

Laughter, comedy, and a comedian-comedy writer named Buster Keaton.

La risa, la comicidad y un cómico-comediógrafo llamado Buster Keaton.

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Abstract.

This essay analyzes the figure of Buster Keaton and his influence on the evolution of film comedy, positioning him as one of the great innovators of silent cinema. The study begins with a theoretical reflection on laughter and comedy as social and cultural phenomena, drawing on the ideas of Henri Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin. Within this framework, it is argued that laughter, both individual and collective, fulfills functions that go beyond entertainment, becoming a mechanism of cohesion, correction, and symbolic resistance. Based on this premise, the essay examines how Keaton manages to construct a unique form of comedy through the interaction between his body, the staging, and the creative use of film technology, without relying on dialogue. Films such as *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *The General* (1926) allow us to observe the use of visual resources, physical acrobatics, and absurd situations that generate laughter through surprise and disproportion. The results show that Keaton's comedy is based on technical precision and emotional mastery that give it universality, maintaining its relevance in contemporary cinema and consolidating its contribution to the historical development of comedy as an artistic genre.

Keywords: Buster Keaton. Laughter. Comedy. Silent film. *Slapstick comedy*.**Resumen:**

Este ensayo analiza la figura de Buster Keaton y su influencia en la evolución de la comedia cinematográfica, situándolo como uno de los grandes innovadores del cine mudo. El estudio parte de una reflexión teórica sobre la risa y la comicidad como fenómenos sociales y culturales, tomando como referencia las ideas de Henri Bergson y Mijail Bajtín. En este marco, se plantea que la risa, tanto individual como colectiva, cumple funciones que van más allá del entretenimiento, al convertirse en un mecanismo de cohesión, corrección y resistencia simbólica. A partir de este sustento, el ensayo examina cómo Keaton logra construir una comicidad singular

mediante la interacción entre su cuerpo, la puesta en escena y el uso creativo de la tecnología cinematográfica, sin depender del diálogo. Filmes como *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) y *The General* (1926) permiten observar el empleo de recursos visuales, acrobacias físicas y situaciones absurdas que generan risa a través de la sorpresa y la desproporción. Los resultados muestran que la comicidad de Keaton se sostiene en una precisión técnica y en un dominio emocional que le otorgan universalidad, manteniendo su vigencia en el cine contemporáneo y consolidando su aporte al desarrollo histórico de la comedia como género artístico.

Palabras clave: Buster Keaton. Risa. Comicidad. Comedia. Cine mudo. *Slapstick Comedy*.

All the acts of the drama of world history took place before the laughing popular chorus.
Mikhail Bakhtin. "Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance."

Introduction

The problem that guides this work focuses on understanding how laughter and comedy work in silent films, and how a creator like Buster Keaton managed to generate a style of physical and visual humor that is still relevant today. Although there have been multiple theories about comedy—from Henri Bergson's philosophical reflection to Tzvetan Todorov's structural considerations—the challenge is to transfer these theoretical approaches to the analysis of a cinematographic work, where laughter arises not only from the script, but also from the interaction between body, space, and film technique. The problem, therefore, is to explain why we laugh with Keaton, what resources he uses, and how these relate to the social and aesthetic foundations of comedy.

The hypothesis put forward in this essay is that Keaton's comedy does not depend on dialogue or the verbal construction of a joke, but on a unique combination of physical discipline, technical precision, and visual creativity, which allows his humor to transcend linguistic and temporal barriers. The laughter he provokes is based on a universal effect: the viewer perceives the disproportion, surprise, and absurd resistance of the body to the onslaught of the world. The strength of his comedy lies in this interaction between subject, setting, and film technology, which explains his enduring influence on the evolution of comedy cinema.

The essay is structured in different sections. First, it reviews the roots of laughter and comedy as a social and cultural phenomenon, drawing on philosophical and semiological theories that explain why we laugh. Secondly, it analyzes the construction of comedy in Buster Keaton, paying special

attention to films such as *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *The General* (1926), where his physical humor reaches a remarkable degree of virtuosity. Finally, it reflects on the relevance of his work today and its influence on contemporary comedy, confirming the universal and timeless nature of his legacy.

In Classical Greece, laughter occupied an ambiguous place. On the one hand, it was attributed with a liberating and socializing character, and on the other, it was viewed with a certain philosophical suspicion. Plato warned of the risks of laughter as emotional uncontrollability, while Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, recognized comedy as a genre with its own aesthetic value, intended to imitate the ridiculous and the base, but in a sense that contributed to the order of the *Polis*. Aristophanes' theater, full of political satire and social criticism, shows how laughter could become a cultural weapon to question power and customs. In this context, comedy served as both an escape valve and a mechanism for cohesion, since laughing together also meant sharing a code of references and values.

Rome inherited many of these concepts, although it gave laughter a more popular and pragmatic slant. Authors such as Plautus and Terence consolidated comedy as a literary and theatrical genre, with stereotypical characters—the cunning slave, the young lover, the miserly old man—who served as distorting mirrors of society. At the same time, Saturnalia festivals and circus shows displayed the more collective and exuberant side of comedy, in which the hierarchical order could be momentarily reversed. In this sense, Roman laughter was a space for symbolic inversion and veiled criticism, but also for immediate and physical pleasure, anticipating the tension between the reflective and the visceral that would continue to be present in the history of comedy.

During the Middle Ages, Christian thought placed restrictions on the social role of laughter, as it was linked to vanity, sin, and undue mockery. However, spaces where comedy flourished persisted in everyday life, especially at fairs, carnivals, and popular performances. Mikhail Bakhtin,¹ in his study of medieval and Renaissance culture, highlights how carnival laughter inverted official values and allowed communities to express momentary freedom from ecclesiastical and political hierarchies. Through parody, the grotesque, and physical exaggeration, a "world turned upside down" was created which, although temporary, was fundamental to the vitality of medieval societies.

¹To this end, we focus on presenting some reflections by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and his classic text *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1965), which analyzes the phenomenon of laughter from a social, political, and ideological point of view at the heart of medieval culture, and how it evolved from the late 16th century through the 17th century and into the early 18th century.

At the same time, among nomadic communities or those on the periphery of large urban centers, comedy took forms linked to oral tradition, gesture, and improvisation. Minstrels, jesters, and traveling storytellers circulated comic stories, satires, and parodies that, although not always recorded in writing, formed a shared humorous heritage. In these contexts, laughter functioned as a tool for community cohesion and as a form of symbolic resistance in the face of adversity and social marginalization. Before modernity, therefore, comedy unfolded on various levels: as social criticism in Greece and Rome, as carnival inversion in the Middle Ages, and as a practice of identity, unity, and belonging among nomadic communities.

It is important to establish some fundamental conceptual distinctions between carnival, satire, and socially corrective laughter, from Antiquity to Modernity. As we have already mentioned, carnival, in its broadest sense, is a collective and ritualized phenomenon in which laughter takes on a symbolic reversal, from the Roman Saturnalia to medieval carnivals, where the grotesque, the corporeal, and the parodic prevailed over official solemnity. Later, with Bakhtin, we will see² how carnival laughter took on a universal and regenerative character over the entire social body, offering a space for liberation and cultural renewal. Satire, on the other hand, has a more focused and critical character. From Juvenal's satirical poetry in Rome to Renaissance and modern comedies, satire uses laughter as an intellectual weapon to unmask vices, ridicule power, and point out hypocrisies. Its function is not so much to provide momentary liberation, as in carnival, but to expose the ridiculousness of certain attitudes or institutions in order to provoke reflection and, eventually, change or reform. While carnival collectivizes laughter, satire individualizes the target, giving it a clearer moral or political intent.

