

Charlie Chaplin

Approaches to Semiotics

101

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His Reflection in Modern Times

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Preface

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Charles Chaplin's birth, the First International Charles Chaplin Conference met in Paris, the City of Light and the birthplace of the Cinema as an art.

The gathering took place from 14 to 16 April 1989, and was set in Louis Liard Hall, the most renowned lecture theater of the Sorbonne University, under the patronage of Lady Oona Chaplin. The opening statement was made by Simone Veil, former President of the European Parliament. The event was closed at the French Film Institute, by Geraldine Chaplin who, in front of a packed hall, conjured up the memory of her father and showed her deep emotion at the love and respect which he still inspires.

Forty participants from twelve nations made an original contribution to a larger and better acquaintance with the film-maker's life and work. This volume contains papers delivered at the conference as well as invited contributions and a bibliography of books on and by Chaplin.

Charles Chaplin's gift

Charles Chaplin's contribution to our culture is a considerable one. His œuvre is one of the monuments in humanity's heritage. His films have, from the very outset, responded to a universal calling. Chaplin himself belongs to the lineage of the great poets of comedy. A pioneer of the cinema, he has illustrated his art. A generous person, he has honored mankind, and restored their dignity to the oppressed. A modern Don Quixote, he has sent out Charlie to combat injustice, with the rebellious spirit of David or Thyl Ulenspiegel. The poet of the image has earned the 20th century universal praise.

A striver for perfection, Chaplin constantly sought to renew his cinematic conception: from epic (*The Gold Rush*) and elegy (*City Lights*), to lampoon (*Modern Times*), satire (*The Great Dictator*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, *A King in New York*) and melodrama (*Limelight*). And while he maintained the figure of the wandering tramp, each new adventure was cast in a new form. A model discoverer, he never refused to call himself into question. At each stage, he freed himself from his own and his time's constraints, and showed himself as critical of others as of himself. His obsession with perfection caused him to repeat the shooting of a scene again and again. In *City Lights*, the scenario reportedly went through a score of versions.

He won acclaim from his peers, who were aware of all that the cinema owed him, for Chaplin contributed significantly to giving the cinema its status of Seventh Art. The legendary Charlie figure hid the film maker, who was as present behind the camera as in front of it, but who was not generally acknowledged as a film author. In this respect, *A Woman of Paris* marked a turning-point in the history of film-writing, inasmuch as the absence of Charlie in this film drew attention to Chaplin's narrative style. It was to influence Lubitsch and many others. He was to be called "the greatest film author" (René Clair 1970 : 130), "the master of masters" (Jean Renoir 1974), our Adam (Fellini). In Tati's terms (quoted by Robinson 1985 : 632): "without him, I would never have made a film".

Thus he was admired by the great and adulated by the crowds: Einstein attended the première of *City Lights*; he shook hands with Churchill and Gandhi; Gide (April 19, 1927) wrote that he was "one of those rare instances where one can agree with popular opinion". Raised in poverty, abandoned by a father who died an alcoholic, and by a mother committed to the madhouse, he raised himself to the heights of glory and wealth by his own means. He reversed his fate. In the world's capitals, London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, he was welcomed as a king. Everywhere, people sought to honor him for what he had given them. The cockney kid became a nobleman. He was a self-made myth.

He was exceptional in all his endeavors, whether as an actor, a moviewriter, director, composer or producer. Unlike anyone else, he moved people from all over the world to laughter as well as to tears. Increasingly, each of his productions was to turn into a world event, challenging fashions and opinions. He always took great risks: *City Lights* (1931), a silent film, came out at the time when the idea of sound pictures was already in full bloom, and the magnates of the film industry feared that he might slow down the public's fancy for a new medium. *Modern Times* (1936) irritated the great Eastern as well as Western and Axis powers, who were afraid that the film might jam the financial and industrial war machine. *The Great Dictator* (1940) is the only film in a non-interventionist US to directly oppose Hitler's tyrannic madness and to issue an appeal for America to come and rescue democracy in Europe.

The clown took on the stature of a philosopher and even of a prophet, with a talent for the arduous art of satire, with a lively commitment to freedom of thought, and a great deal of courage. Between *The Pilgrim* (1923), which ridiculed bigotry and was consequently forbidden in Pennsylvania, to *Monsieur Verdoux* (1948), which indicts a civilization responsible of mass murder, his social criticism becomes increasingly pungent. Humor, in his hands, translates his love for humanity.

Jean Mitry (1957: 11) deemed him to be "the film world's greatest figure". Few have been able to invest film with such an aura of poetry. This master of the

moving image has illuminated our century with the light of his spirit (both as his mind and his humor). He owned the gift of the gods, and made it his gift to mankind.

Préface

Pour la célébration du centenaire de la naissance de Charles Chaplin a eu lieu le premier colloque international Charles Chaplin à Paris. Dans la Ville-Lumière qui a vu naître le cinéma comme art.

Cette manifestation s'est déroulée du 14 au 16 avril 1989, dans l'amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne, la salle Louis-Liard. La commémoration a eu lieu sous le patronage de Lady Oona Chaplin. Elle a été inaugurée par Simone Veil, ancien président du Parlement européen. Et elle a été clôturée à la Cinémathèque française par Géraldine Chaplin qui, devant une salle comble, a évoqué la figure de son père et a exprimé son émotion de voir qu'il était tant respecté et encore tant aimé. En effet, une quarantaine de participants venus de douze pays ont contribué à approfondir la connaissance de la vie et de l'œuvre du cinéaste. Ce volume renferme des comptes-rendus tenus au colloque, en outre ceux rédigés spécialement pour ce volume ainsi qu'une bibliographie des ouvrages écrits par Chaplin et sur lui-même.

Le don de Charles Chaplin

L'apport de Charles Chaplin est considérable. Son œuvre est un monument du patrimoine de l'humanité. Ses films ont connu d'emblée une vocation universelle. Il se situe dans la lignée des grands poètes comiques. Pionnier du cinéma, il a illustré son art. Être généreux, il a honoré les hommes. Il redonna aux opprimés leur dignité. Don Quichotte moderne, il a lancé Charlot combattre les injustices, avec l'esprit frondeur d'un David ou d'un Thyl Ulenspiegel. Ce poète de l'image a donné au XXe siècle ses lettres de noblesse.

Chercheur de sa perfection, Chaplin n'a cessé de se renouveler: à une épopée (*la Ruée vers l'or*) succèdent une élégie (*les Lumières de la ville*), un pamphlet (*les Temps modernes*), des satires (*le Dictateur*, *M. Verdoux*, *Un Roi à New York*), un mélodrame (*les Feux de la Rampe*). S'il conserve la silhouette de l'éternel vagabond, il élabore chaque fois une nouvelle forme pour une autre aventure. Découvreur exemplaire, il s'est toujours remis en question. Il s'est à chaque étape affranchi de lui-même comme de son temps, étant aussi critique avec les autres qu'avec lui-même. Son perfectionnisme lui faisait recommencer sans cesse le tournage d'une scène; pour *City Lights*, il y aurait eu une vingtaine de versions du scénario...

Il a été loué par ses pairs, conscients de ce que le cinéma lui devait. En effet, Chaplin a contribué à forger le cinéma comme 7e art. La silhouette légendaire de Charlot masque l'auteur de film que l'on méconnaît en général, car il était autant

derrière la caméra que devant. *L'Opinion publique* (1923) est un tournant dans l'évolution de l'écriture cinématographique: ce film sans Charlot met bien en évidence le style narratif de Chaplin. Il a influencé Lubitsch et les autres, qui le disent "le plus grand auteur de film" (René Clair 1970: 130), notre Adam à tous (Fellini); "sans Chaplin, je n'aurais jamais fait un film" (Tati, cité par Robinson 1985: 632)...

