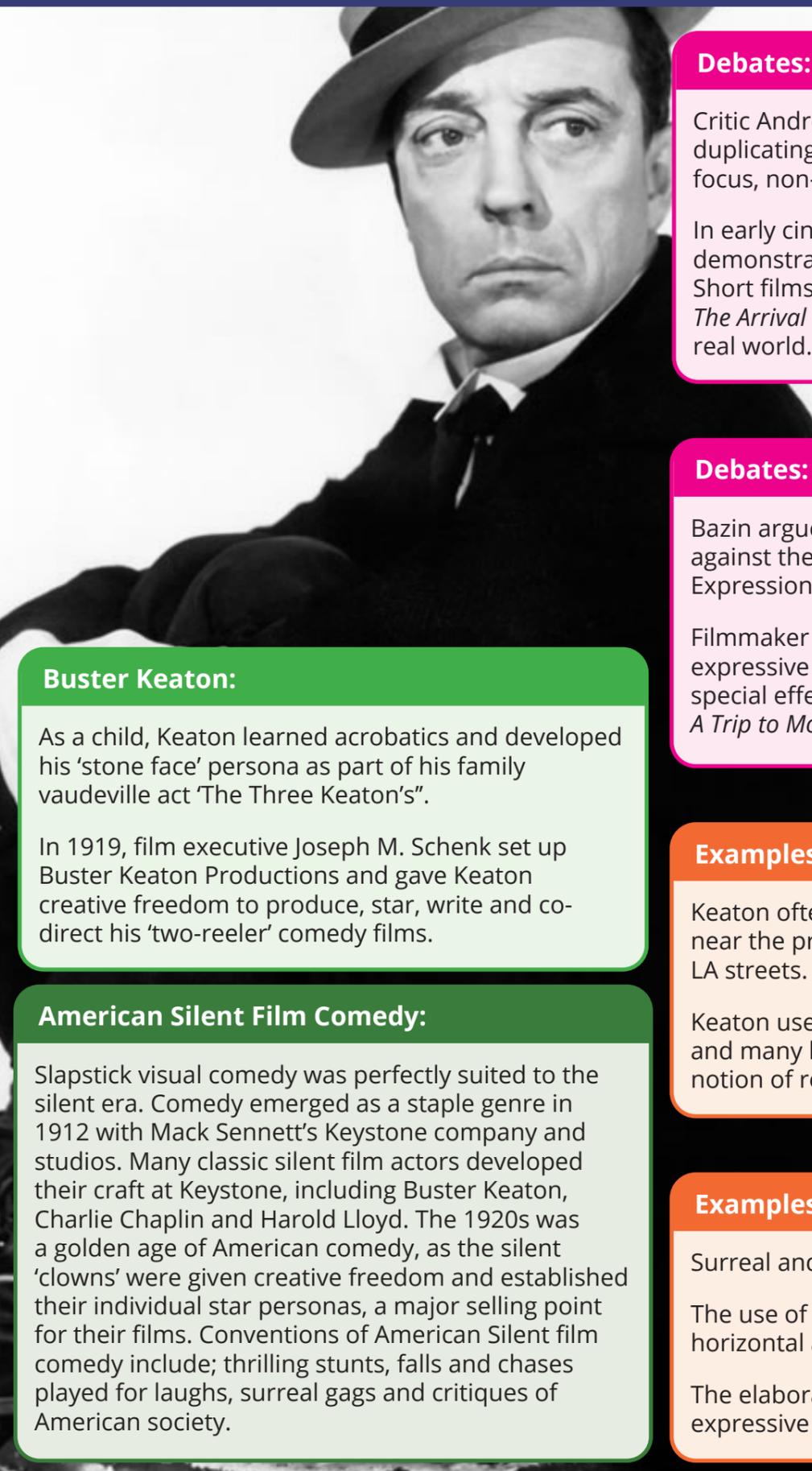


# Buster Keaton



## Debates: Realist cinema:

Critic Andre Bazin viewed cinema as an important medium for duplicating reality. Bazin championed the use of long takes, deep-focus, non-professional actors and limited editing.

In early cinema, the Lumiere brothers 'actuality' films demonstrated the potential for cinema to capture the real world. Short films made in 1895/6 such as *Workers Leaving the Factory*, *The Arrival of the Train* and *Feeding the Baby* depict aspects of the real world.

## Debates: Expressive cinema:

Bazin argued that staged lighting, décor and composition was against the realist mode of filmmaking. He referred to German Expressionist and Soviet Montage filmmakers as 'plastics'.

Filmmaker and magician George Méliès is an early example of an expressive filmmaker. He saw the potential of cinema to create special effects and fantasy world., as evidenced in films such as *A Trip to Moon* (1902) and *The Impossible Voyage* (1904).

## Examples of realism in Keaton's films:

Keaton often set and shot scenes on the real streets of Los Angeles near the production studios. *Cops* makes extensive use of nearby LA streets.

Keaton used realist techniques such as flat lighting, deep focus and many long takes. While these filmic devices adhere to Bazin's notion of realism, they were primarily used to accentuate the gags.

## Examples of the expressive in Keaton's films:

Surreal and dream-like gags are examples of anti-realist devices.

The use of symmetry and geometric shapes with vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines are typical of cubist art of the period.

The elaborate stunts and exaggerated use of the body are more expressive than realist.

## Buster Keaton:

As a child, Keaton learned acrobatics and developed his 'stone face' persona as part of his family vaudeville act 'The Three Keaton's'.

In 1919, film executive Joseph M. Schenk set up Buster Keaton Productions and gave Keaton creative freedom to produce, star, write and co-direct his 'two-reeler' comedy films.

## American Silent Film Comedy:

Slapstick visual comedy was perfectly suited to the silent era. Comedy emerged as a staple genre in 1912 with Mack Sennett's Keystone company and studios. Many classic silent film actors developed their craft at Keystone, including Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. The 1920s was a golden age of American comedy, as the silent 'clowns' were given creative freedom and established their individual star personas, a major selling point for their films. Conventions of American Silent film comedy include; thrilling stunts, falls and chases played for laughs, surreal gags and critiques of American society.

## One Week (1920)



- The idea came from a Ford Motors documentary *Home Made* (1919) about pre-fabricated homes.
- Challenges an idealised domestic lifestyle as Keaton is unable to successfully build a home for himself and his wife.
- The bathroom scene is self-reflexive, as Sybil Seely is aware of the camera and uses her hand to block the view.

## The Scarecrow (1920)



- The use of contraptions and objects having a dual function references Rube Goldberg's illustrations.
- The intertitle 'I don't care how she votes, I'm going to marry her' is a reference to women gaining the right to vote in 1919.
- Chase sequences were a key feature of American silent film comedy.

## The 'High Sign' (1921)



- Keaton's debut as an independent producer. However, he was disappointed with the film and released it a year later.
- The newspaper gag is an example of surrealism. Later surrealist artists were inspired by these gags.
- The Blinking Buzzards are a comic representation of underworld gangs of the 1920s.

## Cops (1922)



- The opening gag uses clever framing and editing to suggest Keaton is behind bars, when he is actually 'locked out' from the upper class wealth of his girlfriend's family.
- Many gags are staged to create symmetry and balance in the frame, such as the 'see-saw' gag.
- Deep focus gives a sense of perspective in the scenes involving chases with the cops.