A third use of laughter, more immediate and everyday, has been the social admonishment of reprehensible behavior. From classical Greece, where Aristophanes' comedy ridiculed political , to the rural and urban societies of the Modern Age, public mockery, name-calling, and oral caricature served as disciplinary mechanisms. Laughing at the fool, the miser, or the proud not only provided

² We will repeatedly refer to the work of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. *La risa. Ensayo sobre la significación de lo cómico* [Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic] (1900), Espasa-Calpe, 1973. This text is fundamental in 20th-century philosophy for understanding what humor is, what is comic, and why we laugh. Bergson argues that the comic arises when the living becomes rigid, automatic, or mechanical, losing its natural flexibility. Laughter, according to him, fulfills a corrective social function by sanctioning inappropriate or excessively rigid behavior and reintegrating the individual into the vitality of the community. Its importance lies in having laid the theoretical foundations for understanding comedy as a cultural, social, or philosophical phenomenon, beyond mere entertainment.

entertainment, but also set limits on what was socially acceptable, reinforcing community norms. In this sense, laughter acts as a form of symbolic punishment. Those who are the object of it are exposed to collective judgment. With the advent of modernity, these forms began to differentiate more clearly. Carnival persisted as a popular festival, although often tamed by the authorities; satire became established as a literary and then journalistic genre, especially in the pamphlets and caricatures of the 18th and 19th centuries; and laughter as a social admonition became institutionalized in practices such as political caricature and humor based on local customs. Thus, laughter went from being a spontaneous and communal gesture to becoming a complex cultural instrument, capable of questioning, correcting, and at the same time integrating individuals within a shared social framework. This leads to a basic and general differentiation between "serious" (official) culture, framed by ecclesiastical and state authority, and "popular" culture, the latter being where laughter could in principle be displayed more frequently and in a more relaxed manner without suffering any admonishment from institutional worldly power.

In the second part of this work, we take as our starting point some sociological, philosophical, biological, and aesthetic reflections on laughter by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, entitled *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), in particular the first section entitled "On Comedy in General. The Comedy of Forms and the Comedy of Movements. The Expansive Force of Comedy," in which the author raises phenomenological and sociocultural questions such as: What does laughter mean? What is at the root of the laughable? What commonalities would we find between a clown's grimace, a pun, a vaudeville entanglement, a scene from a fine comedy? Among other questions that allow the reader to piece together their own possible questions and answers about why they laugh, what they laugh at, and what effects laughter has on their life.

To this end, the French thinker offers significant speculations for thinking about the types of predominant contexts in which laughter arises and what sensations or emotions it awakens in such a way as to provoke laughter, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, what comedy consists of as an emotional, cognitive, ideological, cultural, and psychological structure, always shared socially and interwoven with the surprise, spontaneity, the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the uncalculated, as a reflection of oneself and the most common sphere of everyday life.

In the third and final part, we find ourselves in the 1920s and 1930s (of the last century), basically at the beginning of film comedy. Here we reflect on what film researcher and historian Hilde D'Haeyere shares with us about comedy and so-called *slapstick comedy* films, explaining that the

starting point for this "comic twist" takes filmmaking itself as its theme, portraying the multifaceted process of film production and how it significantly affects the work and the way films are shot, produced, distributed, and exhibited.

After this brief introduction to comedy, she goes on to describe some personal and family aspects of the life of comedian and comedy writer Buster Keaton, and his film work. The fierce competition between film studios at the time is barely hinted at in this work, nor is the mechanization and specialization of work (in particular, the power that producers began to wield over directors), or the impact of sound and other technological innovations that film production embraced, breaking with the paradigm of silent cinema that had prevailed until then, and other vicissitudes that combined to leave this famous comedy artist, considered by many to be the greatest of them all, out of the film "ring," alongside talented people such as Chaplin, Linder, Lloyd, Langdon, Abbot, and Costello, among others.

Laughter. Between seriousness and comedy

*Better to write of laughter than of tears
because laughter is typical of man.*

François de Rabelais. "Gargantua and Pantagruel."

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his work *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1965), states that:

We cannot adequately understand the life and cultural and literary struggles of past eras if we ignore the particular popular comic culture that has always existed and never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes. (2018:608).

However, he himself qualifies this statement by adding that "The authors and compilers of buffoonery, jokes, and satires of the late 16th and early 17th centuries routinely invoked the authority of the scholars and theologians of the Middle Ages who had authorized laughter" (2018:100). Evidence of this latter statement is that he himself asserts that from the early Middle Ages:

Popular laughter penetrated not only middle religious circles, but also upper circles, and in this sense, *Rabanus Maurus* is no exception. The appeal of popular laughter was very strong

at all levels of the young feudal hierarchy (ecclesiastical and secular). This circumstance can be explained, in my opinion, by the following reasons:

- 1) The official religious and feudal culture of the 7th and 8th centuries, and even the 9th century, was still weak and had not yet fully formed.
- 2) Popular culture was very powerful and had to be taken into account; some of its elements were even used for propaganda purposes.
- 3) The traditions of the Roman Saturnalia and other popular comic forms legalized in Rome had not lost their vitality.
- 4) The Church made Christian holidays coincide with local pagan holidays related to comic cults (with the aim of Christianizing them).
- 5) The new feudal regime was still relatively progressive and, consequently, relatively popular (Bakhtin, 2018:99).

Popular culture, due to the sheer number of people it was aimed at, had immense power, unlike the "culture" proposed in feudal courts, so even if it was for reasons of manipulation and what we would today call "media coverage" and "proselytism," the Catholic Church and the figure of the "enlarged state" (nobles, military and guild leaders, etc.) understood this very well and sought to take advantage of it whenever they had the opportunity. Bakhtin gives us examples of the Roman Saturnalia among other popular festivals that originated in medieval Europe itself, as well as others that were learned through the contact that Europeans had with the non-European Mediterranean and Asia. As the Soviet historian states:

[This] exclusivist seriousness of the ideology defended by the official Church recognized the need to legalize outside the church, that is, outside worship, ritual, and official and canonical ceremonies, the joy, laughter, and mockery that were excluded from there. This resulted in the emergence of purely comic forms alongside canonical manifestations (Bakhtin, 2018, p. 96).

However, the issue was not as clear-cut as it might seem, since the church saw pagan festivals as a serious threat to its authority, which is why, as we saw in the previous quote, it tried as far as possible, and generally successfully, to ensure that there was no way in the calendar that religious festivals could be overshadowed by popular festivals, most of which were of non-Christian origin, especially if laughter and comedy played a leading role in them, when not even taking advantage of their staging

and representation to try to bring them into spaces that would make it possible to make them compatible with Christian worship. In other words, the Church knew full well that it needed spaces to "relax" the harshness of its teaching and its "treatment." For this reason, there were spaces and dates when it relaxed a little and allowed certain effusions of unrestricted observance. Hence the theme of carnival.

This, incidentally, resulted in a good school that would soon serve the "pedagogical" purposes that the Church and religious orders put into practice in America to evangelize the indigenous peoples and serve as the foundation for the logic of colonialism implemented in parallel with the Conquest and its subsequent territorial expansion. Bakhtin states that:

Laughter in the Middle Ages was excluded from the official spheres of ideology and from the rigorous, official manifestations of life and human relations. Laughter had been removed from religious worship, from feudal and state ceremonies, from social etiquette, and from high ideology. The tone of exclusive seriousness characterizes official medieval culture. The very content of this ideology—asceticism, belief in sinister providence, the leading role played by categories such as sin, redemption, suffering, and the very character of the feudal regime enshrined by this ideology—its oppressive and intimidating forms, determined that exclusive tone, that frozen and stony seriousness. The serious tone prevailed as the only way capable of expressing truth, goodness, and, in general, everything that was considered important and estimable. Fear, veneration, docility, etc., in turn constituted the variants or nuances of that serious tone (Bakhtin, 2018, p. 95).

Bakhtin emphasizes that the official culture of the Middle Ages was marked by a sharp separation between laughter and the spheres of social, political, and religious life considered "serious." The realm of worship, feudal and state rituals, as well as the dominant ideology, was dominated by a solemn tone that did not allow for humor or comedy. Medieval ideology, centered on values such as asceticism, belief in a fearsome providence, and a constant awareness of sin and redemption, fostered a worldview based on gravity and suffering. Consequently, the cultural forms that were legitimized in the official sphere were expressed solely through serious, rigid, and exclusionary language.