Il a été admiré des plus grands comme adoré par les foules. Einstein assiste à la première de *City Lights*. Churchill, Gandhi le rencontrent. Gide (19 avril 1927) écrit à son propos: "Cas unique où l'on peut épouser l'opinion populaire". Elevé dans la misère, - abandonné par un père mort alcoolique et par une mère internée comme folle, - il s'est élevé tout seul au faite de la gloire et de la richesse. Il a renversé son destin. Il a été reçu dans les capitales comme un roi: Londres, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo... Les gens ont essayé de lui rendre continuellement ce qu'il leur avait donné. Le petit cockney sera anobli. Il a été un self-made-myth.

Acteur-auteur-metteur en scène-compositeur-producteur, en tout exceptionnel. Il a fait rire et pleurer, comme personne, les gens de toutes les nations. Chacune de ses productions est devenue de plus en plus un événement mondial, réalisée à contre-courant. Il a toujours pris de grands risques. *City Lights* (1931), film muet, sort en plein essor du parlant: les magnats de l'industrie cinématographique ont eu peur qu'il ne freine le nouvel engouement. *Modern Times* (1936) irrite les puissances d'Est en Ouest en passant par l'Axe, qui craignent que ce film n'enraie la machine financière ou de guerre... *The Great Dictator* (1940) est seul sur les écrans dans une Amérique non interventionniste à s'opposer directement à la furie d'Hitler et à lancer un appel pour aller sauver la démocratie en Europe...

Le clown a pris la stature d'un philosophe, voire d'un prophète. Il a parfaitement maîtrisé l'art difficile de la satire, expression vive de sa liberté de pensée, mais aussi de son grand courage. Depuis *le Pèlerin* (1923), ridiculisant les bigots (interdit à sa sortie en Pennsylvanie), jusqu'à *Monsieur Verdoux* (1948), qui fait le procès d'une civilisation coupable du meurtre de masse, sa critique se fait de plus en plus acerbe. Chez lui, humour est amour de l'humanité.

Jean Mitry (1957: 11) l'a estimé "le plus grand homme du cinéma". Peu ont pu conférer une telle aura poétique à l'image. Ce montreur d'ombres a éclairé son siècle de la lumière de son *esprit* (au double sens du terme). Il avait le don des dieux. Et il en a fait don à l'homme.

Adolphe Nysenholc

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I

Charles Chaplin:

The man, his work and his time /

L'homme, l'œuvre et son temps

Chaplin and the resistance to “talkies”

Jean-Loup Bourget

While the following remarks are the fruit of my own meditations, they tend to overlap both Ira Jaffe’s ideas in “Fighting Words” (1979) and Michel Chion’s more recent *la Toile trouée* (1988: 75–84). They are different in that they attempt to situate Chaplin’s resistance to talkies in a wider historical context.

My topic is not simply the transition from the silent film to talking pictures, but also the “nostalgia for the silent film”, with the reappearance within the talkies of forms and features peculiar to the silent media.

In the history of Western cinema, Chaplin provides the most complete example of the resistance to talkies (in Japan, Ozu went over to talkies in 1936). The case is telling in two respects. Firstly, Chaplin goes on using an aesthetic form whose loss is often lamented but which no one attempts to keep alive. Secondly, he satirizes the new technique by turning its own devices against itself.

City Lights (1931) multiplies the sound effects, at times realistic, at others, expressive, while preferring subtitles to spoken dialogue. The opening sequence is obviously satirical. The inauguration, in the depths of the Depression, of a monument to prosperity is a gibe at official, academic art, not only speeches, statues and anthems, but also the all-talking technique. Like politics, talkies are capable of producing no more than a lisping, lifeless, meaningless tongue. In the party sequence, the promise of an “all-singing” number (a singer with piano accompaniment) is replaced, in a comic combination of object and body, by a swallowed whistle. Human speech is silenced by a sound gag which mingles mechanics (the whistle and the series of hiccups it triggers) and the organically subhuman (the belly). This mixture is emphasized by the effect of the whistle’s summoning, first, a machine (a taxi), then, a pack of stray dogs.

Modern Times (1936) takes the analysis further. Here, words are distinctly pronounced. Each time, however, they are uttered, not by a body, but by a machine: the boss’s video screen, the “mechanical salesman” of the feeding apparatus, and the radio. To the champion of talkies as a more realistic art form, Chaplin retorts by dismantling the illusion of synchronized sound. He claims, as Alain Masson (1981: 179–191) was to demonstrate fifty years later, that the triumph of the talkie is that of a functional logic. Having turned talkie, films complete their status as “art work in the age of mechanical reproduction”, to quote Walter Benjamin. This is the very reason for Chaplin’s rejection of the phenomenon, while maintaining the assimilation of the mechanical to the subhuman organic. The character’s

mechanization compels him to execute a dance expressive of his madness. Similarly, the sound effects assemble in a single, senseless and painfully incongruous register, the city's roar and the man's rumbling insides.

The ventriloquist of *City Lights* turns cabaret artist. He would love to sing, but "it won't come out": the words stick in his throat. Is writing to take up where speech left off? The young girl jots down the lyrics on the tramp's cuffs. The cuffs fly away (*verba volant*). A title advises him: "Sing! Never mind the words." The tramp begins to sing in vivid gibberish, a linguistic free-for-all where any participant's word goes – as far as picking up (usually sexual) innuendos is concerned. It is a mime language, accompanied by gestures and smiles, and it is as genuinely foreign as Poe's orang-utan's in "Murders in the Rue Morgue". The satirical purpose of the sequence is all the more patent as the tramp's number is preceded by a sketch of singing waiters. They stand for the meaninglessness and insignificance of the overenunciated, hyperarticulate, "all-singing" tongue.

Everything topples with *The Great Dictator* (1940). The target of the satire is no longer speech or talkies but the unintelligible pronouncements of the subhuman machine the "great dictator" (the great dictaphone, so to speak). Praise of a language that is both individual (coming from a mere tramp) and universal (everybody understands him) gives way to praise of speech. This, then, is the English language, full of meaning and bearer of a fraternal ideology.

Like the boss in *Modern Times*, Hynkel, the dictator, uses all the resources of latter-day technology to convey his message – microphones, loudspeakers, the radio. From the outset, however, his florid (idiosyncratic) message, fraught with hate, contrasts with the ordinary, neutral discourse uttered "off" by the interpreter in her strikingly watered-down version. In a word, Hynkel has made the tramp's irrational, screwball language his own. It is up to the barber, urged on by Schultz ("You'll speak." "I can't." "You must. It's our only hope."), to take the floor and denounce, not just through visual or sound effects, but by a careful and articulated address, the abuse of machines which divide men instead of bringing them closer.

