Postgraduate English
www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

Issue 26 March 2013

Editors: Avishek Parui and Michael Shallcross

The birth of the tramp: Chaplin, gesture, and the rhythms of modernity

Sarah Hanks
University of Oxford

The birth of the tramp:

Chaplin, gesture, and the rhythms of modernity

Sarah Hanks
University of Oxford

Postgraduate English, Issue 26, March 2013

It was not unusual for Mack Sennett, founder of the Keystone Film Company, to send a film crew to genuine public events, to unleash their fast-paced slapstick antics on the public and film the result.[1] In February 1914, that event was a children's soap-box race in Venice, California. The resulting film, *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (February 1914), is ostensibly a documentary – about the spectators in the grandstand as well as the race itself. But a man in the crowd in derby hat, poorly fitting clothes, with cane and toothbrush moustache wanders into view. He notices the camera, does a comic double take and immediately straightens himself up. From then on, Charlie Chaplin in his iconic tramp costume, performs an egotistical invasion of the screen, drawing attention away from the race, making himself the camera's main subject. After signing with Keystone on 25th October 1913, this was Chaplin's first appearance as the tramp.[2] Transforming into the anarchic, attention seeking character that was to dominate his early films as soon as he recognizes the camera, Charlie *creates* the subject of the film; no longer impersonal, *Kid Auto* is now about an individual's actions in relation to the camera, how the camera has influenced such actions, and how this in turn alters the content of the film. This mutual relationship makes *Kid Auto* into the definitive tramp creation story for many critics,[3] and his character emerges from the specific relationship between his own gestures and the place of the camera.

---

[1] See Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 65.

[2] While some critics argue that *Mabel's Strange Predicament* is the first tramp film because it may have been filmed before *Kid Auto* (see for example Simon Louvish's filmography, *Chaplin: The Tramp's Odyssey* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)), it was released after it, making *Kid Auto* the public's introduction to the tramp. See Eric Flom, *Chaplin in the Sound Era: An Analysis of the Seven Talkies* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 1997), p. 14.

If the tramp – along with Chaplin's catalogue of often anarchic characters – is a creation of the camera, it is no surprise that European avant-garde filmmakers and writers were drawn to Chaplin's work. 'Film', writes Dorothy Kosinski, was the 'simultaneous product, symbol and interpreter of modernity',[4] the art form which comes closest to perfection in representing the age. Filmmakers and film critics, including René Clair, Louis Aragon, and Louis Delluc in France, and Ivan Goll in Berlin, saw Chaplin – or *Charlot* – as the embodiment of modernity in film, his bodily virtuosity simultaneously symbolic of the human and the machine.[5] In 1927 Clair, writing that the defining characteristic of the avant-garde was 'the *spirit of curiosity*', claimed that 'Chaplin, who with his first films revolutionized the American dramatic film',[6] was in fact an avant-garde artist. I argue that Chaplin's films are meta-cinematic commentaries, enabled by a self-reflexivity born from slapstick, and a bodily exploration of both the literal screen space, and film form itself. As actor and director (of every film considered by this essay apart from *Kid Auto*), Chaplin combines theory with practice of the avant-garde's interrogation of form.

While several critics have noted such European avant-garde admiration for Chaplin,[7] the connection is rarely developed beyond brief acknowledgement. This essay bridges the gap between contemporary film theory and Chaplin's own cinematic practice, viewing the films not through the lens of avant-garde writing, but as theoretical excursions in their own right: as parallel but distinct developments. It takes those of Chaplin's films which are exemplars of self-reflexivity: silent films which are consciously ocular, or that dwell on film practice itself, in order to examine Chaplin's gestural movement across the screen, the relationship between the physical habits of man and object and how these contribute to an alternative rhythm to the linearity of an expected direction of movement, cinematic realism, and the forward drive of the camera and projector. Its chronological treatment of such films enables a final examination of *Modern Times* (1936, United Artists), the film perhaps most often used in discussions of machine aesthetics due to its social commentary driven narrative, considering Chaplin's final non-speaking film as part of an ongoing critique apparent from his earliest films.

---

[3] For example, Kerr sees Chaplin 'elbowing his way into immortality', p. 22.