In this context, laughter was relegated to the margins of society, deprived of legitimacy in the spheres of power and institutions. The feudal regime, with its oppressive and hierarchical nature, found in seriousness an instrument of control and perpetuation of obedience, since solemnity

imposed respect, fear, and submission. For Bakhtin, this predominance of seriousness not only shaped the expression of truth and goodness in the Middle Ages, but also revealed how official culture limited spaces of popular freedom, reserving a marginal and often clandestine role for laughter and humor. However, precisely because of its marginalization, laughter found a space for resistance and freedom in popular expressions, especially in carnival celebrations. There, the people could momentarily reverse official values, mock the authorities, and give voice to the physical and material in the face of the rigid spirituality of the dominant culture.

Carnival and popular comedy preserved a liberating counterpoint, demonstrating that laughter was also a form of truth, even if it was not recognized by the institutions of the time. In a way, laughter and comedy could no longer be prohibited or anathematized under the invectives of breaking the law or the proximity of sin, so the comic or burlesque tone perhaps entered into a regime of observance and "good practices" in which the church, mainly, and the state, were in charge of its full compliance by medieval "citizens." Thus, intimidation, defamation, unfounded suspicion, denunciation, infamy, blackmail, among other practical ways of generating paranoia within socio-political communities spread, as one can easily imagine. However, these did not contain, much less prevent, what the authorities in question sought to "administer." Bakhtin states that:

Under the influence of this new combination, laughter in the Middle Ages underwent notable changes. Its universalism, radicalism, boldness, lucidity, and materialism moved from a state of spontaneous existence to a state of artistic consciousness, of aspiration toward a specific goal. In other words, laughter in the Middle Ages, upon reaching the Renaissance, became the expression of the new free, critical, and historical consciousness of the time. This was possible because after a thousand years of evolution, during the Middle Ages, the buds and embryos of this historical trend were ready to blossom (Bakhtin, 2018, p. 95).

Towards the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, laughter had undeniably gained ground and could not be contained or eradicated from either the private or public sphere, largely because it had finally been accepted that, as long as it only had a partial presence and participation and was not a constant in the common life of society, but was practiced more in individual terms, it is not really this comic or non-serious tone implied by laughter that could threaten the stability of the kingdom or authority, nor the serious tone that these require and carry out in

order to effectively perform their tasks of governing their subjects and maintaining control of political power. Bakhtin states that:

The attitude toward laughter from the 17th century onwards can be defined as follows: laughter cannot express a universal conception of the world, it can only encompass certain partial and partially typical aspects of social life, negative aspects; what is essential and important cannot be comical; history and the men who represent what is essential and important (kings, military leaders, and heroes) cannot be comical; the domain of the comical is restricted and specific (the vices of individuals and society); it is not possible to express the fundamental truth about the world and man in the language of laughter; only a serious tone is appropriate; hence, laughter occupies a lower rank in literature, as a minor genre that describes the lives of isolated individuals and the underworld of society; laughter is either light entertainment or a kind of useful punishment that society applies to certain inferior and corrupt beings. This is, schematically, the attitude of the 17th and 18th centuries towards laughter (Bajtín, 2018, pp. 88-89).

In accordance with the above quotation, it is possible to affirm that, from the 17th century onwards, laughter lost its universal and all-encompassing character and became confined to a marginal sphere within culture. Whereas in earlier times it could express a broader and even communal worldview, in early modernity comedy was reduced to a resource that could only be applied to partial and negative aspects of social life. Under this new conception, seriousness was reserved for the essential, the transcendent, and the worthy of respect; that is, history, heroes, kings, and great events were excluded from comedy, as it was considered that laughter could not express fundamental truths about human existence. In this sense, comedy was limited to pointing out individual effects, social vices, or behaviors considered degrading. Laughter came to function as a corrective and moralizing tool, a kind of symbolic punishment that society directed toward the lower or marginalized sectors. Humor ceased to be conceived as a creative and vital force, becoming instead light entertainment or a mechanism of cultural sanction. This transformation also explains why laughter was relegated to a subordinate place within literary and artistic hierarchies, considered a minor genre in contrast to the solemnity of tragedy or epic poetry.

In this way, Bakhtin highlights the consolidation of a cultural regime in which seriousness was imposed as the only valid way of expressing what was true and important. Laughter was excluded from official discourse, reduced to a secondary and subordinate role, incapable of projecting a global

conception of the world. This attitude in the 17th and 18th centuries reflects a historical process in which comedy ceased to be a space of popular freedom, as in medieval carnival, and became a controlled instrument serving the established social order.

Laughter and comedy

At the beginning of the first chapter of his work *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), entitled "On Comedy in General: The Comedy of Forms and the Comedy of Movements: The Expansive Force of Comedy," Henri Bergson speculates on the subject of laughter and comedy as follows:

What does laughter mean? What lies at the heart of the laughable? What commonalities would we find between a clown's grimace, a pun, a vaudeville entanglement, a scene from a fine comedy? What distillation will give us the essence, always the same, to which so many and such varied products owe their indiscreet smell or delicate perfume? The greatest thinkers, from Aristotle³, have tackled this small problem that always resists effort, slips away, flees, and rises again, an impertinent challenge to philosophical speculation (Bergson, 1972, p. 13).

For Bergson, laughter was not only the individual demonstration of an emotion expressed or manifested outwardly about something that happened by surprise or outside the subject, but something mediated by the sociocultural and collective imagination of which every man and woman is a part, so that the boundaries between inside and outside in this sense were blurred by laughter itself. The French thinker asserts that laughter:

³ Aristotle deals with the subject of laughter in several of his most important works, such as *Poetics*, *Rhetoric*, *Politics* (chapter VII, dedicated to the ridiculous), *On the Parts of Animals*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. In addition to the Stagirite's reflections on laughter from a physiological perspective ("On the Parts of Animals"), in *Poetics* he discusses the origin and effects of laughter in human beings, assigning it a favorable "value" parallel to the virtue of moderation when it is the product of agility, irony, ingenuity, and mockery for the sensations it produces, such as the recreation and benevolence it brings to the listener, generating sympathy, complacency, and pleasure in the various spheres of life where it takes place: social (*Ethics*), political (*Politics and Rhetoric*), and aesthetic-artistic (*Poetics*). Javier Rodríguez Pequeño states, "Aristotle's *Comedy* would turn laughter into art, spread among the learned, become the object of Philosophy and the enemy of Theology. And, as if this were not harmful enough, *comedy* would give a voice to the most humble, turning them into protagonists, into the masters of the canon (2008, n.p.). Umberto Eco, in turn, states that "[...] If one day the word of the Philosopher were to justify the marginal games of disordered imagination, oh, then what is on the margins would jump to the center, and the center would disappear completely! [...] and then the periphery of the known world would become the heart of the Christian empire" (1982, p. 575).

Reasonable, in its own way, even in its greatest excesses, methodical in its madness, dreamy, yes, but still evoking visions in dreams that are immediately accepted and understood by an entire society, how could comic fantasy not inform us about the workings of the human imagination and, more specifically, the social, collective, popular imagination? Coming from real life, related to art, how could it not also tell us what it thinks about art and life? (1972, p. 14).

Bergson agrees with Aristotle in stating that only human beings are capable of laughter. Therefore:

[...] there is no comedy outside of what is properly human. A landscape may be beautiful, harmonious, sublime, insignificant, or ugly, but it will never be laughable. We will laugh at an animal, but only because we have discovered in it a human attitude or expression" (Bergson, 1972, pp. 14-15).