Abuse implies the existence of correct usage. Witness the barber: "Even now, my voice is reaching millions throughout the world." Here, the barber is, quite literally, Chaplin's spokesman. Now, the director's voice is heard by millions of... spectators. Disguised as Hynkel, he is the one who turns the weapon of technology against the supremacy of the machine. The aim is no longer to satirize machines, but to restore them to their rightful role as a tool and means of communication (in both senses) between men. Just as technology may be put to good and bad use, words may be well or ill used, they may serve truth – or falsity. Garbitsch is in Goebbels' image and he has been lent Henry Daniell's unctuous voice. A master of language, versed in Latin tags and contempt, he states that liberty, democracy and equality are words to fool the people. He is answered by Chaplin's having re-

course to language. The aesthetics of silence have been stretched to the utmost limit: we see that pantomime will not suffice in an ideology where language – Valéry’s “Saint language and the honor of men” – is sacrificed in a real and not merely artistic sense. Pantomime cannot be transferred with impunity from the theater to the stage of the world.

The resistance to talkies has been accurately described by Erwin Panofsky as a “nostalgia for the silent period”. Chaplin’s case may be extreme, but it is by no means isolated. Two of the examples quoted by Panofsky ([1959]: 27) are particularly illuminating: the dance behind the glass-panelled screen in René Clair’s *Sous les toits de Paris* and the narrator’s voice-over in Sacha Guitry’s *le Journal d’un tricheur*. Such “vestiges” are, for technical or economic, as well as for artistic, reasons, legion at the beginning of sound cinema. Mimed scenes abound in Paul Fejos’ *Sonnenstrahl* (1933). In another René Clair film of the same period, *Quatorze juillet* (1932), the “antics” of a dance band prolong the spirit and even the devices of Lubitsch (in *The Oyster Princess*, 1919) or of Chaplin (*A Dog’s Life*, of the previous year). That an orchestra should be the “shrine” of silent signs is no surprise. On the contrary, it must be remembered that music is an intrinsic feature of silent cinema. However debatable they may be at times, the subsequent tracks of silent films do no more than systematize the use of tried and true devices. Any embarrassment we might feel at the emphasis on music and the voice-over in the 1942 version of *The Gold Rush* for example is partially due to an illusion in retrospect. By virtue of this utopian purism, we tend to forget that originally the silent film “was never mute” (Panofsky [1959]: 20), since it was accompanied by a pianist and frequently by the voice-over’s forerunner, the aptly-named barker or lecturer (Kozloff 1988: 23–24). In this sense, then, even the more far-fetched reissues of Chaplin are really restorations, like the coloring of the facades of Greek temples.

Silent films constantly convey implicit sound effects. The swallowed whistle in *City Lights*, the stomach-rumblings of *Modern Times*, the coins swallowed in *The Great Dictator*; are all reechoes of “non-talking” procedures which would have been “enunciated” during screenings by a “live” musical accompaniment: for example, in *A Dog’s Life*, the dog’s tail playing the big drum and the satire of the singer’s recital; in *Behind the Screen*, two chicken drumsticks are used for playing the xylophone.

In silent films, as in his sound films, Chaplin uses the written word for ironic purposes. The justly famous title at the end of *City Lights* (“Can you see now?”) is preceded by various wordplays – from the narrator’s extraneous remark in a subtitle (“More rolling”, in *The Immigrant*, a play on the concomitant rollings of ship and dice) to the more subtle irony of *The Kid*: we read the notice **MANAGEMENT NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR VALUABLES STOLEN** when the manager

of the night shelter kidnaps the child who is the “valuable” (in different meanings of the word) for himself and for the tramp.

Sound was therefore implicit in silent cinema. Conversely, silent cinema is not content to “survive” in talkies. It keeps on coming back. Panofsky’s admirable perspicacity did not stop him from interspersing objective statements about the technical and aesthetic evolution of cinema with more subjective value judgments. It is as if he were taking a Bazinian stance, claiming that, ideally, cinema is realistic, and that sound meant not just change, but progress as well. He passes over a phenomenon which has been dazzlingly evident since the beginning of the forties. We might call it a “return of the silent”, or a “renaissance” as in art history, quite comparable, to my mind, to the recurrence of the Romanesque fantastic which Jurgis Baltrušaitis has detected in Gothic realism (Baltrušaitis 1981 and [1988], Bourget 1984). The rebirth is fourfold. First, in the emergence of the film noir which, after the “white” photography of the thirties, is a comeback of expressionist aesthetics; secondly, by the widespread use of color for exotic and imaginative effects (notably in musicals and in fantastic films); thirdly, with the coming into fashion of the voice-over, ousting sound-track dialogue; finally, with the renewed respectability of slapstick, as in Preston Sturges’ comedies. A consciously anachronistic aesthetic breaks with the dominant realistic mode of the thirties and renews contact with the formalism and expressive stylization of silent cinema. In “Limehouse Blues”, the best of the *Ziegfeld Follies* sketches (1946), the décor of London’s East End, the plot, the character played by Fred Astaire, all revive Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms*, while the acting style – pantomime – and the format itself evoke Chaplin’s short films. The opening title describing *City Lights* as “a comedy romance in pantomime” is reechoed in the autodefinition of “Limehouse Blues” as “a dramatic pantomime”. A further *Ziegfeld Follies* sketch, “The Babbitt and the Bromide”, evokes, by dint of angelic attributes (wings or harps), the dream sequence in *The Kid*.

At this point Chaplin reenters to rouse our curiosity. One might expect directors who, like him, had actively cultivated the nostalgia of “silent cinema” to take part in its renaissance, or, following Sturges’ example, to try and combine in an original way the resources of speech and the rediscovery of slapstick. As it happens, however, things turned out differently, at least to begin with. In 1947, Chaplin signed *Monsieur Verdoux*, a work which does contain such effects as voice-over, slapstick and “silent” scenes, but whose dialogue, both as to quality and quantity, is impressive. While it is true that Verdoux spends a sizeable part of the film putting up silently with the inane and vulgar cooings of his “pigeon”, he by no means relinquishes meaningful speech as it was adopted by the barber in a dictator’s uniform.

In 1952, and not before, Chaplin becomes part of the return to silent movies with *Limelight*. From the outset, the praise of silent cinema is patent. The main characters are a ballerina (with her wordless art) and a clown (who has less recourse to language than to music and mime). Two set numbers restore a forgotten art. Everyone recalls the piano-violin duet (typical of silent cinema accompaniment) played by Buster Keaton and Chaplin. The choice itself of Keaton speaks volumes. The man who had, together with Chaplin, topped the bill of comic actors, had come to grief during the transition from silent cinema to the talkies¹. One can, however, never forget the exquisite harlequinade, with its combination of classical dancing and English clownery (the set of Columbine's moonlit tomb is obviously inspired by Samuel Palmer). This sequence constitutes a valuable link between Maurice Tourneur's *Prunella* – so close to the decorative essays of English Art Nouveau –² and Peter Greenaway's latter-day stylization (I have in mind the green man in *The Draughtsman's Contract*, but also, more generally, Greenaway's stress on the pictorial).

Further scenes are part of an implicit, rather than explicit, return to silent cinema. The opening sequence with the London street, Calvero coming home drunk, his discovery of the dancer, provides an outstanding example of narrative figuration. This is "showing" almost bereft of dialogue. This is where a barrel organ plays a main role as establisher of time and place. It provides dramatic contrast and puts off, as long as at all possible, the "intrusion" of dialogue. Other instances include the flashbacks with the sole accompaniment of the narrator's voice-over, and the sequence of the gold digger and the two old fogeys in the foyer of the music hall.