[4] "Léger, 1911-1924: A Language for the Modern World", in *Fernand Léger, 1911-1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1994), pp. 17-27, p. 27.

[5] Tom Gunning calls this a 'peculiarly modern body...that recalled for them...the staccato rhythms of a machine, and the uncontrollable physical spasms of nervous energy...', "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity", available at http://chaplin.bfi.org.uk/programme/conference/pdf/tom-gunning.pdf, p. 6. On Chaplin's popularity in mass and intellectual culture, Michael North: 'Of one had to choose one thing that every human being living in 1922 – from Evelyn Waugh to Walter Benjamin – could have agreed upon, it would probably be Charlie Chaplin.' *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 163. For a detailed account of Chaplin's impact among the Berlin Dadaists, see Sherwin Simmons, "Chaplin Smiles on the Wall: Berlin Dada and Wish-Images of Popular Culture", *New German Critique* No. 84 (Autumn 2001), pp. 3-34.

[6] Recalled in *Reflections on the Cinema* trans. V. Traill, (London: William Kimber, 1953), p. 81.

[7] Peter Conrad, 'a romance between high and low culture', *Modern Times, Modern Places* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 429, and North on Chaplin's transformation into a 'purely visual subject', p. 166. See also contemporary writer Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2001)

The possibilities of cinema, of 'a hundred worlds, a thousand movements',[8] were distilled and refined, through slapstick; Clair adored the 'swift and fresh lyricism' of the Sennetts, in which 'the law of gravity seemed ousted by the joy of movement'[9] before Chaplin had even entered film. The Sennetts were often undercranked to give the final projection an extra injection of speed, a technological boost to human movement.[10] Chaplin took this and moulded it into his own brand of *hyperkinesis;* holding himself in a constantly active state, communicating with people and objects in an automated manner, an extension of the very medium in which he was embodied. It is a rhythm particular to modernity, a mechanical drive forward - what Susan McCabe has identified in Gertrude Stein's prose and Man Ray's films as 'rhythmic propulsion'.[11] And, for such early film critics as Louis Delluc, it was the fact that this is a purely *bodily* propulsion that made Chaplin's style so very fitting to the art. '[T]o paint and model and sculp [sic] one's *own* body, one's *own* features, to make a transposition of art',[12] Delluc would write, in admiration of a man who, by embedding critique into his work, bypassed the written word altogether. This was the purest way in which to analyse silent film, a medium which, many avant-garde writers believed, ought to stand on image alone.[13]

---

[8] Blaise Cendrars, quoted in Kosinski, p. 23.

[9] Clair, p. 39.

[10] See David Robinson, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 23, and Kosinski on the 'novel sense of speed and immediacy' that the avant-garde found so appealing, p. 22.

[11] In *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 71.

Kid Auto is the very essence of this bodily critique; with no discernible narrative, it is free to explore as its subject, gesture and movement. Charlie the egotistical, abusive teenager to the parent camera that has created him, violently grimaces into the lens in the final close-up. Getting face to face with the camera, he saturates the shot with pure gestural expression. Such explosive physicality takes on a more shocking role when Charlie's strutting and preening is shown in the foreground to long shots of the race. Cutting laterally across the paths of speeding cars, his movement provides a directional counterpoint; we fear that the two may collide. One scene depicts the cars being pulled up a ramp which towers above the spectators; the camera is positioned almost directly in front of this ramp in order to capture both this gaining of potential energy, followed by its release. We know the direction of the cars' movement. But at the last second, Chaplin's hat enters from the left of the screen; he rushes across to retrieve it, narrowly avoiding a car. The static camera captures a near collision of two competing bodies on unstoppable trajectories, a collision of the film's intended subject, and Charlie's disruption of it, showing the erratic lines he is willing to cut in order to draw attention to himself.

