Lecture 1 - Introduction
I. What is Film?
   - Chemistry
   - Novelty
   - Manufactured object
   - Social formation
II. Think Away iPods
   - The novelty of movement
   - Early films and early audiences
III. The Fred Ott Principle
IV. Three Phases of Media Evolution
   - Imitation
   - Technical Advance
   - Maturity
V. "And there was Charlie" - Film as a cultural form


Lecture 2 - Keaton
I. The Fred Ott Principle, continued
   - The myth of technological determinism
   - A paradox: capitalism and the movies
II. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)
III. *The Lonedale Operator* (1911)

IV. Buster Keaton
   - Acrobat / actor
   - Technician / director
   - Metaphysician / artist
V. The multiplicity principle: entertainment vs. art
VI. *The General* (1927)
   - "A culminating text"
   - Structure
   - The Keaton hero: steadfast, muddling
Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term. Four lecture sessions covered introductions, the Fred Ott Principle and Buster Keaton. These topics were covered in two lecture sessions for Fall 2007 term.

- You should be open to new forms of aesthetic experience in this class
  - You should gain a new kind of aesthetic discrimination and aesthetic pleasure
  - You should develop a much enhanced vocabulary and better standards for all humanistic disciplines

- This class should be hard work, but not overwhelming

- Each week of this course has required reading and required film(s) (with a couple exceptions)

- The afternoon lectures will be broader in nature, while evening lectures are more concrete introductions to the specific film for that night.

- Students should watch the films together
  - Until very recently, films were a totally communal experience, like theater
  - You couldn’t stop and start, freeze-frame, or watch at home
  - These changes have an enormous social effect on how we watch films
  - However, films are also available to watch individually in the course, for other occasions such as when you write your papers.

- Writing requirements (see syllabus)
  - Brief response paper
    - This won’t get a letter grade, just a check, check plus, or check minus.
    - This doesn’t have to be a complete essay
  - Three complete papers, 5-7 pages each
    - Suggested topics will be provided – you should choose among them
    - You are strongly encouraged to revise
      - All great writers revise obsessively
      - Revision is essential to good writing
      - You must learn to cut things out
        - Concision is a mark of good writing and well-developed critical thinking

- Exams
  - One quiz
    - Short answer identifications
  - One 1-hour test
    - Short answer identifications
    - One essay question
- One 3-hour final exam
  - Short answer identifications
  - Two different types of essay questions

- Grading:
  - Roughly 30% of the class will get As, 40% of the class will get Bs, and most of the rest will get C’s

- Film is a form of Chemistry
  - Why is that the case?
    - The actual physical process is a chemical reaction (we’re not talking about digital film)
    - You can alter that chemical process by changing how you develop it
  - This is important because it reminds us that film is a natural process
  - This may be one of the greatest contributions that chemistry has given the world
    - Movies have had a profound impact on a huge number of lives.

- Film was a novelty in its early days
  - Penny arcades

- Film is a manufactured object
  - Movies could be one of the most fundamental early products to be mass-produced
  - Specialization of labor was at the heart of what allowed films to become such a mass item
  - Other mass-produced items were associated with early films
    - There were Charlie Chaplin dolls, for example
  - Movies were and still remain an essential form of mass-produced wealth
  - You could do an entire history of film looking at it from this perspective, without ever examining the content
  - Films have been economically essential to American history, culture, and development, like the automobile

- Film is a social form
  - Over time, from this, film developed into an essential medium of art
    - Movies illuminate the world the way art does
  - These two aspects – social and artistic – are separate. Not in conflict, but separate.
  - The less self-consciously artistic movies are often the most socially revealing
    - We don’t need to be embarrassed about watching less artistic movies
    - In fact, we should look at them
For example, take Griffith – an artistically brilliant director, but highly racist, with strong social prejudices

By analyzing these prejudices, we can examine the contemporary American social pathologies

These are exercises in understanding the world that we value intrinsically

The Fred Ott Principle
- Clip: *Fred Ott’s Sneeze*
  - a very early film – the first copyrighted film in the US
- The Fred Ott Principle is the process that illustrates how film goes from novelty to social form
  - In under 30 years, we go from Fred Ott sneezing to Charlie Chaplin
  - It’s that evolution which is essential
- People used to watch shorts at nickelodeons
- This was a very popular form of entertainment
- Clip: *The Kiss*
  - Many people were scandalized by this at the time
  - This was probably the first kiss ever shown in the movies
- People loved shorts like these partly because motion itself was amazing – it was totally new to see it reproduced in this way
  - It felt more real to them than it does to us
  - There were stories of people running and screaming in fear when a train in a film appeared to drive straight at them, or when a cowboy turned to the camera and shot directly at it
  - To understand this you have to imagine a world where visual experience was far simpler than it is today, without modern technology.