The reappearance of silent features is not without a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, it is anything but a triumph. Calvero is emphatically depicted as a failure, a sad clown who has lost the ability to make people laugh because he has given in to a taste for philosophy and gloom. Not only does *Limelight* end with his death, but the elegiac "mode" of the film is less a celebration of an art form, i.e. pantomime, than a lament for its disappearance. Thus its epigraph ("The glamor of limelight, from which age must pass as youth enters") might be interpreted as symbolic. Not only Calvero, but the clown's ancient art must give way to the ballet dancer's more serious one. Does this not suggest, despite the paradox of the comparison between dialogue and dance, that silent art and slapstick must yield to talking films? In this respect, the dichotomic structure of the film is telling. Apart from the theatrical numbers, Chaplin has not given up "meaningful words" and Calvero's sententious character is a direct descendant of the barber and Verdoux. Between the clown and the philosopher, the duality is as marked as between the histrionic Hynkel and the pacifist barber. "To hear you talk, no one would ever think you are a comedian."

Regarding the return of silent cinema, *A King in New York* (1957) marks an undoubted decrescendo after the heights of *Limelight*. The nostalgia of the homage is clear when we are treated to a comic sketch in the purest, primitive, cream pie style, like *Behind the Screen*, at the end of which King Shahdov bursts out laughing, ruining the make-up which mummifies him instead of making him look younger. In many ways, Chaplin renews with the satiric vein of *Modern Times*. America is denounced as producing a deafening din, as throttling communication. Her cinema, her music, her television, her advertising are all taken, pell-mell, as so many satirical targets. However, contrary to what was happening in *Modern Times*, Chaplin's attitude to speech is, in this work, deeply ambivalent. It is both the best and the worst of things. At worst, we listen to Dawn Addams' commercial patter, but also to Rupert's "monopolistic" babbling, itself eventually twisted into an informer's blunt assertion. Words at their best are exemplified by the invitation to talk which unmasks the corrupt minister and his evasive replies. When Macabee, using free speech, turns the accusation against his inquisitors, and cries: "I charge this committee with fomenting a cold civil war of hate and..." the words are suddenly cut. The prevailing technology is no longer necessarily that of speech – as in *Modern Times*. If needs be, it can also be a technology of – silencing.

This is where we measure the path trod by Chaplin. The thirties' militant resistance to talkies gives way, from *The Great Dictator* on, to a precarious balance between the retained demands of the art form (granting pride of place to slapstick, hence to silent cinema) and those of the meaning or the message, which prefer speech and words. Right up to the conclusion of *A King in New York*, the slapstick of the fire hose which ridicules the commission of inquiry is strangely contradicted by the subsequent shots, which show a written text, newspaper headlines claiming that the King has agreed to cooperate with the commission.

Consequently, Chaplin's belated and partial return to silent cinema is not to be explained mechanically by the long fight he put up against sound movies. For years, Chaplin believed that pictures could be an adequate surrogate for words, not only for expressing emotions, but also for communicating ideas. The homily delivered by gestures about David and Goliath in *The Pilgrim* comes to mind where the hero takes furtive peeks at his Bible to get his iconographic "programmes", like a classical painter. Similarly, in *The Gold Rush*, the famous dance with the bread rolls takes the place of a speech which the tramp could never, even in a dream, have made for his sweetheart. In 1940, the barber takes the floor to make a speech fraught with ideology. He is to find his imitators in Verdoux, Calvero, and, to a lesser extent, in King Shahdov, at a time – that of the Cold War and McCarthyism – when keeping silent would have implied acquiescence, when keeping mum would have meant formalism. The uneasy coexistence of pantomime and words in

Chaplin’s work from 1947 to 1957 bears witness to the sustained difficulty, even impossibility, of making ideology subservient to aesthetics.

Notes

1. In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin, as we know, shaved Chester Conklin to the strains of a Hungarian dance by Brahms.
2. Particularly Beardsley’s Pierrots and Frederick Cayley Robinson’s costumes, sets and illustrations for Maeterlinck’s *Blue Bird* (stage version 1909, illustrated edition 1911) [Johnson 1979: 87].

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Pretending the world is funny: Charlie Chaplin's job as the prototype comic personality

Rhoda Lee Fisher and Seymour Fisher

We embarked on a full scale study of professional comics, administering projective personality tests to each of 43 of them. These tests were the Rorschach inkblots, the Thematic Apperception Test, and the Early Memories Test. From these materials we found that a particular pattern of inkblot fantasy typified the comic mind.

Four major themes predominated in the professionals' responses to the inkblots: concerns about morality, feelings of smallness, sensations of moving in a downward trajectory, and denials of badness. In our book, *Pretend the world is funny and forever*, we have demonstrated not only that these parameters can be scored objectively but also that raters can successfully apply them, on a blind basis, to distinguishing the projective materials of comics from those of non-comics.

We found a preoccupation with issues of good versus evil. The comedians we observed were caught up in an intense internal debate about whether they were good or bad and were striving to prove they were virtuous rather than evil. Their Rorschach responses were permeated with moralistic images – angels, devils, and wicked dragons. Moreover, they consistently produced a rare species of Rorschach imagery that focuses on the denial of bad qualities. One comedian saw “Wolfman...He's misunderstood. Only trying to live his life to his best ability. People don't understand...People are afraid. If you walk up and talk to him, he's a decent being.” (Fisher 1981: 42) Another saw “faces. Evil-looking...mean mouth...The evil is not very evil. A put-on.” (Fisher 1981: 41).

The stories the comics made up when we showed them the ambiguous drawings of the Thematic Apperception Test revealed a focus on characters who are behaving badly. The procedure for administering the Thematic Apperception Test is one that involves asking the subject to make up imaginative stories to a series of pictures. Yet, when the comedians simply talked about themselves during interviews, they displayed a great need to document how well-intentioned and altruistic they were. They described the comedian as one who cheers and soothes the audience, and they saw themselves as virtuous healers.

Comics defend themselves against accusations of badness with humor showing that good and bad are quite arbitrary categories. Typically, they take a topic; present a perspective on it; and then come up with a twist that highlights the relativity of that perspective. They often focus their “twisting” on topics with taboo or bad

connotations, like sex or anality. In so doing, they assert that the usual definitions of badness in these areas are relative and probably absurd, and indirectly declare that any links between themselves and badness are meaningless, too.

Chaplin was intensely immersed in moral issues as he played out the Little Tramp. Endlessly, the Tramp was caught up in struggles with hypocrisy and people behaving with immoral coldness. He exposes the selfishness of the establishment and implicitly preaches the virtue of kindness and being just plain human. He is often involved with policemen and other law enforcers in a way that raises questions about the difference between what is lawful and what is right. Purity versus sin are highlighted in repeated hilarious episodes. In one of his earlier movies Chaplin condensed the good versus evil conflict into the person of a character who is an escaped criminal wearing the disguise of a clergyman. Despite his ministerial guise, the criminal cannot stop doing things that betray his asocial drives. But he also shows flashes of goodness and unselfishness that make it clear Chaplin considered morality illusively ambiguous. In some of his later movies he really became quite evangelical about his moral beliefs. For example, in *The Great Dictator*, in his mocking portrayal of dictatorship, he ends the film with the central character urging: "The kingdom of God is within man... In the name of democracy let us all unite. Let us fight for a new world – a decent world... The soul of man has been given wings and at last he is beginning to fly." In still a later film (*Monsieur Verdoux*), Chaplin explores with maximum magnification the question of evil by focusing on the character of a bluebeard murderer who seems in his everyday life to be kind and gentle but who kills old ladies for their money. The entire film is concerned with the issue of defining sin. Of course, we also know that in his own life Chaplin became increasingly vocal about injustice and the righting of wrongs. His public statements about such matters led to a collision with the establishment and triggered his exile from the United States.