The camera generally remains static in Chaplin's earlier films, as is the norm for early American slapstick. Siegfried Kracauer, looking back in 1951 on Chaplin's earlier work noted that: 'since in those anarchic days of the immobile camera life on the screen was synonymous with life in motion, the comedy makers did their utmost to exaggerate all natural movements.'[14] Where films are centred around the camera itself, Charlie orbits it as a satellite, its monumentality mocked and its stature reduced to mere prop. We should think of the 'on-set' film as a sub-genre in Chaplin's earlier work; from the Keystone one-reelers *A Film Johnnie* (March 1914) and *The Masquerader* (August 1914) Chaplin opens his stint at the Essanay company with *His New Job* (February 1915),[15] and seven films into his contract with Mutual produces *Behind the Screen* (November 1916).[16] While retaining a Keystone pace, the latter two films do not move beyond the confines of the film set and prop department, containing and increasing the pressure on Charlie's explosive acting style. In *His New Job* Charlie stumbles onto a film set, is given a job as a carpenter, wanders into the dressing room and dons the lead's costume (a huge military uniform which swamps his diminutive frame), before taking on that role. The Charlie of *Behind the Screen* is already in employment as a stage hand's assistant: "Goliath, the stage hand. David, his assistant", an intertitle tells us. His slapstick antics come into their own when they enable him to save a cross-dressing Edna Purviance from striking stage hands bent on kidnap and the destruction of the studio.

---

[12] Louis Delluc, *Charlie Chaplin* trans. H. Miles, (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd., 1922), p. 14.

[13] On cinema as purely visual see Benjamin Fondane, "From Silent to Talkie: The Rise and Fall of the Cinema" (1930), reproduced in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939* vols. I, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 45-55.

Negotiating these enclosed spaces Charlie is imbued with mechanical movements, walking, as Gertrude Stein so admired,[17] at right angles through the set. Such movements become a comment on camera technology itself. His path, forever angular rather than curved, seems mathematically calculated, exact, planned; constantly fetching props while his boss sits idle in *Behind the Screen*, Charlie moves rhythmically back and forth, cutting across and then towards the working camera. Twice tripping over the leg of the 'prop' camera, on his third encounter Charlie stops, lifts the tripod leg, steps *under* it, and replaces it in the same position. With both the actual camera and its ‘prop’ counterpart static, Charlie makes it a fusty, immovable monument to technology which he will, through physical comedy, systematically undermine. But it also shows that he is set on a mechanical trajectory, unable to negotiate a more fluid path around objects, what Bergson has called ‘mechanical inelasticity’.[18] A bump to the head – from a falling fake pillar - violently jolts Charlie out of this angular behaviour; he skips across the set with arms pinned firmly to his sides, weaving in and out of props, encircling the camera and entwining it in his anarchic energy. Less a break from such ‘inelasticity’ into the natural fluidity of human movement, this shock is like an electrical surge in Charlie’s system - a machine-gone-wrong, he is unpredictable, at once systematic and erratic, planned and anarchic. This ability of Chaplin’s to conform to linear movement in order to subvert it, to follow a regular rhythm then break into syncopation, enables him to critique his medium from within.

---

[14] Siegfried Kracauer, "Silent Film Comedy" (1951), *American Writings: Essays on Film and Popular Culture* ed. Johannes von Moltke and Kristy Rawson, (London: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 213-217, p. 214.

[15] Chaplin signed with Essanay in November 1914.

[16] Chaplin signed with Mutual in February 1916.

[17] Chaplin recalls a meeting with Stein in which '[s]he theorised about cinema plots...She would like to see me in a movie just walking up the street and turning a corner, then another corner, and another', in *My Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1922), p. 330.

For such a critique to take place however, Charlie must be aware of the contained nature of the film set, of the possibility at least that the filmic medium can distort. Any kind of movement in *His New Job* and *Behind the Screen* is therefore of an inquisitive nature, into the medium itself and the spaces in which it is created. The title *Behind the Screen* invites us to look, implying that something once concealed is now revealed. We move not just behind the screen, but beyond it, to a world of heightened movement doubled through a self-reflexive display of the very machinery of cinema. In this world of the static camera, Charlie’s movement into a new area is shown in an entirely new shot, and simultaneously he crosses over thresholds – through doors or curtains – to play an entirely different character. In *His New Job* we revel in the gleeful predictability of the swing door to the casting office, which knocks over Chaplin and Ben Turpin in turn, with every swing to and fro. Later, when he walks through the ‘STAR’ door, making the transition from carpenter to film star, the ability of film to transform the appearance of a person comes under scrutiny. Movement over thresholds enabled *by the medium of film* normally denied us (and him), opens up the medium itself to self-interrogation.