The Fred Ott Principle - summarized
- The sociological, technological, artistic, and economic changes that allow the development from the Fred Ott film to artistic, advanced films
- The films we look at in the beginning of this course might not make a great claim on your attention in themselves.
- Rather, it’s the process of evolution that matters in this early film era
- The essential conventions of cinema were alien at the birth of film
- People were so excited by the novelty of motion to be riveted regardless of content

A unique language special to the film medium developed over time
- The audience and the film-makers where editing each other as they went
- A similar process of change would later occur with the emergence of television: movies changed their role in society and were fundamentally transformed by TV
Editing:
- Modern movie viewers multitask visually on a level that is extraordinarily complex. Early audiences couldn’t do that.
- In modern film we can see the camera move while the subject moves, music that doesn’t match the events on screen, very fast editing, etc.

There was always some multitasking though.
- Silent films were never really silent – there was live music played along with them.

Ever-increasing complexity
- The language that developed was fundamentally new and specific to the medium
- Paradox: capitalism and technology, with all of their associated greed, are the enabling conditions and seed for what becomes the defining art form of the twentieth century
  - Film is a profound artistic expression, but it originates in an industry that exists to make money

The Great Train Robbery (1903)
- This isn’t quite the first narrative film, but we can consider it close enough.
- This is a defining early narrative movie
- It establishes the Western genre
- This showcases an immense increase in complexity since Fred Ott’s Sneeze and similar early films
- You have to think away your experience with modern technology to understand this

The complete process of development from penny arcades to nickelodeons to movie theatres took only fifteen years
- By 1910 movie theatres were being built
- By 1920 film was a major American industry

New communication is always understood through the metaphors of the old technologies
- The very first films were made like theatrical pageants
  - The camera was always still, with the action happening in front, as though on stage
  - Film-makers were naturally comparing movies to the theater
  - Later, people learned to experiment more, moving the camera, zooming in and out, etc.
- First people had to understand film through the metaphor and ancient tradition of theater
- Theatrical acting is broader, more stylized, because viewers were so far away
  - Over time, a quieter mode of acting developed in film
• D. W. Griffith: *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912): this film represents the more film-appropriate mode of acting that developed.

- The Fred Ott Principle (continued)
  - The immensely complex process from minor, trivial novelty to an embedded social form, the central American medium of entertainment, a more universal form of narrative than prose fiction in twentieth-century America
  - It’s about the development of an institution and an art form, not just one film, like Fred Ott sneezing
  - Film scholarship is a relatively recent phenomenon
    - Much of new scholarship today is devoted to the silent era, and particularly to early silent film
      - Discoveries are being made every day
      - One of these recent discoveries: early audiences were at least as interested in the apparatus as in the content
        - Traveling film shows
        - Early audiences were situated at an angle that allowed them to see the projector as well as the image on screen
        - Early films showed motion – waves crashing, an elephant getting electrocuted – as much or more than they showed narrative.
      - Remember, early audiences had to learn the rules and language of film, which hadn’t been created yet – lighting, acting, camera placement…
  - The Fred Ott Principle had three main phases:
    1. Imitation
      - Early films drew enormously on past art forms: theater, novel, newspaper, visual art…
      - Over time, distinctly cinematic methods and effects began to appear
      - There was patent warfare – distribution methods, how films would be created, how audiences would be exploited, what the length of films would be, etc. – all these issues were still unclear
      - These things didn’t have to develop as they eventually did – film could have developed in many different ways.
      - Whatever approaches made the most money generally prevailed
      - Mass production, specialization of labor, and industrialization all developed around the film industry
    2. Technical Advance
      - At this stage, basic industrial stability had already been reached
• Now film makers had a chance to explore the possibilities of the film medium – parallel action, faster editing, etc.
• Griffith began to discover how film could manipulate the emotions of audiences
• Feature-length films became the standard during this era (around 1916, 1917)