There are a good many instances in which comics have cast themselves in multiple roles. Consider Charlie Chaplin in *A night in the Show* (produced in 1915) in which he portrayed two different characters on the screen. In the Mutual Films, he impersonated a tramp, a paper hanger, a floor-walker, a fireman, a studio property man, a policeman, an escaped convict, a wealthy drunk and yet in each instance we simply see the visage of one Charlie Chaplin. He is the same fellow no matter the formal role designation applied to him.

One cannot but be impressed with such fascination with multiple identity. There is a long tradition of comic preoccupation with this issue. Comics have variously expressed themselves in the wearing of costumes with right-left asymmetry, in presenting oneself in hermaphroditic guise, and in simply dramatizing the multiplicity of self.

We would reiterate that the energy for this interest derives in part from the comic's longstanding debate with himself whether he is good or bad. He cannot

decide whether he is an angel or a devil. This represents a split in his identity which disturbs and puzzles him. He tries to understand and defuse the issue by openly confronting and also ridiculing it. He gives the message: "There is nothing terrible or threatening about self-splitting. It can happen to anyone and it's largely a laughable matter. Besides, when you look closely, the split is not very real. The split parts are not truly unlike each other. They are no more different than a bunch of Charlie Chaplin images on a movie screen all pretending to be individual people."

Chaplin, like the comics in our research sample, was expected, even as a child, to be adult beyond his years. He was expected, to an unusual degree, to care for himself and even to be the caretaker for his sib. Like the majority of the comics we interviewed Charlie Chaplin began, at an unusually early age, to earn money and actually provide partial support for his parents. There were also many of our cases in which the comics, like Chaplin, obviously gave more psychologically to their parents than they received. Let us recount this very important and influential image from his early years:

In his *Autobiography* Charlie Chaplin details a salient incident in which he, as a 5-year-old, was precipitously called upon to fill in for a serious failing in his mother. He recalls that one night his mother, who earned the family's daily bread by singing on the stage, took him along to the theater. He continues (1966: 9):

I remember standing in the wings when Mother's voice cracked and went into a whisper. The audience began to laugh and sing falsetto and to make catcalls. It was all vague and I did not quite understand what was going on. But the noise increased until Mother was obliged to walk off the stage. When she came into the wings she was very upset... the stage manager who, having seen me perform before Mother's friends, said something about letting me go on in her place.

And in the turmoil I remember him leading me by the hand...and leaving me on the stage alone... I started to sing... Halfway through a shower of money poured on the stage.

One can only speculate about what it means to a 5 year-old child to find himself in a position of having to rescue his obviously distressed mother. His sense of responsibility must have been enormous.

Similarly, Charlie recounted a disturbing incident linked to his mother becoming psychotic and requiring hospitalization. When he went to visit her, he reassured her (1966: 70-71):

that she would soon get well. "Of course, she said dolefully, if only you had given me a cup of tea that afternoon, I would have been all right." ... For days I was haunted by her remark: "If only you had given me a cup of tea... I would have been all right".

In essence, Chaplin's mother placed the weight of her psychosis on his shoulders. We theorized that parents who early expect their children to carry a heavy load are, in effect, casting them in a demanding role. What they expect might be paraphrased as follows: "I want you to grow up very fast. Forget that you are a child who has the privilege of being supported and nurtured. I will be displeased if you do not live up to the self-sacrificing role I have in mind for you." One might say that, in essence, the comic's parents will give him approval only if he musters the special premature capacity they expect. Presumably, the comic, Charlie for one, earns the label good or the label bad as a function of getting or not getting such approval. It is the toughness of the parents' expectations that makes it difficult to win the "good" label from them with any consistency. It is an arduous task to be good within their definitions of the term. So, we may theorize this is one source of the comic's chronic preoccupation with images of good versus bad.

Another way the comic manifests his feelings of unworthiness is in an exaggerated preoccupation with smallness. Although they are no smaller than other people, their inkblot images are full of references to figures that are tiny, short, thin, miniature, and dwarfed: "A cute little dog barking"; "A pygmy running"; "A very tiny mouse eating." We were able to show in the course of several experiments that such inkblot references go hand in hand with perceiving oneself as small or reduced, and this sense of smallness is accompanied by sensations of being down. Objects in the comics' Rorschach fantasy world are consistently "falling", "below", "descending", and "at the bottom", such as: "A man in the bottom of a pit"; "A plane falling down"; "They are lowering the flag." Issues of downness and smallness are germane to the comic orientation. In terms of Charlie Chaplin's imagery, note his description of a room that he wrote about in his autobiography in which he demonstrated clearly his preoccupation with size (cf. Fisher 1981: 91). Large and small images are juxtaposed and somehow personally affect Charlie, the observer:

Objects in our sitting room that affected my senses: Mother's life-size painting of Nell Gwyn, which I disliked; the long-necked decanters on our sideboard, which depressed me, and the small round music box with its enameled surface depicting angels on clouds, which both pleased and baffled me. But my six penny toy chair bought from gypsies I loved because it gave me an inordinate sense of possession.

There is no doubt that Charlie Chaplin was a unique comedian with his own specific brand of imagery, his own world view. Not only that, it is also obvious that his personality was in many ways highly individualistic. But still, it is striking that he seems to be preoccupied with the same basic themes and conflicts that we found in our research to be typical of comedians crossculturally. It would appear that comedians struggle with similar issues and frustrations as they evolve. Each develops his or her own unique personality style in the process of adapting to the basic core conflicts. However, they all seem to have in common the fact that being the funny one permits them to come to terms with the contradictions and the premature responsibility that have been placed upon them by their parents.

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Charles Chaplin and the Jewish world

Adolphe Nysenholc

1. The life of a myth

Before his death, Charles Chaplin was commonly imagined to be Jewish, whether by philosemites, anti-Semites, or even by the Jews themselves (Sadoul 1957: 146, Barchèche & Brasillach 1953: 118, Anna Arendt 1944: 99; see Gauteur's overview of the issue (1969))

After his demise, doubts about his Jewishness have been voiced by left- and right-wingers alike. His latest biographer, D. Robinson (1985: 41) establishes a genealogy apparently without any trace of Israelite kinship; but he does not feel the need to comment on the fact that, in *The Great Dictator*, Charlie plays the role of a Jewish barber. This film, however, concluded the *Charlie* series (1914–1940), and Chaplin must have been aware that if his adventures ended in a ghetto, it would be hard not to view him in retrospect as a figure in the Jewish tradition; all the more so, since by incarnating the Jewish barber, Chaplin corroborated the legend of Chaplin as a son of the diaspora, a recurrent and persistent image in the minds of critics and audience throughout the twenty-six years when Charlie was the emblematic-figured character.

The sceptics may be right about Sir Charles Chaplin. But the question of the Charlie character's Jewishness obviously remains open. Whatever claims the objective biographical data may substantiate, they fail to affect the subjective, but equally real, data of public opinion which have pervaded the director's life and perhaps his work. No one has ever regarded Buster Keaton, the other great comic, as a Jew. The fact that Charles Chaplin has actually been *viewed* as Jewish probably points to significant traits in his art, or even in his life, which gave rise to the belief.

Reportedly, Chaplin's own claims were contradictory: "No, I am not Jewish" (1922: 146); "It is said that Chaplin is Jewish. That is the truth, and I have never denied it" (1946, quoted by Martin 1966: 12). Yet he seemed to think of himself as more Jewish than his biographer did; for his apparent denial in 1922 was immediately followed by a qualification which opens the door to intense speculation: "...but I am sure there must be some [Jewish blood] somewhere in me. I hope so".

