

## ***FEBRUARY, 1914***

By Michael Ventura

January 23, 2014

The icon that Charles Chaplin created at the age of 24 may be said to have been born on the first day that he was put on public display: Feb. 7, 1914.

The “flicker” was “Kid Auto Races at Venice,” and the original print ran but six minutes and 33 seconds.

Hit pause. I have to interrupt myself, because some of you are skitting off to search the Internet for “Kid Auto.” Careful. YouTube’s version is a decent print, but the final and crucial 11 seconds are absent. Steer clear of the other widely circulated Internet version, a choppy 1919 reissue with a story tacked on through title cards. (By 1919, audiences wanted films to begin, have a middle, and end; in 1914, they weren’t so picky.) The dependable version of “Kid Auto” is only available in the 2010 box, *Chaplin at Keystone*.

Ok, hit play.

I’m not being uppity when I say that film critics have missed the point of “Kid Auto.” Perhaps that’s why it wasn’t fully restored until decades after most other Chaplin films. Critics rightly, and a bit boringly, point out that Chaplin’s first performance as the Tramp was in “Mabel’s Strange Predicament,” a longer picture filmed earlier but issued two days later than “Kid Auto.” But “Kid Auto” was the first time the public saw this character.

“Kid Auto’s” six minutes and 33 seconds shared a reel with a picture called “Olives and Their Oil.” Mack Sennett’s Keystone studio produced comedies primarily, but also made “educationals” – short documentaries. Brent E. Walker’s compendium of all things Keystone, *Mack Sennett’s Fun Factory*, lists about one “educational” a month in 1914, including “A Glimpse of Los Angeles,” “How Motion Pictures Are Made,” and “Our Largest Birds” (about ostriches).

“Kid Auto” shares a reel with an educational and has an educational title: “Kid Auto Races at Venice, Cal.” Below the title, as part of the Keystone logo, we see “Farce Comedy / Keystone Film Company / New York 1914,” but the next card reads: “In Picturing [i.e., filming] This Event An Odd Character Discovered That Motion Pictures Were Being Taken And It Became Impossible To Keep Him Away From The Camera.”

To employ a 16<sup>th</sup> century usage still current in 1914, the spectators were being gulled – deceived. Invited to believe they were watching something “real.”

And that was easy, because they, in fact, were watching something real.

Keystones of 1914 jumped from the title into the picture with no credits, no names of actors or directors – unless an actor became popular. Then Mabel Normand would star in “Mabel’s Busy Day” and “Mabel at the Wheel” or Roscoe Arbuckle would star in “Fatty Joins the Force.” (Chaplin, interestingly, even when famous, would just use “His”: “His New Profession,” “His Musical Career.”)

So we’ve seen a title card and a card of explanation, then we’re watching something real: The Kid Auto Race at Venice, Calif. – real kids speeding around in small race cars launched from a steep ramp, watched avidly by real crowds of men and women, boys and girls.

The opening footage lulls the audience into their “educational” mode.

So it's 1914, we've never heard of Charlie Chaplin, we've never seen the Tramp, we'd like to see the race, and we have no reason to notice the fellow in the derby with the cane yards from the camera at the far left of the screen.

The camera isn't pointed at him. We might not notice when he does a bit of business with a cigarette or when a cop (not a Keystone cop, a real cop) asks him to step back from the racetrack. Soon he turns to the camera. Takes a few steps towards it. Notices it. Is interested. We may not be watching him, but he's watching us.

We're about 44 seconds into the picture. For the next five minutes and 50 seconds, give or take, we will be fixated by this impish man – who doesn't look normal but neither looks so very different (nor does he look like a tramp). And the camera will continue to gull us.

For instance, there's a marvelous 180-degree pan of the Chaplin in front of the grandstand, walking a bit down the grandstand, walking across the racetrack, then walking near the crowd on the other side – a camera movement not unheard of in “educationals” but rare in 1914's dramatic films and unheard of in comedies. We of 1914 can't be sure what we're watching. The film style is like an educational, but the guy is hilarious.

You may not find him so in 2014. But a British critic, unnamed in David Robinson's *Chaplin: His Life and Art*, wrote: “‘Kid Auto Races’ struck us as about the funniest film we have seen. ... He does things we have never seen done on the screen before.” Audiences around the world agreed.

This “odd character” is not a nice guy. He doesn't care about anything but being on camera. He gives not a damn about the disruption he's causing. He doesn't pretend to like anyone in sight. When a little boy (not an actor), gets too near him, he meanly swats him away.

That's typical of Chaplin who, within a year, was being called the most famous man in the world. The Chaplin of 1914, especially, was not the tender fellow of 1921's *The Kid*. Children playing Keystone scenes with Chaplin often look wary; in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* he slaps a paperboy hard enough for the kid to be visibly afraid. But audiences, young and old, loved Chaplin for it.

Simon Louvish, in *Chaplin: The Tramp's Odyssey*, quotes a *Chicago Herald* of January 10, 1915: “In one year as a motion picture comedian, Charles Chaplin has achieved greater popularity than any other funmaker of the films.” A 1915 *New Jersey Evening News* describes vendors selling Charlie Chaplin balloons, postcards (two for a nickel) and statuettes. There are lookalike contests in Cleveland; in Kansas they're calling it “Chaplinia,” “a movie epidemic.” By 1916, Louvish reports, “[b]oys in the most remote parts of the world imitated Charlie Chaplin's walk and played games based on his character.”

The Chaplin who first swept the world bears little resemblance to the Chaplin of the famous features we constantly rerun. When the world sang the dozens (some say hundreds) of improvised versions of “The Moon Shines Bright on Charlie Chaplin,” it wasn't sensitivity that impressed them.

“Charlie Chaplin, meek and mild, swiped a sausage from a child/ When the child began to cry, Charlie socked him in the eye... One, two, three, O'Leary, I saw my Auntie Sary/ Standing in the door, O'Leary, kissing Charlie Chaplin.”

I won't jump to conclusions profound or otherwise. My job here is simply to present the mystery.

Critics tend to be snowed by Chaplin's later pooh-poohing of his Keystone experience. He didn't pooh-pooh at the time. Robinson quotes what he wrote to brother Sydney when Sennett hired him: "I don't know whether you have seen any Keystone pictures but they are very funny." Mack Sennett's *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, the world's first feature-length comedy, gets short shrift in Chaplin's autobiography, but to Sydney he wrote in 1914: "It is the best thing I ever did."

"Kid Auto" ends with a grotesque close-up of Charlie making fun of whoever's on the other side of the lens – i.e., you and me. Then the picture suddenly ends, as if the film broke, but no: In 1914, Keystone endings were often abrupt. A Keystone didn't conclude; it stopped, as though the picture was over but the story was not. (Existentially accurate, wouldn't you say?)

Said Chaplin in 1916: "The human race I prefer to think of as the underworld of the gods. When the gods go slumming they visit the earth. You see, my respect for the human race is not 100 percent."

We of 1914 – we loved him for that.

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