# Placing Charles Wolfe
## Film History, Theory, and the Archive

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Our Hero came from *Nowhere* – he
wasn't going *Anywhere* and got
kicked off *Somewhere*.
-   *The High Sign* (Keaton and
    Cline, 1921)

When I think of Charles Wolfe, I think of Buster Keaton, and not only because of Wolfe's decades-long interest in the "Great Stone Face" and silent-era slapstick comedy. Both also share a kind of methodological and stylistic affinity. In his acting and his exploration of the technical and representational possibilities of the cinema, Keaton took great pleasure in being remarkably precise and rigorous in equal measures. He also moved about the screen with a distinctive agility as though, despite the effortfulness of his practice, he tapped effortlessly into the free-flowing energy of the

cinema and his modern world. As Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker* recently put it: "[H]e moved like the moving pictures."[1] Wolfe is likewise at once meticulous and effortless in his treatment of film history. While being grounded in laborious and original archival research, he thinks with an agility that makes easy work of some of the most complex questions about the technological, cultural, and theoretical possibilities of the cinema, and he clearly enjoys the work.

In this brief reflection, I consider what Wolfe's study of Keaton makes possible in the study of film history. Of course, Keaton is not everything. Wolfe is a leading Frank Capra scholar and has written, among other things, about photography, documentary, and sound technologies in the histories of American cinema. In all cases, he balances the biographical and the social with fine-grained analyses of film form and material culture. The balance is also present in his writings on slapstick comedy, but something crystalizes in how he sees the genre that has striking implications for the futures of both studies of early cinema and silent film and the discipline of cinema studies more broadly. That something is Wolfe's approach to the theme of "space and place" in Keaton's silent comedies of the 1920s.

Wolfe took up the theme in his doctoral work during the late 1970s when he used the comedian's interactions with various "disorienting" diegetic spaces to conduct close formal analyses of the broader evolution of acting, editing, and *mise-en-scène* in American slapstick.[2] In a series of more recent essays expanding on what Jay Leyda termed the "California slapstick" subgenre,[3] he has been treating Keaton's films as archives of the comedian's attempts to navigate the changing social geographies of the nondiegetic places in which he moved, lived, and worked.[4] The focus draws energy from the priorities of New Film History, which emerged as film studies became institutionalized in the 1970s and began "looking past the screen," as Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin would have it, to the social and industrial contexts of early films, including the spaces in which they were made and exhibited.[5] Coincidentally and significantly, Wolfe completed his PhD in 1978, the same year in which New Film History took shape at the pivotal International Federation of Film Archives Congress in Brighton, England. For Wolfe, looking closely at Keaton's relationship with such spaces does much more than contextualize his filmmaking; it makes it possible to write new histories and theories of slapstick that are, we will see, rooted in the regional specificities of Keaton's milieu.

**The Case of *The High Sign***

As an example, consider the opening of Keaton's *The High Sign* (1921) (fig. 1). Following an intertitle that highlights the placelessness of Our Hero (played by Keaton), the comedian gets kicked off of a train and skids into a beach town, walks by a carousel where he lifts a newspaper from a rider as they spin by, and sits down on a bench. His attempt to read the newspaper is thwarted by its unexpectedly huge size, which engulfs him and topples him to the ground. The gags offer wonderful opportunities for thinking about Keaton's emerging star identity (his film career was just "kicking off" at the time) and his unique slapstick style, as well as his handling of what Donald Crafton calls the "lurching" between narrative and attractions that characterized silent film comedies.[6] In his analysis of the film, however, Wolfe looks elsewhere and asks, "Where have these events taken place?"[7]



Figure 1. Our Hero surveying "Somewhere" after having been kicked off of a train. Screen grab from *The High Sign* (Keaton and Cline, 1921) https://archive.org/details/the-high-sign.

Drawing on John Bengtson's study of location shooting in Keaton's films, Wolfe identifies those places as Moonstone Beach on the South Bay Los Angeles coastline; "the Looff Carousel on the Long Beach Pike"; "and the

Venice boardwalk near the intersection of Windward Avenue and Ocean Front Walk."[8] Of all the things we could choose to look for, we might wonder what we can learn about *The High Sign* or about slapstick comedy in general from such site-specific details, beyond important aspects of the film's production history. For Wolfe, the value is not simply in *placing* Keaton in various locations, but in *identifying* them, an ability that changes how we see Keaton's films. In the settings through which Keaton moves, Wolfe explains, are visible traces of the efforts by early twentieth-century land developers to transform the Southern California coastline with the construction of new residential communities, amusement complexes, boardwalks, businesses, roadways, railways, and waterways. Those traces compel us to see that Keaton's diegetic settings were entangled with the social geography of the Southern California locations in which he worked.[9]