Thus, for Henri Bergson, laughter is not a mere physiological act or an isolated psychological phenomenon, but a social behavior deeply rooted in culture. In his work *Laughter* (1900), the philosopher argues that we always laugh in a collective context, since laughter requires spectators, a community that shares codes and references. Therefore, it constitutes a cultural behavior that functions as a mirror and measure of what is socially accepted; that is, laughter is a corrective, since society laughs at those who deviate from human flexibility and vitality, reminding them—and reminding us—of the limits of what is permissible or desirable.

Bergson also associates comedy with mechanical rigidity applied to living beings. We laugh when a person acts automatically, clumsily, or out of step with the natural flow of life, as if they had become a kind of machine. This behavior, which breaks with human nature, arouses comedy because the community perceives it as an anomaly that is punished with laughter. Thus, laughter becomes a collective gesture that corrects and at the same time integrates the individual into the social order, without resorting to violence or formal punishment. In this sense, the cultural impact of laughter is significant, as it not only entertains, but also regulates, unites, and reinforces community values. By ridiculing what is perceived as maladjustment or rigidity, laughter keeps alive the adaptability of individuals within society. For Bergson, then, comedy is not reduced to an aesthetic or emotional phenomenon, but has a profound social value, because it shapes behavior and ensures the continuity of life in common.

For Bergson, "it suffices to note that a comic character is generally comic to the exact extent that he is unaware of himself. Comedy is unconscious" (1972, p. 24). Bergson states that:

Several [philosophers] have defined man as "an animal that knows how to laugh." They could also have defined him as an animal that makes others laugh, for if any other animal or inanimate object does so, it is because of its resemblance to man, because of the mark that man has left on it, or because of the use that man makes of it. Let us now point out, as a symptom no less worthy of observation, the insensitivity that often accompanies laughter. It seems that comedy can only produce its thrill by falling on a surface of a very calm, very flat soul. Indifference is its natural environment. The greatest enemy of laughter is emotion (Bergson, 1972, p. 15).

According to Bergson, no one is predisposed to laughter, which is why it is more associated with surprise, spontaneity, the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the uncalculated. This unconsciousness is also connected with a certain insensitivity resulting from the very lack of predisposition to what provokes laughter or is comical. Bergson considers that:

Now detach yourself, watch life as an indifferent spectator: many dramas will become comedy. We only have to cover our ears when the music plays in a dance hall to find the dancers ridiculous. How many human actions would pass such a test? And would we not see how many of them suddenly cease to be serious and become funny if we isolated them from the music of feeling that accompanies them? Comedy therefore requires, in order to have its full effect, something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart, for it addresses pure intelligence. Of course, this intelligence must remain in contact with other intelligences. [...] We would not enjoy comedy if we felt isolated. It seems that laughter needs an echo. [...] Our laughter is always the laughter of a group (Bergson, 1972, pp. 17-18).

The above quote is interesting because, as we saw in the previous section, the secular and ecclesiastical powers that defended the observance of a serious (official) tone over a comical (popular) tone relaxed their stance in the 17th century, as the latter tone was generally practiced by individuals or small groups and only occasionally, that is, in spheres that did not jeopardize the serious tone required by official matters, such as those of a religious and political nature that concerned the entire community and whose control was in the hands of those who exercised power. For the French philosopher, unlike the Russian thinker, laughter is never individual—although it started there,

laughter is an individual act that serves to drain the negative energy we might carry, for example, if we had a bad day—nor is it solitary, but rather shared or in a group, so that both the social and the individual emerged from it strengthened and feeding off each other. Bergson asks himself:

How many times has it been said that the laughter of theater audiences is greater when the house is fuller? How many times has it been pointed out, on the other hand, that many comic effects are untranslatable from one language to another, being relative to the customs and ideas of a particular society? But it is the failure to understand the importance of this double fact that has led us to see comedy as a mere curiosity that amuses the mind and laughter as a strange, isolated phenomenon, completely unrelated to the rest of human activity. Hence those definitions that tend to make comedy an abstract relationship perceived by the mind between ideas, "intellectual contrast," "perceptible absurdity," etc., definitions which, even if they applied to all forms of comedy, would not explain at all why comedy makes us laugh. For why is it that this peculiar logical relationship, which is only perceived, contracts us, expands us, shakes us, while all others leave our bodies indifferent? We will not approach the problem from this angle. To understand laughter, we must return it to its natural environment, which is society; and above all, we must determine its useful function, which is a social function [...] Laughter must have a social meaning (Bergson, 1972, pp. 17-18).

Bergson understands that laughter and comedy cannot be fully explained in the individual sphere, but necessarily require a social space in which to unfold. According to the French thinker, we laugh in community because laughter fulfills a regulatory and integrative function. It is a collective phenomenon that appears when we share common codes, customs, and expectations. Its natural environment, then, is society, since there laughter not only generates pleasure or entertainment, but also acts as a mechanism of symbolic correction in the face of rigid, maladjusted, or eccentric behaviors. In this way, comedy reveals itself as a cultural and social practice that reflects, reaffirms, and sometimes questions the values of a community.

It should be noted that, although Bergson recognizes the social nature of laughter and its corrective function in the face of rigid human behavior, he tends to overlook the broader cultural and historical dimension that it can have. His analysis focuses on laughter as immediate behavior within a social group, without exploring how comedy is embedded in specific cultural practices such as carnival, satire, or popular forms of expression. It is precisely Bakhtin who recovers this perspective by showing that laughter is not only a collective regulatory gesture, but also a cultural phenomenon

capable of subverting the official order, creating alternative spaces of truth, and liberating the individual through the symbolic inversion of values. Thus, while Bergson limits laughter to a social mechanism of correction, Bakhtin reveals its cultural, historical, and even political power.

The small feudal populations that Bakhtin had in mind had become cities by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, some of them with a substantial demographic explosion whose dynamics turned individuals into tiny particles of a complex social whole that, at times, seemed to function according to an anarchic reality. Therefore, his inquiry in this regard was fundamentally based on finding the social meaning of laughter. For Bergson:

A man running down the street stumbles and falls: passersby laugh. They would not laugh at him, I think, if they could assume that he had suddenly decided to sit down on the ground. They laugh because he sat down involuntarily. It is not, therefore, his sudden change of attitude that makes them laugh, but the involuntary nature of that change, the clumsiness. Perhaps there was a stone in his path. He had to change pace or avoid the obstacle. But due to a lack of agility, distraction, or stubbornness of the body, due to an effect of rigidity or acquired speed, his muscles continued to perform the same movement when circumstances required something else. That is why the man falls and why passersby laugh (Bergson, 1972, p. 19).

Here we see again what we mentioned above about surprise, spontaneity, the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the uncalculated as generators of comical situations that make people laugh, "accidental" events that happen to someone for reasons beyond their control and that could also happen to those who observe what happened and laugh at it. This situation reflects that the viewer perceives the real and physical world—which requires no translation—as juxtaposed with the fictional or representational world that emerges in literature, cinema, and theater, respectively.

Bergson considers that "it is an external circumstance that has determined the effect. Comedy is therefore accidental; it does not go beyond, so to speak, the surface of the person. How will it reach their inner self? Mechanical rigidity must dispense with an obstacle placed in front of it by circumstances or by human malice in order to reveal itself" (1972, p. 20). By virtue of the above, and this comes very close to what we see on screen when the great comedians of film history, particularly during the silent era, suffer accidents that could and perhaps should be considered tragic, but which seem comical to us, to the extent that we admire them as much as we laugh ourselves silly.

Laughter can be understood as a kind of "energy valve" in that it functions as a release of accumulated tension in the body and mind. From a psychological point of view, laughing allows us to release repressed emotions, relax mental and physical rigidity, and restore inner balance; in this sense, it acts as a kind of "escape" that prevents excess nervous energy from turning into anxiety, stress, or conflict. Hence, many theories—such as Freud's in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (⁴, 1905)—consider laughter to be a mechanism of release, where the repressed finds a socially acceptable outlet. At the same time, from a social perspective, laughter channels collective tensions. Entire communities have used comedy as a means of venting frustrations with power, hierarchies, or prohibitions, as in the medieval carnival analyzed by Bakhtin.

