Making an American Citizen: 
Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and the 
Silent Comedies of Assimilation

Yeonsik Jung

In the late 1880s, "new" immigrants from southern and eastern Europe began to flow into the United States. Unlike earlier waves of immigrants from the British Isles and northern Europe, who were easily assimilated into mainstream American society, these "new" immigrants were suffered from the unfamiliarity and inhospitality of the new world, being considered aliens ineligible to be American citizens. Their poverty-stricken, intemperate lifestyle and willingness to work for lower wages under poor working conditions were thought to invite industrial wage slavery and to cause social problems that would eventually destroy the American national character. As John Higham demonstrates, Anglo-Saxon nativism, which had begun to revive in this period and would continue to grow in the 1920s, implanted ethnic and racial antipathy in Americans’ mind, instigating them to object to the perpetuation of the newcomers’ heterogeneous religion, customs, and language as a part of American life (158–75).

Reflecting the desires of old-stock Americans, Congress passed various acts and bills by which federal government claimed the power to regulate both the number of immigrants and their
countries of origin. Among these acts and bills, the National Origins Act (part of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act passed in 1924) markedly limited the number of immigrants to no more than 161,000 a year. Particularly by giving each European nation a quota based on two percent of the number of people from that country listed in the U.S. census of 1890, in which "old" western Europeans predominated, this act restricted the influx of the "new" immigrants and thus modified the composition of immigrants (Daniels 133-43).

The era of the "new" immigration, roughly between the 1880s and the 1920s, coincides with that of silent cinema. Born in 1895 when Louis Lumière made his first film, *La Sortie des usines Lumière*, silent films were widely exhibited at small storefront movie theaters, known as "nickelodeons," and soon established itself as an important social institution in America providing public entertainment for the working class (notably "new" immigrants) until the first feature-length talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, was released in 1927. Coincidently, given the three-year grace period of the National Origins Act, the two eras terminated at exactly the same time in 1927.

Many film historians, accordingly, have focused on the relationship between silent cinema and immigrants in the early twentieth century, assuming that the former has functioned as the social institution of Americanization among European immigrants by working to homogenize and integrate them into American society. The genre of the "ghetto film," a term Miriam Hansen adopts from Patricia Erens to indicate

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1) Because *The Jazz Singer* includes many intertitles at various points to convey character dialogue, it is not a sound film in the strict sense. Yet, as Michael Rogin notes, it can legitimately claim the status of the first talking picture since "[n]o feature film before *The Jazz Singer* had lip-synchronized either musical performance or dialogue. None used sound to cut away from and yet retain the previously visible action, and none incorporated words and music into the story" (81).