According to Groucho Marx, who had questioned Charles on the subject and received an evasive answer, the truth must be that Chaplin himself did not know. He may have been born a Gentile, but until further evidence to the contrary, he seems

to have lived with an inkling of illusion that he belonged to the chosen people. While in his parody of the Fascist dictator, he plays the role with a fair amount of critical detachment, in the role of the victim his sympathy virtually shades off into identification. Thus, in 1940 (*Collier's*, March 14), he declares: "I have never protested when I was said to be a Jew; for I would have been proud to be one".

The very vagueness of his ascendancy may, itself, be perceived as a feature of a people constantly severed from its ancestral roots, whether by pogroms, crusades, or the original diaspora. The official records of London bear no trace of Charlie's birth. Thus, he enters the world unrecognized, a stranger at the fringe of society.

He then sets off for the U.S., the new Promised Land. (In *The immigrant*, 1917, people seem to see Charlie on board amidst survivors of a Central European pogrom). He makes a fortune and fulfils the dream of every schlemiel (Cf. *Motel, the cantor's son*), thus laying himself open to the widespread stereotype of the money-loving Jew who starts from scratch but is bound to succeed in business. He becomes one of the leading exponents of a new art form; the Jew is often perceived as the harbinger of new movements (Judaism opened the path to other forms of monotheism). He becomes one of the most outstanding figures in the film world, a domain where a number of Jews, directors as well as producers, had met with success, especially in the comedy, which appeared as a Jewish specialty (Cf. Lubitsch, the Marx Brothers, Jerry Lewis, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen,...). Presumably, the genre has its roots in the rebellious spirit of David's posterity, whose social satire might be in line with the iconoclast and demystifying tradition of Abraham, the idol-smasher. In this manner, Charles Chaplin became fraught with several Jewish stereotypes.

In London, Stan Laurel and Chaplin both belonged to Fred Karno's music hall troupe; he and his teammate Oliver Hardy also met with great success on the other side of the Atlantic, but in spite of an apparently parallel career, he was never considered as a Jew. The reason for this resides in the fact that in addition to the circumstantial evidence already adduced, Chaplin's films corroborate the myth of his Jewishness through their themes.

2. The work of a genius

The "little one" who, by his slyness, defeats the "big one" is, without any doubt, the archetype of a universal fable: Reynaert, the fox, fools the bear; and Thyl, the wag, jeers at Emperor Charles V. But in Chaplin's films, the confrontation takes on the biblical dimension of the battle between David and Goliath. In *The Pilgrim* (1923), where Charlie plays the role of an involuntary pastor, he mimicks the scriptural passage by way of sermon. There is no need for the spectator to inter-

pret the scene, as the key is provided by the director himself. Although this scene constitutes the only Old Testament reference in Chaplin's work, it is a significant one; for it is, in a way, a scale model of all *Charlie* films, epitomizing the basic schema of all his interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, Charlie is called *The Tramp*, who roams the paths of adventure, eventually fleeing towards a new destination. He will thus be quite naturally associated with the wandering Jew.

He has neither hearth nor home (Tévié the milkman wonders whether the children of Israel had a home at all, Aleichem [1962: 79]), while Buster Keaton, in several of his films, is a rich man's son, living with his parents in a comfortable house. And Charles is a wanderer in more than one sense: he wanders off the paths of orthodoxy and convention, his gags are *gaffes*. A square peg in a round hole, he is driven away from wherever he goes. A Chaplin scenario is a zigzag line leading from one sequence to another, in which Charlie seeks to safeguard his own life. As soon as he seems to have made it to a safe haven, it turns out to be another hostile environment, where he does not know the rules and customs, where he commits new blunders and is once again thrown out. Chaplin may not be Jewish by birth; but through his scripts, he gives the public the image of a man continually persecuted because of his strangeness. Of course, any comic character, any clown will be to some extent persecuted, scolded or chastised for his clumsiness. But when, in the closing scene of *The Pilgrim*, Charlie flees, straddling the borderline between the U.S. and Mexico, chased by the sheriff on one side, and driven back by guerilla fighters on the other, unable to find refuge anywhere, one cannot but be reminded of the fate of the homeless and stateless, expelled from wherever they seek to settle. In his flight, Charlie literally and figuratively transcends the frontier, and becomes a citizen of everywhere and nowhere.

In the pursuit scenes, typical of slapstick comedy, Charlie plays the role of the unlucky wretch who always gets himself out of trouble. But this is the very situation which characterizes the Schlemiel, i.e. the picturesque figure of the unlucky Jewish fool, in the works of many a Jewish writer like Sholem Aleichem or Peretz. The poor bungler who ingenuously eludes the strokes of fate became a hero to the people of Israel, for he would survive any pogrom, or even any attempt at *Shoah* (i.e. annihilation), if not as an individual, at least collectively. While the body could be killed, the spirit of Israel, that is both its soul and its wit, stayed alive. Jewish humor, then, has become the repository of the Jewish soul.

Self-mocking laughter rated as victory over despair. As long as the little wanderer cannot triumph through David's craft and hit the giant's head, he aims the sling of humor at himself. It is a way of playing with danger to master it from inside. Between the equally suicidal alternatives of arrogance and cowardice, humor allows one to maintain one's dignity. Freud ([1962]: 126) saw in humor one of the

characteristics of the Jewish people. He wrote: "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character".

Chaplin, at any rate, knows how to laugh at himself. Every rush of feeling, whether heroic or emotional, is broken by a gag. And while Keaton's films feature sheer comedy, Chaplin alternates tears and laughter, to the extent where his audience could interpret his works as having the tearful quality of ghetto-time Judaism. It might be argued that there is something Dickensian about the melodrama of Chaplin, the Englishman. But the features already referred to add up to such a powerful myth that it creates a bias affecting public opinion: even a well-read author like Elie Faure (1963) writes that Charlie has "le sourire d'un élu" [the smile of the Chosen].

The wanderer, miraculously protected despite his destitution, does not lapse into a bum's existence. He is not a Buñuelesque beggar, whose fate is the punishment for some obscure sin. On the contrary: Mitry (1957: 26) speaks of Charlie in terms of "un aristocrate déchu" [a deposed gentleman], Rob Wagner refers to his "shabby gentility" (quoted by Fowler 1934: 239). Among the oppressed, he preserves his human dignity, thanks to his humor. He seems to share the social condition of the shtetl-dwellers, who could lose all their possessions overnight in a pogrom and were forever forced to seek their fortune elsewhere. The poor tramp, then, was not scorned: for he was the very image of what one might soon be like oneself. The traveler, deprived of his belongings, was entitled to address the rich man as his equal; for the latter might suffer the same reverse of fortune. By and large, this situation is mirrored in *City Lights*: Charlie becomes a friend of the rich drunkard, smokes his cigars and drives his Rolls Royce. As a luftmensch, living on air (cf. Martin 1983: 21), he adopts the rich man's lifestyle as if it were natural to him. But each morning, when he is sobered up, the millionaire no longer recognizes his crony, and kicks him out into the street as if he were a mere schnorrer, a Jewish beggar paying his way with his drollness. In this manner, Charlie experiences the ups and downs of a schlemiel's existence.