Laughter, in this context, functions as an energetic valve for the social body, allowing the pressure of serious and solemn order to be drained, generating a space for shared catharsis that strengthens group cohesion. Thus, in its individual and collective dimensions, laughter is a form of liberating energy- that protects both the individual and the community from excessive rigidity or repression. Bergson considers that:

The effect of distraction can also be reinforced. There is a general law of which we have just found a first application and which we will formulate as follows: when a certain comic effect derives from a certain cause, the effect will seem more comic to us the more natural the cause seems to us. We already laugh at the distraction that is presented to us as a simple fact. (Bergson, 1972, p. 21).

Here, the French philosopher's assumption that laughter is a group phenomenon and fulfills a social function seems to become clearer, as does the idea that comedy is a reality that is as human in general as it is cultural, with diverse specificities and differentiated nuances that can be found throughout the planet. That is, possibly not everything makes everyone laugh, at least not yet, despite the cultural homogenization that global capitalism has set as its goal, but there are common elements that coincide. The above is as true for the author of this article as the fact already mentioned in this work that the gap between the tragic and the comic can be much narrower than one might imagine, and here, certain cultural and ideological aspects may have a significantly greater weight than should be assigned to the literary and cinematographic genres themselves. For Bergson

⁴ See Freud, Sigmund. "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious." *Complete Works* (Volume III). Biblioteca Nueva, 1923.

Laughter must be something like this, a kind of social gesture. Because of the fear it inspires, it represses eccentricities, keeps certain accessory activities that could become isolated and dormant always alert and in reciprocal contact, and softens any remaining mechanical rigidity that may remain on the surface of the social body. Laughter is not, therefore, a matter of pure aesthetics, since it pursues (unconsciously and even immorally in many special cases) a useful goal of general improvement. Nevertheless, there is something aesthetic about it, since comedy arises at the precise moment when society and the individual, freed from concern for their preservation, begin to treat themselves as works of art (Bergson, 1972, pp. 27-28).

Comedy, and laughter in particular, also serve a moral, existentialist, and vital function in the sense that they allow human beings to lead a more relaxed and carefree life, at least while they are laughing, regardless of the reason for it. When tragedy looms over us, the act of laughing at ourselves in the face of the effects of the tragic event or situation can help to cathect the individual in question, or to sublimate the feelings associated with the event, whether to form an attitude of resistance or resilience. In this sense, the "rigidity" shown shapes the comedy and the "laughter" functions as a sanction. Bergson states that:

A comic expression of the face is one that promises nothing more than it gives. It is a unique and definitive grimace. It could be said that the entire moral life of the person has crystallized in that system. And that is why there is no face more comical than the one that best suggests the idea of some simple, mechanical action in which the personality is absorbed forever. There are faces that seem to spend the day crying, others laughing or whistling, others eternally blowing an imaginary trumpet. These are the most comical of all faces. Here, too, we see the law that the more natural the cause, the more comical the effect. Automatism, rigidity, a habit acquired and preserved; this is what makes a physiognomy make us laugh. But the effect gains in intensity when we can connect these characteristics with a deeper cause, with a certain fundamental distraction of the person, as if the soul had allowed itself to be fascinated, hypnotized, by the materiality of a simple action (Bergson, 1972, p. 31).⁵

⁵ See Taibo, Paco Ignacio. *La risa loca. Encyclopedia of Comedy Cinema* (2 vols.). UNAM, 1975.

Comic expression not only promises nothing, but also reveals more than it expresses, from culture and society to the sense of belonging and the degree of empathy or apathy we feel towards those we laugh at. Contracting the face, stiffening the body, gesturing in the "opposite direction," and reversing emotions with the actions shown or represented lead to the observer (spectator) being mistaken in what they thought they could guess or predict about the situation in front of them, where anything that might happen is so unexpected that it can only make them laugh. These expressions, on a gestural level, result in a mechanism that "turns on," but at the same time cannot be taken lightly, that is, simplified to a mere cultural expression. Laughter goes beyond simple movements or outlets. The French philosopher considers that "only those aspects of our gestures that are mechanically uniform and, therefore, alien to our living personality can be imitated. To imitate someone is to extract the automatism that has allowed itself to be introduced into their person. It is therefore, by definition, to make them comical, and it is not surprising that imitation makes us laugh" (1972, pp. 37). A good example of this is that:

We guess that the usual devices of comedy, the periodic repetition of a phrase or scene, the symmetrical reversal of roles, the geometric development of entanglements, and many other games, may draw their comic force from the same source, for perhaps the art of the vaudeville writer lies in presenting us with a visibly mechanical articulation of human events while maintaining their outward appearance of verisimilitude, that is, the apparent flexibility of life (Bergson, 1972, p. 39).

***Slapstick Comedy* or the beginnings of film comedy and the cinema of Buster Keaton**

Man is the only living being that laughs.

Aristotle. "On the Soul."

The silent films of the 1920s constitute one of the moments of greatest aesthetic, technical, and social condensation of early modernity. In this context, the work of Buster Keaton stands out as one of the most refined expressions of what can be called a "comic turn" in cinematic language, in which there is a shift from purely burlesque comedy to reflective laughter, structurally linked to the social, technical, and industrial transformations of the 20th century. Films such as *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *The General* (1926) not only exemplify this mutation of the visual gag, but also crystallize—in the modern sense of the term—a social experience marked by the mechanization of the body, the

reorganization of work, and the growing technological mediation of reality. The comedy and laughter produced by these works closely dialogue with what has been said so far about the social, historical, cultural, political, and anthropological theoretical reflections of both Bergson and Bakhtin, understanding them in particular as forms of knowledge, thus allowing us to understand why Keaton's art remains fully relevant today.

In his famous essay *Laughter* (1900), Bergson defines the comic as "the mechanical embedded in the living." This formulation is particularly illuminating when approaching Keaton's cinema, whose body seems to operate like a machine perfectly synchronized with the technical environment that surrounds it. In *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), Keaton plays a projectionist who dreams of literally entering the movie screen. This central gag—the character's impossible leap into the film—is not only a technical feat, but also a comical reflection on modern alienation in which the subject moves between spaces without control, subject to a mechanical and logic that exceeds him. Laughter arises, according to Bergson, from the rigidity of the body in the face of a world that demands constant adaptation; but also, as Bakhtin would point out, from the critical awareness that the viewer acquires in recognizing this mismatch.

The "comic turn" of silent cinema manifests itself here as a sophistication of cinematic language and the social function of laughter. It is no longer just a matter of provoking laughter through falls or chases, but of articulating a reflective comedy that dialogues with the historical conditions of production. In the 1920s, the United States underwent rapid modernization, as evidenced by the expansion of Fordism, the standardization of working hours, and the rise of the mass media, among other phenomena associated with technological advances applied to everyday life that were reconfiguring a new social order. Keaton, far from nostalgically resisting this world—as other actors such as Chaplin and Linder, among others, did partially or totally—incorporated it into his films in a critical and ambiguous way.

In *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), cinema within cinema reveals the illusion of control promised by technical modernity, while exposing its unstable and fragmentary nature. For its part, *The General* (1926) deepens this dimension by setting the action in an environment dominated by the quintessential machine of the late 19th century, the railroad. Set during the Civil War, the film articulates a double temporal movement in which it looks back at American history, but from a fully modern sensibility. The locomotive is not only a narrative objective, but also the structural axis of the film. Keaton synchronizes his body with the relentless logic of the train, turning the chase into a

precise choreography where every gesture is calculated down to the millimeter. Here, laughter emerges once again from the tension between the human and the mechanical, but also from the excess of rationality applied to absurd situations.

From Bakhtin's perspective, laughter has an ambivalent dimension: it degrades and renews, dismantles hierarchies, and allows for a critical distance from the established order. In *The General* (1926), this laughter is not carnivalesque in a medieval popular sense, but it does fulfill a demystifying dimension. The war epic is reduced to a series of technical obstacles and misunderstandings, where heroism is confused with mechanical obstinacy. Keaton does not openly ridicule war, but he empties it of solemnity through a somewhat cold, almost impassive comedy embodied in his famous "stone face."