3. Maturity
• During this stage the content of film became married to the medium
• Film became a mature art form
• Note: we might think of silent film as a separate entity from sound film
  o It’s possibly part of capitalism that the maturity of silent film was truncated by the development of sound. The novelty of sound brought about a regression – early sound film was not as good as late silent film.
• Similarly, sound film was later destabilized by the advent of television
  o Film survived World War II, and came out of it just fine, even revitalized
  o The vast majority of Americans were going to the movies every week in 1948 – it was a fundamental part of their lives and routines. Consider what it means, to have such a dominant narrative form
  o When television came along, it supplanted film
  o By the 1970s, most Americans went to the movies only one or two times a year
  o This limited the centrality and influence of movies, but it also liberated them in a sense, allowing them to be more political, controversial, and artistic
  o This telling of the story of film makes film history sound like a triumph, but that would be oversimplifying matters.
  • The notion that technology causes enormous, automatic changes in society is oversimplified.
    • Rather, we should consider the multiplicity principle
    • In every case we’re looking at, technology might not drive society, but rather the reverse – society drives technology
      o Consider the example of how early automobiles tended to look like carriages, as the imitated the older form.
    • When Thomas Edison first began to think about film, he imagined a much more agrarian art form, where everyone made their own films
There’s nothing inherent to the technology to require the system and outcome that developed, rather, it’s cultural, societal, and historical in nature.

- We take the technology in whatever form the society dictates, with all its needs and prejudice.
  - The inherited prejudices, diseases, and lies of a society are carried by the technology
    - Look at the attitude towards violence, race, and morality in these films.
  - You don’t have to see all that many very early films to understand the founding principles of development.

- The Multiplicity Principle
  - Think about the complex difference between the very early and then the more complex artistic films from later on
  - An instance of art carries multiple meanings at once.
  - All art is entertainment but not all entertainment is art.
    - Art is more intelligent
    - Take soap opera – it over-explicates at the cost of sacrificing character – it’s a good measure of a bad movie if a character speaks in ways that are implausible
    - On the other hand, take Keaton. His jokes aren’t just one-dimensional – they have philosophical ramifications.

- Buster Keaton
  - Born in the 1890s
  - His family were Vaudeville performers
  - He was in their act from age 3 on
    - As a child he used to do tricks where his father would throw him into the audience, etc.
  - He stayed in that act until he was 21, when the act fell apart due to his father’s alcoholism
  - He was offered another job in Vaudeville, and then became involved in film performance with Arbuckle
  - Very quickly, he started directing his own films
  - He was still only doing shorts at this point, because comedies in that era were always done in that format. He wanted to do feature-length films though, and did eventually move into doing those.
  - Then his studio sold to MGM, and he was much more limited in what he was allowed to do there.
  - He fell increasingly into alcoholism, and then MGM fired him in 1935.
  - In 1952 he worked together with Charlie Chaplin to do Limelight
  - Note about Keaton: “The great stone face”

- Early cinema
A cinema of attractions – can include gag films (*The Whole Dam Family*), trick films, narrative films

These early films were grouped together with live performances, music, and other acts

Quick, funny, and sensational

The apparatus itself was interesting

Triple exposure – Keaton was able to play himself multiple times in the same short, all on screen at once – Keaton was very meticulous about how he set up his tricks

These films didn’t develop complex characters, but rather trajectories, gags, tricks, and climaxes

Clip: from *Sherlock Jr.*

- A lot of long shots, which show that Keaton is actually doing this performance himself
- The long shots also give you a good sense of the set up and trajectory
- Note Keaton’s stone face
- Note Keaton’s engineering genius – he did all his own stunts, and set up all the props and sets

- A lot of this sort of film style was left behind when sound film came along

*The General* as a culmination

- Keaton is more philosophically complex and self-conscious as a film maker (compared to Chaplin)
  - In the second half of *The General*, he lets you revisit the first half in a complex and fascinating way
  - A philosophic idea of the world is enacted by the jokes in *The General*
  - This idea is based on the notion of contingency

The Keaton Universe: Contingency

- Contingency carries the idea of accident and control simultaneously
- Antiheroic and comic vision of human experience
- Multiplicity principle: every joke has multiple significances.
- This should help you see the difference between art and entertainment

Modern day: Keaton can be compared to Jackie Chan

- Jackie Chan also comes from a theatrical background
- There’s a similar emphasis on the performer as someone who can perform stunts, with acrobatic ability, able to endure hardship.

Clip: Chan references/revises exactly the same falling set shot that Keaton used

- Still an emphasis on long shots, but there are many more shots
- There is a physical continuity of him actually doing all these things
- Chan shoots in sequence, like Keaton did
- **Shanghai Knights**

- Buster Keaton (1895-1966)
  - Shorts: *One Week* (1920), *The Play House* (1921), *The Boat* (1921), *Cops* (1922)