Crucially, Wolfe has pointed out that Keaton's locations were places in transition. Because of the geography and sprawl of the region, the development of the Los Angeles area at the time unfolded in a "patchwork fashion" where disparate communities were gradually linked up by infrastructure projects—roadways and railways and boardwalks—that provided the connective tissue of what Wolfe calls a "topographically variegated, expansive, and decentralized urban space."[10] He uses that history of space to frame *The High Sign* as an archive of early twentieth-century urban planning in Los Angeles and consequent discourses of modernity. As Keaton moves through the boardwalk "somewhere" in Southern California, for example, the places he navigates tell the story of how the *fin-de-siècle* Venice of America project, a vision of the land developer Abbot Kinney who had transformed the Santa Monica Coastline, was evolving to accommodate the pace of the city's growing transportation and commercial needs.[11] We learn all of this from brief glimpses of backgrounds in a handful of shots at the start of the film, backgrounds that viewers may not notice, let alone think much about.

Wolfe does not stop there. He goes on to suggest that Keaton's locations in turn shaped the formal conventions of the slapstick genre. The idea here is that it was through these specific places in a developing urban space that Keaton imagined the possibilities of using continuity editing strategies and patterns of movement—namely the chase—to link gags and stunts across spaces in a medium and in a genre that were also being developed. Notably, each of the opening shots of *The High Sign* were filmed in a different place in Southern California and joined through editing into "an imaginary

geography."[12] That is, Keaton's continuous movement in what appears to be the same unified place in the film joins three geographically different places outside the film. And that construction of spatial continuity through editing mirrors how land developers in Keaton's milieu were using infrastructure projects to link the profilmic places that appear in *The High Sign* into a unified "Los Angeles." What we see when we look closely at the film, then, is that, while Our Hero may be placeless, the slapstick genre is not.

**Lessons from the Background**

That a theory of slapstick comedy can be rooted in the historically-specific social geography of Southern California is a reminder of the benefits of spatializing film theory—particularly theories of film form and genre, which have long struggled with the pressures of ahistorical thinking. Rob King's wonderful analysis of how the social history of technology shaped the formal conventions of early American slapstick speaks to this, too; as does Maggie Hennefeld's feminist history of early slapstick comediennes and the geopolitics of the genre.[13] It's also reflected more broadly in the recent expansion of global and transnational studies of film genre. While Wolfe's approach has very much been central to New Film History since the archival turn in the discipline, it carries important lessons on the values of doing film history and theory today.

One of the richest lessons is in applying what Wolfe calls "a form of historical forensics" to an oft-overlooked aspect of the moving image: the background.[14] When he emphasizes the importance of place to theorizing film form, an emphasis that animates Priya Jaikumar's brilliant recent work on films shot on location in India, Wolfe asks us to see the moving image background as an archive rather than a backdrop.[15] In this view, the places that appear in *The High Sign* are not only made meaningful by narrative patterns or by Keaton's movements through them; they have their own stories to tell. Focusing on the situatedness of those stories prompts Wolfe to call on historians "to specify how slapstick forms evolved in different locales," and to imagine in turn "a comparative study of geographic patterns in" slapstick films at a global scale.[16] The call is to expand the scope and nature of genre criticism by challenging the field to diversify its methods and reconstruct the slapstick genre from a potentially ever-expanding set of regional microhistories. There is clearly a great deal of exciting work still to be done along these lines.

Wolfe's treatment of the background as an archive of possibility also encourages the discipline to diversify the kinds of archives it draws upon. His attention to histories of urban planning, migration, and the environment that take him well beyond the purview of studio archives reminds me of Thomas Elsaesser's comic but sincere observation of New Film History in 1986: "To do film history today, one has to become an economic historian, a legal expert, a sociologist, an architectural historian, know about censorship and fiscal policy, read trade papers and fan magazines, even study Lloyds Lists of ships sunk during World War One to calculate how much of the film footage exported to Europe actually reached its destination."[17] Echoing Janet Staiger's call in the early 2000s for a renewed interest in such approaches, Wolfe affirms that the expansive methodological frame (which is not unlike Keaton's newspaper in *The High Sign*!) is alive and well, and still creating opportunities for new critical studies of one of the longest standing genres in film history.[18]

There are lessons beyond silent-era film comedy, too. For instance, in my own work in animation studies, I am applying Wolfe's historical forensics to the overlooked background art in Warner Bros.' popular Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner cartoons made between 1949 and 1965. Thinking about the slapstick comedy in these cartoons, as Wolfe does with Keaton, is revealing that Jones' now iconic animated desert participated in the changing social geography of the American Southwest. Within the animated backgrounds are visible traces of how the idea of the desert was being constructed relative to the establishment of an expansive interstate highway system, the mining industry's impacts on the environment during the early years of the Cold War, and the fallout of nuclear weapons research and development in places such as the Nevada Test Site. The more I look closely at those backgrounds, the more I see the need for writing histories and theories of animation that account for such specificities of place, especially in a medium such as the drawn cartoon that, because of its ontological distance from profilmic reality, is built on a kind of placelessness.