The tradition of *slapstick comedy*, heir to both carnival masks and Bergsonian mechanicity, found a privileged place in the early days of silent cinema. The exaggeration of falls, chases, blows, and physical misunderstandings is part of, on the one hand, Bakhtin's carnival logic, where the body becomes a space of excess and comic liberation; and, on the other hand, Bergsonian theory, by highlighting the comedy in the repetition of mechanical movements and the disarticulation of the human in the face of the inert. Buster Keaton, master of *slapstick*, condenses these two dimensions. His imperturbable face in the midst of chaos introduces the paradox of laughter, that is, while the viewer is infected by the ridiculousness of the situation, the character remains serious, further accentuating the comic effect.

His films embody the carnivalesque vitality that subverts order and the mechanical rigidity that Bergson identifies as the root of comedy: machines that rebel, bodies that bend or break their limits, and a world where accident becomes the rule. Thus, the comedy of silent cinema is not only entertainment, but the modern crystallization of a long cultural tradition of laughter, which unfolds both as a mechanism of social criticism and community celebration. Comparing both perspectives, we see that laughter, whether as a force of liberation (Bakhtin) or as a social corrective (Bergson), is always linked to the collective; in no case is it reduced to a solitary experience, but rather depends on the gaze and participation of a community. In *slapstick comedy*, developed in the early days of silent film, both dimensions are clearly articulated. The blow, the fall, the stumble, or the chase not only provoke a carnivalesque pleasure in their excessiveness—bodies that deform, spaces that become absurd—but also reveal the mechanical nature of modern life, in which bodies become cogs,

characters are absorbed by the logic of the machine or trapped in repetitive routines, all of which Bergson describes as a source of ridicule. Film researcher and historian Hilde D'Haeyere states that:

Several films produced by the Mack Sennett Comedies studio between 1917 and 1933⁶ show a sense of documentary integrity in the filming of locations in Los Angeles and the exploitation of real-life events. The inclination to base comedy on local reality is also visible in *Slapstick Comedy films* that take filmmaking as their subject, portraying the multifaceted process of film production. These meta-films are truly "homemade" films: they use studio grounds that are not disguised as sets as filming locations; they show the workings of film machinery in full view of the cameras; they demonstrate rehearsal, acting, and directing methods; and they present comedians as ordinary people behind the scenes (2014, p. 82).

Let us remember that a revolution in technology and commercialization is taking place in the field of cinema, significantly affecting the work and the way of filming, producing, distributing, marketing, exhibiting, safeguarding, and advertising, among other things. Cinema, which has only been around for a few decades, has not only continued to reinvent itself, but has also been impacted by the innovations and discoveries of the era in optics, mechanics, film, and other areas in which cinema uses science and technology to enhance its daily existence. In addition to the above, everything mentioned here leads in turn to an increasing specialization of work within film companies. Hilde D'Haeyere states that:

With their constant reworking of Keystone-era iconography and technology, Sennett's films about film production set standards of physical comedy for the representation of early Hollywood in the public imagination. Physical comedy cinema began to function increasingly as a model for the way Hollywood chose to look back on its early years. This image drew directly on physical comedy meta-films by mixing historical components with fictional ones,

⁶ "That transition from silent to sound cinema was not easy; it was fraught with technical complexities, including the adaptation of screening rooms and the specialization of professional sectors such as screenwriters, who had to innovate in the ways they wrote or narrated under the new conditions demanded by this nascent industry. [...] During 1933, this irreversible change became more noticeable. From then on, films began to be screened in which the shortcomings of silent cinema became more noticeable. Constant technological development began to encourage the manufacture and specialization of lighter cameras with more sophisticated optics, which, at the same time, would allow for new framing and mobility systems. The global cultural context of cinema was based on the expressiveness of the image and its movements, which, together with the actors, were the raw material that shaped the industry in those decades. Silent films and their audiences were accustomed to silence; in fact, the adaptation of sound was not welcome by some filmmakers and theorists, who saw the new proposals as a threat to the expressive purity of images" (José Rivera Guadarrama, "Hitchcock and the first sound film in Europe." *La Jornada*, no. 1555, December 22, 2024, p. 14).

comedians with their film characters, and obsolete equipment with new technological displays, thus painting a compelling portrait of an industry that sought to represent its past in terms of a well-organized work environment inhabited by playful-minded fools who resisted such professionalism. The most notable post-Sennett revival films promoting Keystone-style chaos as a substitute for early films are *Hotel Keystone* (1935), a Vitaphone tribute film in which Keystone cops intervene when a swimsuit beauty contest ends in a pie-throwing party, and Twentieth Century-Fox's *Hollywood Cavalcade* (1939), which offers a thinly veiled account of Mack Sennett's life (2014, p. 103).

Palmira González mentions in her work *El cine mudo* (2008) that "having started cinema alongside Griffith, Mack Sennett was the father of American slapstick comedy⁷, and founded a production company—Keystone—where such important figures in the world of cinema as Charles Chaplin,⁸ Buster Keaton, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, Harry Langdon, Mabel Normand, and Gloria Swanson took their first steps" (2008, p. 55). Regarding the life of Buster Keaton, Pinto de Sousa recounts that:

Problems with the law [...] forced the [Keaton] family to emigrate to England, where Buster's natural growth made it difficult for the "three Keatons" to remain the star attraction. His father's alcoholism exacerbated his occasional violence, so in February 1917, Buster Keaton left the show business and returned to New York. There he met Dutch comedian Lou Anger, director of the *Comique Film Corporation* studios, created by Joseph Schenck for one of the rising stars of cinema, actor and filmmaker Roscoe Arbuckle, known as *Fatty*.⁹ Arbuckle decided to include Keaton in the cast of *The Butcher Boy* (1917). In that film, Buster already wore the typical clothing that would characterize him throughout his filmography, namely his flat hat and enormous shoes (2016, p. 8).

According to Palmira González:

[...] if there was any comedian who could compete with Chaplin, it was Buster Keaton (1895-1966). Very different from Chaplin, Keaton appealed more to the intellect than to the emotions: his always impassive face [...] characterized him. His character lives in constant

⁷ See Kalat, David. *Too Funny for Words: A Contrarian History of American Screen Comedy from Silent Slapstick to Screwball*. Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2019. See Balducci, Anthony. *The Funny Parts: A History of Film Comedy Routines and Gags*. Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2012.

⁸ See Sadoul, Georges. *Vida de Chaplin*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955.

⁹ Noriega Sánchez, José Luis. *History of Cinema, Theory and Film Genres, Photography and Television*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2002, 109.

struggle against machines and is capable of causing the greatest disasters in the end all by himself. (2008:58).

Regarding Keaton's early life as an actor, Pinto de Souza states that:

At just 4 years old, Joseph Junior made his stage debut participating in his parents' music hall act, later renamed the "Keaton Trio." A year later, Buster was already the star of the show, where he was used as a broom to clean the floor, a potato sack, or a soccer ball, earning him the nickname "the human mop."¹⁰ His father treated him so badly that on more than one occasion he had to appear before the juvenile courts. The most surprising thing is that the little boy enjoyed these beatings: "The audience was surprised that I didn't cry. I didn't cry because it didn't hurt me. All children like to be shaken around by their parents. They are all puppeteers and acrobats by nature. Besides, being a born comedian, when I heard the audience shouting, laughing, and applauding, I forgot about the bumps and bruises I might have suffered at first. [...] One of the things I discovered was that whenever I smiled or let the spectators suspect how much fun I was having, they didn't seem to laugh as much as usual. I suppose it was because people don't expect someone who is being used as a doormat, potato sack, or soccer ball to love what is being done to them"¹¹ (2016, pp. 7-8).