---

[18] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* ed. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell, (London: MacMillan and Co., 1911), p. 10.

But movement across the set in *Behind the Screen* is, importantly, not just that of Charlie; objects are imbued with a force unique to comedy. For European avant-garde filmmakers, comedy was the ideal subject for film for precisely this reason. René Clair recalled an interview with P. A. Birot for *La Danse* in the early 1920s, in which Birot said: ‘I only vaguely remember the first comic films, but it seems to me that they were genuine creations and, what’s more, that they were *dynamic*, that they were really born of a new medium of expression...’, (my emphasis).[19] Dynamism is akin with Charlie’s *hyperkinetic* action, but *Behind the Screen* contrasts comic movement more generally with a more stultified dramatic atmosphere. In an extended custard pie fight, pies are imbued with force from throwers in the “Comedy Department” of the studios, fly across the screen and re-enter in the “Drama Department”, sending movement crashing into a scene of stasis. In *His New Job* there are (unusually for early Chaplin) three tracking shots in the scenes in which Charlie is playing in a historical drama. These shots immediately slow the pace of the film, as they make bodily movement redundant, but Charlie’s histrionic acting lightens the scene by drawing attention to the absurdity of the genre. Comedy ought to be, these films say, the grimace of a face against the camera, of rapid bodily movement engulfing the screen.

Films that take us behind the screen will inevitably bring us into contact with the paraphernalia of film production; the artifice of the screen is shown to be as great as that of the stage. As these objects, as props, are artifice, they carry imaginative potential – we need think only of the “marble” pillars that nearly “crush” Charlie in both films, the bear rug which receives a full treatment from the barber, or the upright piano he lifts from underneath the fingers of a supposedly genuine pianist in *Behind the Screen*. The screen itself, that is, the medium of film, filters these objects to imbue them with significance within that film. Showing us what is behind the screen exposes them as props and challenges our notions of what they should be. On this world Louis Aragon wrote:

---

[19] In Clair, p. 14.

> his [Chaplin's] very vision of the world which, together with the discovery of the mechanical and its laws, haunts the hero to such an extent that by an inversion of values each inanimate object becomes a living thing for him, each human person a dummy whose starting-handle must be found.[20]

This 'inversion of values' determines comic distortion. Objects are what Chaplin makes them, even in films that are not explicit meta-commentaries on actual film production. In inverting expectations, Chaplin privileges comic playfulness as an inquisitive challenge to cinematic realism. T. S. Eliot believed that Chaplin 'has escaped in his own way from the realism of cinema and invented a *rhythm*'[21] (Eliot's emphasis). This rhythm runs counter to the linearity of realism, providing an alternative commentary on an object's appearance. It means that theoretically human and object can be anything. Indeed, Tom Gunning has pointed out that Chaplin's mixing of the human with the object exaggerates certain traits of both, 'exceeding our categories of knowledge and extending our experience', to retain familiarity but give us something entirely new.[22] Chaplin's eighth Essanay film, *Work* (June 1915), is a rhythmic undercutting of realism, to borrow from Eliot, in its edited structure and preoccupation with objects. In this film Chaplin plays a wallpaper hanger (a character he had played while on stage with the Fred Karno Company, in a comic sketch called *Repairs*),[23] in employment while retaining the tramp costume. The film again retains some Keystone chaos, but the main premise of the film is of a pair of decorators systematically destroying a middle class house from the inside out. Simultaneously a faulty oven causes equal chaos, before exploding. Cinematic realism is undercut when Charlie, unable to move an enormous safe, removes his jacket from the top and is then able to move it with ease. Such subversion of norms in *The Pawnshop* (October 1916, Mutual), itself a surrogate prop department, becomes a critique of slapstick acting itself; when Charlie hits a customer on the head with a hammer, the customer turns to the camera looking dazed, before leaving the shop. Charlie then turns to the hammer and bends it, advertising its artificiality to destroy this illusion of concussion.[24]

---

[20] In Abel I, p. 167.

