Lecture 3 - Chaplin

I. Movies before Chaplin
II. Enter Chaplin
III. Chaplin's career
   - The multiplicity principle, continued
IV. The Tramp as myth
V. Chaplin's world - elemental themes

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

• Quick review: Keaton’s “contingent universe”
  o By this phrase I mean that certain artists can embody live experience in their work, even if they couldn’t articulate it themselves in words
    - Art can be serious even if the content doesn’t seem that way
    - Keaton has a profound understanding of the world worthy of being called philosophical
    - The phrase “contingent universe” captures the complexity of Keaton’s world
    - For example, think of the cannon sequence from *The General*: brilliant long sequence, with each joke building on the previous ones, eventually becoming a statement about our existence in the cosmos.
      - The cannon actually working the way it does is repeatedly contingent on Buster’s actions in a hundred ways… and yet also not.
      - Contingency also means accidental!
      - His behavior is necessary, but it also doesn’t fully explain the results
        - The universe has to do with your choices, but it’s also accidental – it is rational and random simultaneously
        - You get what you want, when you get it, accidentally
        - This is a particularly brilliant vision to apply to a mock heroic film about the Civil War
          - *The General* demystifies the sentimentality that has been attached to the Civil War.
            - The Continuity Principle
              - Old media determines the forms that new media will take

• Chaplin’s career
  o Began as a child
  o By the time he was a teenager, he was already something of a star
Like Keaton, he did Vaudeville acts
His shows were immensely successful in Europe
He was known as one of the great pantomimers of his day
He pulled in a huge salary for his time: $150 a week, which was a huge amount of money at the time, while he was working for Keystone
When he moved to Essanay it went up to $1250 per week
From there he moved to the Mutual Film Corporation, where he made most of his great films
The Tramp character had been in so many different movies, and the audience would have seen most of them – this is a kind of literacy, and we cannot underestimate the importance of that history that the audience was a part of.
Each year during this period Chaplin made fewer and fewer films, but they got better and better
He started making $670,000 a year
When he moved to First National, he made $1,000,000
Then he moved yet again, joining D. W. Griffith in 1919 to co-found United Artists
By the 1920s he was the most recognizable, famous figure in the world
His sound films, from later on, aren’t as great artistically

- The Tramp as a myth
  - The tramp becomes a kind of mythological figure
  - He taps into deep psychological issues
  - In a way, the tramp is a communal creation, like a myth, even though Chaplin created him, because the historical culture had a part in it – there were so many unemployed hoboes and bums at the time, and so the Tramp was a kind of social reality
  - Think about the costume – coat and shirt too small, pants and shoes too big – he is an emblem for mismatch
  - His body is dexterous and graceful
  - Chaplin realizes the power of the close-up to allow him to show emotions in his face
  - Even the chase scenes help to create character.