Palmira González comments that:

Buster Keaton, who came from music hall, began his film career in 1917, appearing in Fatty's films. His best short films date from the early 1920s, when he partnered with Joseph Schenck for production and had Virginia Fox and Sybil Seely as co-stars. Between 1923 and 1929, he made important feature films, notably "Sherlock Jr." (1924), "The Navigator" (1924), "Seven Chances" (1925), "The General" (1927), "¹² " probably his best work, and "River Hero" (1928) (2008, p. 58-59).

¹⁰ Goudet, Stéphane. *The Book of Buster Keaton*. Cahiers du cinéma editions, 2008, 12.

¹¹ Memba, Javier. *History of Universal Cinema*. T&B Editores, 2008, 73.

¹² Film based on the story *The Great Locomotive Chase* written by William Pittinger, one of the perpetrators of the theft of the real "General" in 1862. The film ranks 18th on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 greatest American films of all time. American Film Institute (2015) <http://www.afi.com/100years/movies10.aspx> (Accessed 1/01/2025). Éric Rohmer comments on this film: "Buster Keaton's sense of humor, which we could call contemplative comedy, is exercised at all times, as he does not play with surprise. [...] Laughter and comedy were there, not in themselves, for me, but, as the philosopher would say, in themselves for themselves, latent in the film, and they gave rise to an impression of epic grandeur that I now wanted to savor alone. An impression that I had not experienced before, nor have I experienced since, except with Griffith and Murnau. [...] In Keaton, very few gestures of expression are

Sousa de Santos believes that Keaton's success was largely due to certain traits that made him a unique actor, unmistakable from other equally great filmmakers and actors in the same film genre.

He states that:

His characteristic traits, as Sánchez Noriega explains, are crazy events, frantic chases, slaps and cream pie fights, pretty actresses, conflict with law enforcement, etc. This genre bases its appeal on a succession of gags where timing and mathematical rhythm reach virtuosity, rather than on the stories told. The humor is naive, absurd, the result of primitive violence and physical situations rather than the psychological dimension of the characters, but without renouncing criticism of social values and attitudes, especially when it becomes more transgressive because it is irreverent and immodest. Several traditions and influences coexist within the genre: popular shows (vaudeville, pantomime, music hall), French comedians such as Max Linder, André Deed, Boireau, etc. The genre in question experienced its golden age around this time with characters such as Charles Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, and Buster Keaton (Pinto de Souza, 2016, p. 9).

Keaton embodies like few others the dual nature of laughter on which we have based this work. His films bring together carnival logic, with collapsing sets, trains that become scenes of chaos, and accidents that seem to suspend the laws of everyday life, with the mechanical rigidity that Bergson identified in repeated gestures and the automation of the human. The seriousness of his face—his famous "wooden face"—far from neutralizing the comedy, intensifies it, as it accentuates the contrast between the chaotic world and the individual who seems unly unresponsive to it. This

remnants of the old mimicry or Chaplinesque contamination. He only performs the movements required by the action, the effectiveness of which is proven at every moment. [...] There is nothing corrosive here. There is no criticism of established society. And yet, beneath the respect and consideration he professes, he never fails to highlight its contradictions" ("Le Mécano de la General," *Positif*, no. 400, June 1994). For Goudet, "Buster Keaton the director is as rigorous in the ordering of his stories as he is in the geometric composition of literally symmetrical shots. [...] The narrative of *The General* is one of the most beautiful of all time. There is a beauty in the perceptible simplicity and great intelligence of this binary structure based simply on the round trip of Johnny Gray (Buster Keaton) [...] From the outset, there is the audacity of transforming a historical war event into a burlesque action film. [...] The film seems to be folded in on itself. All the situations [...] in the first part are echoed in the second" (2008:65-66). Regarding the same film, Manuel Villegas considers that "that impassive face is the personal translation of the universe that surrounds him. A universe that has its own rhythm, according to immutable, relentless gears of rigorous precision: a mechanical world, like monstrous machinery. That is why one of its fundamental comic elements is machines, large or small. Everything in his world is mechanical, from machines to men to the course of events" (2005, p. 248).

neutrality becomes a catalyst for collective laughter, a mirror of the modern condition, in which human beings are confronted with a reality that threatens to mechanize them. In this way, the comedy of silent film, and in particular Keaton's work, constitutes a meeting point between the visions of Bakhtin and Bergson. Cinematic laughter inherits the medieval carnival spirit in its power to reverse the order and give prominence to the grotesque, but also revealing the tension between the mechanical and the human, between bodies and technology, in repeated gestures and accidents, as ways of condensing a profound cultural reflection, where laughter serves as resistance, criticism, and communal celebration in a world that, at the beginning of the 20th century, was swept up in the vertigo of technological modernity. Pinto de Souza considers that:

In this context of total freedom and boundless creativity, Keaton, assisted in the production by Eddie Cline, made nineteen films in two and a half years, many of them masterpieces.¹³ Among these nineteen works, titles such as *Convict 13* (1920), *The Haunted House* (1921), and *The Electric House* (1922) stand out. Jean Mitry shares this opinion, as he believes that Keaton reached his creative peak with the films made between 1923 and 1928: *The Law of Hospitality*, *The Navigator*, *The General*, and *The Cameraman*,¹⁴ are works that make him the greatest comedian after Chaplin¹⁵ (2016, p. 10).

Buster Keaton exemplifies this dual dimension. In *The General* (1926), for example, the sequence in which Keaton manipulates the locomotive without ever losing his imperturbable expression combines carnivalesque logic and Bergsonian mechanics. On the one hand, the train, a symbol of technological modernity, becomes a scene of chaos and excess; on the other, the protagonist repeats automatic gestures that make him look like just another cog in the machine. The viewer laughs at the grotesque disproportion of the situation and, at the same time, at the mechanical rigidity that traps the character.

In *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), the famous scene in which the facade of a house falls on Keaton, who is saved because the window fits perfectly around his body, also functions as a metaphor for

¹³ Goudet, Stéphane. *The Book of Buster Keaton*. Cahiers du cinéma editions, 2008, 27.

¹⁴ "In *The Cameraman*, we delve into the work of those anonymous characters behind the camera, showing us the genesis of every film, that is, the camera and the possibilities it offers. In *The Modern Sherlock Holmes*, on the other hand, the focus is on the final phase of filmmaking, the presentation of the work to the public, the relationship between this audience and the film, and how the latter can influence their perception of reality" (Pinto de Sousa, 2016, p. 16).

¹⁵ Caparrós, José María. *Introduction to the History of Cinematic Art*. Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, 1990, 52.

Bakhtin and Bergson's vision, that is, the excessive accident, close to carnival humor, is combined with the mechanical coldness of perfect calculation, where laughter arises from the tension between mortal danger and the automation of a gesture. When he stars in the film *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), he masterfully portrays what other directors such as Arcady Boytler and Woody Allen, among others, would later pay homage to in their films.¹⁶ Goudet refers to this scene in the following quote:

Certainly, the projectionist's ghost manages to penetrate the image of the film without any difficulty, but he finds himself almost immediately trapped, shaken by the editing. The film on the screen unfolds, disregarding any narrative plausibility. It presents the most diverse spaces (the sea, the mountains, the zoo, a city street); and all of them endanger the intruder. Taming the world, making a place for oneself in it, also consists of learning to tame the imaginary (2008, p. 53).

In the scene from *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) to which Goudet alludes, the projectionist played by Keaton crosses the boundary between the movie theater and the screen, entering a film universe that, far from welcoming him harmoniously, subjects him to abrupt and disconcerting editing. The character is trapped in a succession of disconnected spaces—from the sea to the mountains, from the zoo to the city—that disorient him and constantly put him at risk. This spatial disarticulation illustrates, in a comical way, the difficulty of inhabiting the world and adapting to its unpredictable dynamism. According to Goudet, Keaton's genius lies in showing that "making a place for oneself in the world" also involves learning to tame the imagination, that is, recognizing that reality and fiction are intertwined and that only those who are capable of managing this transition can resist the chaos and instability that both impose.