[21] T. S. Eliot, "Dramatis Personae", *The Criterion* (April 1923), Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 303-306, p. 306.

[22] Gunning, p. 10. Gunning has written of Chaplin's acting as moving 'into a new physical realm' combining both human and object, p. 2.

[23] See Flom, p. 8.

By denying such realism, these films reveal a human-object nexus in which traits are interchangeable; bodies display a malleability which evades categorization. In *Work* this is realized as an object-oriented equivalent to Charlie's mechanical movement in front of the camera, as he metamorphoses into a ladder in a pair which supports a plank of wood. We see though, like in *The Circus* (1928, United Artists) when he pretends to be a mechanical marionette to evade capture, a human inquisitiveness slipping through, making comedy out of his inability to remain inanimate. And reciprocally, his equivalent object-as-human in *The Pawnshop* struggles to keep to its new role. Siegfried Kracauer recalled in his 1951 essay "Silent Film Comedy" the inanimate objects in Chaplin's slapstick which were 'filled with malice towards anything human'[25] and which 'gave lie to the alleged blessings of mechanization.'[26] Objects are mischievous in Chaplin films, anthropomorphized into impish saboteurs of human life. But in order for them to, as Kracauer correctly points out, expose the limitations of the mechanical aid supposed to liberate man from drudgery, they must retain elements of the mechanical. When Charlie deconstructs an alarm clock, treating it first at a tin can and then as a living thing by listening for a heartbeat through a stethoscope, the comedy lies in the juxtaposition of Charlie's seriousness over his task, and the still obvious fact that the clock remains an inanimate object. Laid out on the counter, the clock's working parts begin to move, to shuffle along the counter in a staccato manner. Such movement lends a not-quite human mechanicity to the clock even as it is deconstructed via surgical methods. Looking forward to 1924 to Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger's Dadaist film *Ballet mécanique,* we see much of the same angularity. The film begins and ends with a boxy marionette Charlot,[27] doing a staccato dance and tipping his angular derby, while contrasted in quick successive shots with the smooth lines of a woman on a garden swing. At the close of the film Charlot, like the clock, is systematically deconstructed, his trademark cane, baggy trousers, and tightly-jacketed torso exit the screen, until all that remains is a moustachioed face and rhythmically tipping derby. Finally this too disappears, the last to exit the screen. This desire to capture what is purely bodily, abstract movement through limbs, costume, and face, shows that Charlot *was* the cinema to these filmmakers – indeed, Murphy praised Chaplin for his 'consumate knowledge and feeling for tempo.'[28] He could be deconstructed – the individual parts that make up his visual persona broken up to try to ascertain where the body ends and the machine begins.

---

[24] And tainting our view of other films – two releases later we are to see the Goliath gangster of *Easy Street* (January 1917) bend a street lamp "like rubber".

[25] Kracauer, p. 214.

[26] ibid.

For Chaplin then, comedy must occupy liminal ground, neither wholly human nor entirely mechanical. His blurred boundaries give human and object degrees of agency limited by the presence of the other. *The Pawnshop* forces incongruous objects together, violin-birdcage-derby, and Charlie too, who works among these out-of-place objects which dislocate him as a human. *Work* sees him entangled in ladders and laden with pots of paint, enmeshed in the trappings of his work in an attempt to dehumanize him and destroy his surroundings. And of course his partner in mischief is that periodically exploding oven. The film cuts between long shots of the parlour, in which the decorators wreak havoc, and the kitchen where the oven frustrates the husband's hopes of breakfast, in an almost parallel action where the two destructive elements work independently until the last explosion. These cuts become increasingly rapid as the film approaches this climax, compounding the sense of movement and uniting human and object as one. When the smoke clears following this collision of editing and on-screen movement, Charlie emerges *through* the oven door, a complete merging of human and object.

---

[27] Originally created for Léger's animation *Charlot Cubiste*, which was never made.

[28] Quoted in James Donald, "Jazz Modernism and Film Art: Dudley Murphy and *Ballet mécanique*", *Modernism/Modernity* Vol. 16, No. 1, (Jan 2009), pp. 25-49, p. 43.