The capacity of Wolfe's thinking to travel beyond his immediate field of study is one of his most valuable recent contributions to the discipline. From his writings on slapstick, for example, we can trace important methodological resonances in Jennifer Fay's incisive reading of environmental design and location shooting in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), which she uses to place Keaton in the early history of cinema's relationship with the Anthropocene.[19] In another vein, R. Barton Palmer aligned with Wolfe when he analyzed how

postwar Hollywood Westerns erased the specificities of real places such as Monument Valley and made them into generic backdrops that helped construct the geographic imaginary of the West as "a distinctive landscape suspended between somewhere and nowhere."[20] Nathan Holmes has done exciting work to extend this mode of inquiry to looking at how chase sequences and backgrounds in the crime film genre of the 1970s participated in producing ideas about real built environments.[21] That Wolfe's way of seeing slapstick opens onto such varied terrain is a testament to the versatility and appeal of his thinking.

Finally, these resonances are a reminder that the study of early and silent film and media histories is not exhausted; that even in seemingly minor details and backgrounds of old and oftentimes familiar films, there are new histories to be written, old ones to be reworked, and lessons to be learned about how to navigate media cultures in the present. The reminder is reassuring, not least because the frenzy and excitement of the ever-expanding digital continues to put pressure on the significance of the cinema's first decades and the historiographic practices we use to understand them. Indeed, I expect that, as questions of the futures of history, theory, and the archive evolve under the impact of new media and complicate the contours of Film and Media Studies, Wolfe's lessons will continue to gain currency.

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

1    Adam Gopnik, "What Made Buster Keaton's Comedy So Modern?" *The New Yorker*, January 24, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/31/what-made-buster-keatons-comedy-so-modern-biography-james-curtis-dana-stevens.

2   See Charles Wolfe, "Spatial Disorientation and Dream in the Feature Films of Buster Keaton," PhD diss. (Columbia University, 1978).

3   Jay Leyda, "California Slapstick: A Definition," in *The Slapstick Symposium*, ed. Eileen Bowser (Brussels: Fédération internationale des archives du film, 1988), 1-3.

4   See Charles Wolfe, "California Slapstick Revisited," in *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King (New York: Routledge, 2010), 169-189; Charles Wolfe, "From Venice to the Valley: California Slapstick and the Keaton Comedy Short," in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, ed. John Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3-30; and Charles Wolfe, "California Landscapes: John Divola and the Cine-Geography of Serial Photography," in *The Image in Early Cinema: Form and Material*, ed. Scott Curtis, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 212-227.

5   See Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin, eds, *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

6   Donald Crafton, "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 357.

7   Wolfe, "From Venice to the Valley," 10.

8   Wolfe, "From Venice to the Valley," 10. Wolfe relies heavily on John Bengston, *Silent Echoes: Discovering Early Hollywood through the Films of Buster Keaton* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2000).

9   Wolfe develops the focus on social geography across both "California Slapstick Revisited" and "From Venice to the Valley."

10  Wolfe, "California Slapstick Revisited," 177-178.

11  See Wolfe, "From Venice to the Valley," 5-9.

12  Wolfe, "California Slapstick Revisited," 182.

13  See Rob King, "'Uproarious Inventions': The Keystone Film Company, Modernity, and the Art of the Motor," *Film History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 271-291; and Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick & Silent Film Comediennes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

14  Wolfe, "California Slapstick Revisited," 171.

15  See Priya Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

16  Wolfe, "California Slapstick Revisited," 185.

17  Thomas Elsaesser, "The 'New' Film History," *Sight and Sound* 55, no. 4 (1986): 248.

18  Janet Staiger, "The Future of the Past," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 126-129.

19  Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23-58.

20  R. Barton Palmer, *Shot on Location: Postwar American Cinema and the Exploration of Real Place* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 87.

21  Nathan Holmes, *Welcome to Fear City: Crime Film, Crisis, and the Urban Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).

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