In *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), Keaton takes this dialectic between the carnivalesque and the mechanical to the extreme by introducing the projectionist who dreams of literally entering the screen to become a detective. The famous sequence in which the protagonist crosses the border between the real world and the film world brilliantly embodies the carnivalization described by Bakhtin, in which the everyday order is suspended to give way to a universe where the laws of logic and space- re subverted, generating collective enjoyment in visual excess. At the same time, the sudden changes of scenery and the protagonist's inability to adapt to them respond to Bergson's analysis of comedy as mechanical rigidity, as happens with the human body, out of step with the

¹⁶ See Král, Petr. *Les burlesques ou Parade des somnambules*. Lurlule, 1986.

speed and arbitrariness of the editing, becoming a ridiculous automaton that cannot keep up with the technical transformations of cinema. In this film, Keaton manages to synthesize the two theories in a gesture of radical modernity, when laughter emerges both from the carnivalesque power of cinema, on the one hand, and as evidence of the mechanization of the subject in the face of a technical artifact that overwhelms him, on the other. In the same vein, Pinto de Sousa states that:

We are faced with a meta-cinematic scene from 1924, masterfully executed. The fact that his character crosses the screen to enter another film and that within that film, Keaton plays with the editing, that is, cutting the shot and changing the setting where the protagonist was to create comical scenes, shows a great knowledge of the possibilities of cinematic language, as he is able to edit one film within another (2016, p. 12).

There has been much speculation about what led to Keaton's decline and his disappearance from both film and theater. His biographers and experts on his work and life agree on the factors that led to this. They agree that his experience with Metro marked his fate after it bought his contract, taking away his independence and leading him to break off his relationship with the studio.¹⁷ This, combined with family and personal issues and, indeed, the impact that the advent of sound had on the seventh art, further complicated matters for this creative genius.¹⁸

It is important to remember that this last aspect, added to the circumstances that led to monopolistic practices that were not always very ethical, in an expanding market that foreshadowed what has now become an industry, particularly Hollywood, and which Keaton experienced firsthand, such as the mechanization and specialization of work, and in particular the case of the power that the producer began to have over the director, whose vision of things came to prevail over that of the director, affected him greatly. "If we look at any of the films from this period, we see that [...] Keaton was incompatible with the *Studio System* and with the way Thalber, Louis B. Mayer's right-hand man, worked" (2006:36).¹⁹ This was not unique to Keaton; there were many directors, artists, and, in general, people who had been working in the film industry who were unable to cope with this situation, leading to the collapse of the lives and careers of many actors and actresses as a result of

¹⁷ See Willis, Jaime. *Metro Goldwyn Mayer*. T&B Editores, 2006.

¹⁸ See Bill Nichols. "Documentary cinema and the arrival of sound." *Telling truths with cinema. Evidence, ethics, politics in documentary*. Lurlule, 1986, 91-105.

¹⁹ Willis, Jaime. *Metro Goldwyn Mayer*. T&B Editores, 2006, 36.

the hegemony of sound in cinema and the shift that the industry was taking.²⁰ Pinto de Sousa considers that:

His commercial success never came close to what it had been. It was clear that he was not as commercially successful as his rival directors, Chaplin and Lloyd. Although the cause of this lack of profitability has never been very clear, various historians speculate about an early surrealism, which was captured in many of his misunderstood actions, and about an excessive auteur perspective, which also detracted from critical support (Willis, 2006, p. 36).

In conclusion

The aim of this work was to trace the origins of laughter and comedy from Antiquity, through the Middle Ages, to the modernity of *slapstick* comedy in the dawn of silent cinema and the films of Buster Keaton. In particular, emphasis was placed on what was considered "serious culture," represented by ecclesiastical and state authorities, and "popular culture," where laughter found its ideal space to be displayed socially. We proceeded by sharing some of the most famous reflections of the Soviet thinker Mikhail Bakhtin contained in his classic text *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1965), which analyzes the phenomenon of laughter in the social, political, and cultural space of the Middle Ages and the late 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries.

In the second part, we took as our starting point the sociological, philosophical, biological, and aesthetic reflections on laughter by French philosopher Henri Bergson in his work *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), particularly the first section entitled "On Comedy in General. The Comedy of Forms and the Comedy of Movements. The Expansive Force of Comedy," in which the author raises phenomenological and sociocultural questions about the meaning of laughter and what predominantly provokes it. We saw through this author's discourse that the sociocultural context in which laughter arises plays a very important role in unleashing feelings and emotions that individuals share and te socially, as well as the factors that directly influence social groups so that comedy comes into play, such as the emotional, cognitive, ideological, cultural, and psychological, always interwoven with surprise, spontaneity, the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the uncalculated: a reflection of one's own nature and part of human nature, and of the social sphere in which human beings live their daily lives.

In the third and final part, turning to the 1920s and 1930s, when the beginning and heyday of film comedy can be located, that is, the transition from silent to sound cinema, we reflect on the

²⁰ See Horton, Andrew. *Buster Keaton's Sherlock Jr.* Cambridge University Press, 1997.

beginnings of silent cinema and the technical and economic complications and economic complications faced by the fledgling film industry, particularly through the work of film researcher and historian Hilde D'Haeyere on so-called *slapstick comedy films*, explaining what this "comic twist" basically consisted of, which takes filmmaking itself as one of its themes. As the reader will have noticed, this section served to introduce the last part of this essay, dedicated in particular to the figure of the great director and actor-comedian Buster Keaton. To this end, some personal and family aspects of his life and films are shared, with an emphasis on some of them, and we interweave sociological, phenomenological, historical, and aesthetic-political reflections on comedy and laughter as expounded by Bergson and Bakhtin. In addition to this, we offer some details about the state of filmmaking at the time and the crisis that certain changes generated in the industry, both in terms of employment and commerce, as well as technology, science, ideology, and politics, which had a significant impact on the profession and work being done by Buster Keaton, among other directors and comic actors who, like him, were left "out of the game."

The notion of "modern crystallization" allows us to understand how these films condense multiple historical processes into precise aesthetic forms. Crystallization does not imply immobility, but rather a momentary fixation of social tensions: body and machine, individual and system, illusion and technique. Keaton's production processes—based on absolute control of space, time, and movement—reflect the same rationalizing spirit that organizes modern industry, but return it to the viewer in the form of comedy. Thus, Keaton's cinema functions as a distorting mirror of modernity in which its logics are reproduced to expose its fissures. The current relevance of Buster Keaton's art lies precisely in this ability to articulate reflective laughter in the face of an increasingly automated world. In an era dominated by algorithms, screens, and accelerated rhythms, the figure of the body trying to adapt—without quite succeeding—retains a remarkable critical power. Keaton offers neither consolation nor easy catharsis; his comedy is dry, analytical, and therefore profoundly modern. *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *The General* (1926) not only belong to the history of silent cinema, but continue to challenge contemporary viewers by reminding them that, behind every technical advance, human fragility persists. In short, Keaton's cinema embodies the "comic turn" of the 1920s, offering laughter that thinks, observes, and reveals the social structures of its time. Through the embedding of the mechanical in the living, his films crystallize an experience that, far from being historically exhausted, continues to resonate in the present.

The central objective of this work is achieved by showing how Keaton's cinema stands as a space where the theories of Bakhtin and Bergson converge. It was found that the laughter provoked by the comedian-comediographer Keaton is not limited to visual entertainment, but brings into play profound cultural forces, such as carnivalization, which liberates and regenerates, on the one hand, and social correction, which exhibits the mechanization of modern life, on the other. Keaton, with his famous expressionless face, acts as a catalyst for this tension by remaining impassive in the face of catastrophe, revealing the paradox of cinematic laughter, which can be both critical and celebratory, corrective and excessive. Ultimately, his work confirms that laughter, rather than a simple aesthetic device, constitutes a cultural language that transcends eras and media, from medieval carnival to the silent film screen.

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