Such fusion allows Chaplin a moment to theorize; after drawing out the comic in a scene in which the object becomes an extension of the human, focus turns to the film form itself. In equivalent scenes in *The Pawnshop* objects that are ocular become an extension of Charlie's own eyes, supposedly enabling him to scrutinize visual communication. In one scene a man intent on swindling Charlie acts out a "tragic" story in order to get more money for a wedding ring – only to give change for Charlie's generous offer from a huge roll of notes. As the man enters the shop, Charlie takes his picture and, as he gesticulates, observes him through binoculars. This optical substitution stands in for the camera, technology which many avant-garde filmmakers and writers saw as *refining* vision. For example, Philippe Soupault argued that the lens allows the eye to become more penetrating, more acute, by narrowing the field of vision,[29] and Jean Epstein considered sight 'the most developed sense' with the cinema limited to sight.[30] Charlie hopes to scrutinize what is in front of him – to see whether he can discern more with this optical extension. Yet he comically renders it useless – failing to decide on the veracity of the man's story, and later using an eye glass to examine a clock part with the wrong eye. As mechanical extension of the body, the eye glass may make Charlie look like a camera, but its mini-lens is comically bypassed for its human equivalent –

---

[29] "Note I sur le cinema" (1918) reproduced in Abel I, pp. 142-143.

[30] "Magnification" (1921), reproduced in Abel I, pp. 235-241, p. 240. See also Germaine Dullac: 'The machine is based on the effects of lenses that come closer to or move away from [an object] to frame the picture required for our dialectic. Every lens records the vision we have intellectually conceived in order to transmit it to the film' – i.e., the camera and film are perfect way to capture intellectual thought and creativity, and to express it. "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema" (1924), reproduced in Abel I, pp. 305-314, p. 308.

the other eye. As theory this is an examination of the lens as an aperture through which to view. In making it comic, Chaplin asks us whether we can really believe our eyes when viewing film. He exhibits a consciousness about technological forms of viewing, holding them up to scrutiny.

Gesture then may not be the only form of effective communication – and certainly not the most trustworthy.[31] But Chaplin's art is all about gesture and the rapidity of the slapstick form from which it originated. The purity of visual communication because of film's silent form came under threat from synchronized sound. Warner Brothers released *Don Juan* in 1926 which used synchronized music and film, and a year later *The Jazz Singer* which contained a very small amount of synchronized dialogue.[32] The advent of the talkie quickly changed film production; in 1928 Hollywood's film output consisted of 10 all-talking, 23 part-talking, and 220 silent films. Just one year later the balance of power had shifted, when 38 silent competed with 216 part- or all-talking releases.[33] The avant-garde in Europe displayed mixed reactions; where Abel Gance had high hopes for the talkies as long as the existing laws of silent cinema remained unchanged,[34] Benjamin Fondane saw change as inevitable because cinema is driven by the 'masses, and the masses believe in progress.'[35] But many such writers, including Clair, opposed the talkie, because silent film did not rely on words, like literature or theatre – it was pure image.[36] This liberated art form, they felt, would be constrained once more by words.

---

[31] Indeed, see *The Pilgrim* (February 1923, First National) in which Charlie acts out a sermon on David and Goliath in a bid to convince the congregation that he is a Parson and not, in fact, his true identity – an escaped convict. His audience are unconvinced and unimpressed. In *Behind the Screen* Charlie waves a white handkerchief to trick his foe into calling a truce on their custard pie fight.

[32] See Flom, p. 50.

[33] Louvish, p. 226.

[34] "Images of Yesterday, Voices of Tomorrow" (1930), reproduced in Abel II, pp. 41-42.

[35] Fondane in Abel II, p. 50.

[36] On cinema as resolutely *not theatre* see Germaine Dulac, "The Expressive Technique..." in Abel I, pp. 305-314, and Philippe Soupault, pp. 142-143. Louis Delluc in his book length study on Chaplin, noted that cinema is most different from theatre in its constant willingness to reinvent itself. Finally, Clair emphatically wrote in 1925 (although he was to change his mind), 'If words had given you [film] life, it would be impossible to preserve you from their constrictive power, you would be their slave.' "Rhythm", reproduced in Abel I, pp. 368-370, p. 370.

