be more static and naturalistic.  c) In the 1940s, the French film critic André Bazin argued that German Expressionism and Soviet Montage filmmaking went against what he saw as the ‘realist’ calling of cinema, denouncing their flamboyantly ‘expressive’ styles and high-blown visual rhetoric as a betrayal of this true calling. Since then, the Realist mode has dominated Hollywood, and most other national cinemas.  d) It is important to note that the Realist mode does not necessarily mean it has to be set in the ‘real world’, but rather that the imagined world it creates (the diegesis) is a realistic and believable one. The absence of a diegesis, and the inability of the audience to ‘buy into’ the film as existing in a real world, perhaps due to the film drawing attention to its own artificiality, are ways in which we might define a more Expressive style. |