The penniless character is a typical *man-child*, like any comic hero. But in Chaplin's film, infantility (in its positive sense), of which various aspects have been discovered in *L'âge d'or du comique*, seems to partake of the schlemiel's as well. Indeed the ghetto ne'er-do-well tends to act as a Benjamin figure, a parallel which can be ascertained by a mere glance at Mendele Moicher Seform's *Travels of Benjamin III*.

The schlemiel, child of Israel, was a minor within a minority, a David not yet king, "irresponsible" because he had no State. One of the synonyms for schlemiel is *yold*, derived from Hebrew *yeled*, 'child'.

Charlie's childlike innocence could not but underscore the injustice of the persecution to which he was continually subjected. But eventually, the smaller-than-small will become the greater-than-great: in *Shoulder Arms*, Charlie captures the Kaiser. As an involuntary putschist, he takes the place of the Great Dictator, and seems to forsake his life for his fellow men. Already, at the end of *The Circus*, he had withdrawn, out of love for the young horsewoman, thus leaving her to his rival; in *City Lights*, he lets himself be jailed for the sake of the blind flower-girl. He increasingly becomes a modern-time incarnation of what Starobinsky (1970: 116) has called the "sauveur sacrifié" [sacrificed savior] archetype, which has led authors to comment on his "messianisme juif" [Jewish messianism] (Martin 1966 [1983]: 36) or his "sentimentalisme messianique" [messianic sentimentalism] (de Becker 1959: 86). There was, then, a direction to his wanderings: the little Jewish barber from the ghetto will end up, albeit unwillingly, as a prophetic "dictator" for the redemption of Mankind.

3. The projection of an era

Although it would be a gross exaggeration to say that Chaplin's art is the continuation of ghetto culture, his whole oeuvre seems to bear the imprint of allusive touches which may suggest the reality of the *Golah*. But then again, the connotations may not have been introduced deliberately.

Yet, as a film-maker, Chaplin was sensitive to public response. He changed his films in accordance with the feedback he received after a preview. Anxious to please his audience – as a film director should be – he may have sought to give his public the image which they expected from him. They saw him as Jewish, he knew it, and this cannot but have worked on his mind and caused him a problem, especially since he probably was not a Jew. And the creation of his work must have been performed in this very tension. His Jewishness was in the eye of the beholder – and Chaplin may have become what he was made to be; or, in other terms, he created an image, and became himself a reflection of its projection.

"The less Jewish the man's background, the more Jewish his films": If the believed Jewish connotations cannot be attributed to Chaplin's life, it must be related to his work, or even to a subtle form of interaction between the two.

So he may have experienced his childhood as a psychological pogrom, with the death of his alcoholic father, and the confinement of his mother to a mental hospital. As an abandoned child, wandering through the streets of London in quest of a bite of food, and fervently hoping for better days, his wounded sensitivity may have recognized in the condition of his Jewish contemporaries a reflection of his

own predicament: A person may feel spiritual links with a people with which he has no blood ties.

The opposite movement is illustrated by, say, Eisenstein or Eric von Stroheim: while at least one of their parents was, as some countries had it, “of Mosaic religion”, their works are never read – at least not at the *prima facie* level – as expressions of Jewishness. While a Jew does not necessarily produce a Jewish œuvre, a non-Jew may very well have its Jewish sensitivity.

Jewish humor is imitable. Chaplin, the great comic genius, was probably fascinated by its prevalence in Hollywood. Laughing at others may have seemed too limited to his universal spirit, and he must have welcomed the self-mocking element in Jewish humor as an opportunity to extend the range of his cinematic talents, allowing him to encompass both the passion for life and the challenge to destiny.

L'âge d'or du comique (1979: 32–33, 179–183) adhered to the view of Charlie as a “world citizen”, a Jew transcending his condition through the humanistic vocation of his work. Since he inspired laughter to everyone, Jewishness could not be the only key to his gags. How else could one explain the success of the Charlie movies in Tokyo? The proceeds of *City Lights* in Japan were large enough to cover all the production expenses. In the book, the Jewish background of Chaplin was postulated as a *petitio principii*: it was taken for granted while it would have required proper evidence. Conversely, the argument in favor of the universality of Chaplin’s work failed to give due credit to a possible Jewish inspiration.

Charles Chaplin ou la légende des images (1987: 123–150), which still held on to the belief that Charles was Jewish at least through his mother Hannah, acknowledged the importance, in the debate, of the issue of Chaplin’s social sources. But the book’s comparison between Chaplin’s cinematic œuvre and the work of great Yiddish writers did not really allow (despite a great many instances of convergence, which may be fortuitous) to give final substantiation to the thesis of a schlemiel Charlie. In fact, the analysis failed to take into account the import of popular gossip, which served as the main vehicle for the aura of his legend.

I believe the time has now come to wonder whether we should not admit that Chaplin was, simply, a Gentile who, to a certain extent, produced a work with Jewish resonances, or at least, which was viewed as Jewish, and upon which subsequent generations of this century have actually projected the messianic image of the eternal Wandering Jew. Chaplin himself did not fight against this illusion; on the contrary, through empathy, he eventually came to incarnate a schlemiel, in the true sense of the word, in the ghetto of *The Great Dictator*.

In 1934, Chaplin was deeply touched by I.J. Singer’s play *Joshe Kalb*, performed in Los Angeles by the Yiddish *Jewish Art Theatre* on its tour. He reportedly attended three performances, talked with the actors for several hours, and had

his photograph taken with them (cf. *Folks-Stimme*, Warsaw, December 1987). At that time, he was working on *Modern Times*; but it is not impossible that the idea of *The Great Dictator* should already have been shaping itself in his mind, with a Charlie pogromized by a Crystal Night and living under the threat of the Shoah.

The Great Dictator is his last embodiment of Charlie, and the myth comes full circle. The film seems to function as a caption, the key to the picture which he had projected of himself throughout all of his oeuvre.

Yet it is not a reduction of his total work. On the contrary: whoever were to regard his films independently from this perspective would deprive them of one of their dimensions, and even of their depth. The goal here is not to monopolize for one people a universal figure who transcended the nations – even though the Jewish people was scattered throughout the countries of the world. The present aim is, rather, to acknowledge that a work of art is not an abstraction; that it is produced at a given point in space and time, and as such “informed” by its situational context. And when an oeuvre has met with a success as great as Chaplin’s, the feed-back of public opinion could not but exert an influence on his further work.

“Sur la route éternelle, Chaplin semble reproduire à son compte la tragédie du Juif errant, une tragédie qui serait élevée aux dimensions du monde moderne” [On the eternal road, says Jean Mitry (1957: 92), Chaplin seems to reproduce for himself the tragedy of the Wandering Jew, and to raise it to the dimensions of the modern world].

Thus, the final homily of *The Great Dictator* is an ardent plea for Human Rights: “I don’t want to be an emperor [...] I should like to help everyone – if possible – Jew, Gentile – black men – white [...] You are men! with the love of humanity in your hearts. Don’t hate [...] Fight for liberty! [...] Let us all unite [...] in the name of democracy [...]!”

This transfiguration of the schlemiel may be regarded as natural if one considers, like Albert Memmi (1962: 219) in his *Portrait d’un Juif* [Portrait of a Jew], that “la condition juive n’est qu’un raccourci, plus condensé, plus sombre, de la condition humaine la plus générale” [The Jewish predicament is but a shortened, condensed, darker picture of the human condition in general].