Chaplin's own interviews and writing suggest concordance with this; in *Motion Picture Magazine* he says, '[t]hey [the talkies] are spoiling the oldest art in the world, the art of pantomime,'[37] and for *Theatre Arts Monthly* in 1930, 'I shall never speak in a film...I cannot conceive of my films as other than silent.'[38] Looking back in *My Autobiography*, he believed that the tramp could never have made the transition to sound, '[i]f I talked,' Chaplin wrote, 'I would be like any other comedian.'[39] Chaplin did not speak in film until *The Great Dictator* (1940, United Artists), over a decade after *The Jazz Singer*, and after three non- or part-dialogue films – *The Circus* (1928), *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936, all United Artists). Critics give varied reasons as to why Chaplin resisted what David Robinson has called 'the looming ogre of sound'[40] for so long, pointing to the incompatibility of fast-paced pantomime with the slower action of talking film, a reluctance to risk his popularity as a silent star (particularly in non-English speaking countries), and financial and directorial powers which gave Chaplin almost absolute artistic control.[41] Critics such as Peter Conrad have also suggested that the tramp's silence is a comment on the futility of written and verbal communication in the modern era.[42] Chaplin's decisions were, I think, expedient in light of a combination of these factors acting at once.

Such discussions can obfuscate the post-sound silents' role in Chaplin's ongoing critique of the film medium, and the fact that these films engage in dialogue with earlier films self-consciously interested in film practice. For example, references to sound in a work firmly grounded in the silent era, playfully point to their own, unrivalled form as a source of gestural comedy. *Behind the Screen* sees Charlie, unmotivated, play an improvised pie tin xylophone with leftover bones. In the same film the director bends over and rips his trousers – causing much embarrassment. Later, when the trousers are repaired, Charlie recreates that embarrassment when he stands behind the director and tears a handkerchief – replicating a sound which the audience cannot hear. It is the *visual* substitution that creates the comedy.

---

[37] "Charlie Chaplin Attacks the Talkies", in Maland, p. 119.
[38] (Nov 1930), p. 908, quoted in Louvish, p. 227.
[39] Chaplin, p. 420.
[40] Robinson, p. 94.
[41] See Flom, p. 51.
[42] Conrad, p. 425.

Yet when a similar substitution occurs in *City Lights*, five years into commercial synchronized sound, silent film's communicative capacity is no longer unrivalled. Charlie has found work as a street cleaner in order to raise money to support a blind flower seller. In one scene, after a hard morning's work, Charlie washes his face before lunch. Next to him a fellow cleaner lays out his lunch, including a piece of cheese which bears a remarkable resemblance to a bar of soap. The camera cuts to Charlie fumbling around for the soap, and the much anticipated substitution of cheese and soap takes place; his colleague, oblivious, takes a large bite out of a soap sandwich. A medium shot shows the man in profile, furiously shouting at Charlie – but all that comes out is a stream of bubbles, the perfect visual expression of foaming at the mouth. Charlie's childish playfulness as he laughs and tries to catch the bubbles fails to conceal the fact that such self-referentiality points to a rapidly outmoded medium; his laughter is tinged with nostalgia. But it rings with the bitterness of laughter directed at the obsolete, the dying form.

City Lights resists speech while utilizing synchronized sound to render words and language into nonsense. A kazoo replaces the voices of bureaucrats in the film's opening scene, and later when Charlie swallows a whistle his hiccups attract a pack of dogs. While the former is a comment on the arbitrariness and irrelevance of bureaucratic language, the latter reduces the experimental substitution of instruments to mere comic display. It is not until *Modern Times* that synchronized dialogue is pitched directly against gesture. When Charlie, employed as a singing waiter intends to perform a song with the lyrics written on his cuffs, his hopes are dashed when, during a vigorous introductory dance, they fly off into the audience. On Paulette Goddard's order to 'Sing! Never mind the words!' Charlie "improvises" lyrics in a nonsense Franco-Italian language – bursting the tension created by the possibility that the tramp may actually speak. Bolstering the act with comically exaggerated gesture, Charlie communicates more clearly through the visual than the aural; speech, this scene contends, is inadequate as a comic medium.