(translated by J.P. van Noppen)

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The Chaplin reception in Germany (Brilliant comedian and “Jewish film clown”)

Michael Hanisch

When Chaplin got off the train in Berlin in September 1921 he was amazed and somewhat disappointed – as we know from his travel book *My trip abroad*. He came from London and Paris where he had been welcomed like a king. He was almost unknown in Berlin at that time. In England and France he had been acclaimed by the crowds. Wherever he came into view, there were lots of policeman, there were traffic jams. In Germany there was calm and silence – which Chaplin liked at the beginning but which he soon found annoying. In Germany he became known later than anywhere else.

During World War II, Germany was cut off from the American and French film markets. The French, English, and American soldiers of World War II knew Chaplin already. The German “field gray soldiers” had to content themselves with the somewhat prosaic and simple-minded humor of Henny Porten in their war cinemas. Today one might – though not altogether seriously – reflect on whether the war would have ended earlier if the Germans had also known the defamatory jokes of Charlie Chaplin. What kind of power can a brilliant film comedian hold? Chaplin came to Berlin on 23 September 1921. Three weeks prior to this date, on 2 September, *The Rink* was projected – the very first Chaplin film to be seen in the German cinemas. And from that date on there was a bond of love between the German audiences and Chaplin, between the critics and Chaplin.

The newspapers were not very laudatory in reporting about the main film of the program, Asta Nielsen’s *Roswolsky’s Mistress*. On the other hand, they were very kind about the first film in the program. The German newspapers praised Chaplin, even those critics who were actually very critical of the cinema medium and considered film as a primitive means of mass entertainment (and who still held this opinion in 1921), were enchanted. One of them, the great republican writer Kurt Tucholsky, connected Chaplin and his films with the ongoing German political situation. When he saw *The Kid* in 1923, in the middle of the terrible period of inflation, he prefaced his review with the deep heartfelt comment: “Wenn Ludendorff halb so komisch wäre –!” [I wish Ludendorff were half as comical at least!]. (*Die Weltbühne*, XIX, N° 49, 6 December 1923).

The left-wing liberal German journalists had taken to Chaplin. They considered the English-American movie star as an ally in the light of the ongoing events. It was, above all, the *Weltbühne* – the legendary small weekly which was so import-

ant in view of the German society of Weimar – that time and again published articles appreciating Chaplin and his films. Among its writers/editorialists were Tucholsky and, above all, Hans Siemsen. The latter may be considered as the pioneer among the German Chaplin promoters. As early as March 1920 when Chaplin was only known by name in Germany, Siemsen published an article in the *Weltbühne* on “Zwei Postkarten und ein Buch” (XVI, N° 11, 11 March 1920) [Two postcards and a book], in which he describes one of these postcards showing Chaplin. One might wonder who had drawn his attention to Chaplin, who had told him of his films. It is possible that Siemsen had heard of Chaplin from the French surrealists. It is common knowledge that poems and booklets about Chaplin had been published in Paris as early as 1919–1920. Although the Germans only knew him by hearsay, they were, nevertheless, enthusiastic about him.

Hans Siemsen also was the one in Germany to write the first essays about Chaplin. In 1922 he published five very discerning and ingenious essays about Chaplin and his films in the *Weltbühne* (XVIII, N° 40–44). Meanwhile the films of the Mutual period had become known in Germany. Siemsen, too, connected Chaplin’s work with reflections on the policy of the Weimar Republic. He writes,

Chaplins Komödien sind fast alle eminent politisch. [...] Von dieser Seite gesehen, ist der Inhalt der Chaplinaden immer derselbe: der Kampf der Unterdrückten gegen die Unterdrücker. Chaplin ist immer der Unterdrückte, der Schwache, der Kleine, der Verfolgte. Niemals ist er der General, der Bankdirektor, der Staatsanwalt, der reiche, behäbige, mächtige Bürger. Er ist immer der Untergebene, der Gefangene, der Angestellte, der Hausdiener, der Proletarier. Und wenn er ausnahmsweise mal Polizist ist, so ist er das in einem Verbrecherviertel, wo die Polizei nichts zu sagen hat, wo die Polizisten zu den Verfolgten gehören und um ihr Leben laufen müssen [...] Chaplin lüpf die Kulissen. Er lehrt, daß man nichts ernst nehmen soll, nichts als die aller-einfachsten menschlichen Dinge. Und daß man sich vor nichts fürchten soll, nicht vor den großen Bankgebäuden, nicht vor den Generalen und Unteroffizieren, nicht vor der Würde, nicht vor der Macht und nicht einmal vor dem schrecklichen, dicken Mann. Er lehrt die vollkommene, die radikale Respektlosigkeit. Gott segne ihn! Er ist ein Revolutionär (*Die Weltbühne*, XVIII. Jahrgang Nr. 42 vom 19.10.1922)

[Nearly all of Chaplin’s comedies are eminently political. [...] From this point of view the content of the Chaplinades is always the same: the fight of the oppressed against the oppressors. Chaplin himself is always the oppressed, the weak and little one, the persecuted creature. It never happens that he is the general, the bank manager, the public prosecutor, the rich, unworried, powerful citizen. He always is the inferior, the captive, the em-

ployee, the valet, the proletarian. And if – once in a while – he is a policeman, his sphere of activity is a quarter of criminals where police do not have a say, where the cops are among the persecuted and have to run to survive. [...] Chaplin has a glimpse behind the scenes. He teaches us not to take anything seriously, nothing but the very elementary human things. And he tells us not to be afraid of anything – the big bank buildings, power, not even to be afraid of the awful fat man. He teaches absolute, radical irreverence. God bless him! He is a revolutionary.]

But even as early as 1923 there were other opposing comments on Chaplin's work as well. For example, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* – for some time the unofficial organ of the German government, a sort of German *Times* – asserted about Chaplin, "Diese grotesk-sentimentale Mischung ist uns fremd. Sie entbehrt der Logik, und ohne Logik ist deutsche Filmdichterei nicht zu denken" (*Die Weltbühne*, XIX. Jahrgang Nr. 49 vom 6.12.1923.) [This grotesque-sentimental mixture is alien to us. It lacks any logic, and German film fiction is inconceivable without logic].

A divergence of views about Chaplin was already true in the 1920s. On the one hand, millions of cinemagoers went to see his films; the Berlin premières were the first-rate social events involving all members of high society. Most of the critics responded to his films in an exceptionally positive way. Journalists, who usually hardly ever stepped into a cinema also wrote about them. On the other hand, there were critics who thought that the success of the Chaplin films was uncanny. They defamed him as a stupid clown, as a miserable wretch – just the antitype of a straight forward German. It goes without saying that these critics came exclusively from the conservative wings.

The Germans quickly caught up with the Chaplin fans in France, England, and other countries. Now, a new Chaplin film was immediately launched in Berlin as well as in Paris, Munich, or London. But one film was banned from German cinemas until after World War II; until then German audiences were denied the viewing of *Shoulder Arms*. Kurt Tucholsky had seen the film in Paris and Copenhagen and he enthusiastically commented on it in the *Weltbühne*. And – as was always the case when he dealt with Chaplin – he called upon Chaplin himself:

Der Film *Das Gewehr über!* aber sollte an einer Stelle gespielt werden, wo er noch nie gespielt worden ist, und wohin er gehört. [...] Auf einen Fleck Erde aber gehört er, vor eine Gattung Menschen, die den Mut nicht aufbringen, zu Ende zu denken, die in Lüge leben und in Kompromissen. Dieser helle Film gehört in das dunkelste Deutschland. Übern Rhein, Chaplin, übern Rhein –! (XXIII. Jahrgang Nr. 23 vom 7.6.1927.)