But this dichotomy between the effectiveness of gesture and speech as comic communication must run in parallel with serious social commentary, in this film subtitled 'A story of industry, of individual enterprise – humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness' and released in the shadow of the Depression.[43] Chaplin's meta-cinematic commentary continues, but places traits from a repertoire of gestural set-pieces in a new context; film as a rapidly developing technology is situated within a narrative concerned more with industrialization in general. In this retrospective creation story the birth, life and death of the tramp is due to a conflation of mechanization and sound film where, losing his job with the Electro Steel Corp following a mental breakdown, he leaves hospital *in the tramp costume* – the emblem of modernity's failed promise to liberate man from grinding work. Man becomes subservient to machine, dehumanized and collectivized by the high-angle camera in the film's opening montage of workers squeezed through a narrow subway opening like sheep. Whenever speech does occur, language is filtered through electronic intermediaries. In the Orwellian "telescreens" in the factory that allow the manager to observe his workers and bark such orders as 'HEY, QUIT STALLING, GO BACK TO WORK, GO ON', synchronized sound is seen to regulate the pace of modern life. A radio which displays impeccable comic timing when an advert, '*If you are suffering from gastritis, don't forge-...*' breaks an awkward stomach rumbling exchange between Charlie and a vicar's wife. Comic agency displaced onto this mechanical speaking device is inextricably linked to consumerism, tainting the purity of entirely visual humour with a dehumanized, mechanized agenda.

---

[43] See Joan Mellen, *Modern Times* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), who calls Chaplin 'the great cinema poet of the Depression', p. 21.

Such a comparison of technologies, relating film technique to a wider machine aesthetic in *Modern Times* broadens Chaplin's ongoing critique of film, as the aural rhythms of sound collide with the ocular. It presents, as Michael North has pointed out, a visual realization of the rhythm of a film projector when Charlie, passed through the mechanisms of a machine, looks like a strip of film.[44] The reverse motion photography however, which enables Charlie to be "spat out", displays an editorial skill in rewinding the visual, in providing a counter rhythm to that machine's forward drive.[45] Avant-garde writers had already isolated this syncopated element as the essence of film comedy; Antonin Artaud wrote in 1933, 'I believe that the humour of the cinema arises partly from this security regarding a background rhythm on which are superimposed (in comic films) all the fantasies of movement that is more or less irregular or vehement.'[46] In *Modern Times* this irregularity, the unexpected deviation from an apparently predictable path so vital to comedy, is redirected towards a wider comment on the age. It pitches fluidity of movement and human gestures against the mechanical just as Chaplin does *throughout* his career, with a different imperative. Now no longer a playful, inquisitive exploration of film practice, Chaplin's self-reflexive theorizing is transferred to a narrative arena in which a mechanical mono-directional drive governs not just film, but life itself.

Charlie's status as neither wholly human nor object – his particular *hybridity* – is a version of what Bergson called the 'mechanical encrusted on the living'.[47] Charlie's repetitive gestures in the factory, imitating monotonous bolt tightening, exemplifies this, his mechanical angularity likened to the movement of the pistons on the production line itself, and his constant speed to the enormous rotating wheel in the background. Rather than remaining static, the camera pans the whole factory before closing on a medium shot of

---

[44] Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 186.

[45] Not the first time Chaplin exploits the medium to display impossible visual feats; in *Pay Day* (April 1922, First National) he uses reverse motion photography to catch bricks.

[46] "The Premature Old Age of the Cinema", in Abel II, pp. 122-125, p. 124.

[47] Bergson, p. 37.

Charlie, connecting him with the movements of the whole factory. It then moves along the production line *with* Charlie as he fails to tighten bolts fast enough.[48] Crossing the factory imbued with the vibrations from the machine, Charlie's hands and arms move back and forth, unable to snap out of his automaton state. Yet movement displays a very different kind of rhythm when Charlie's breakdown means he dances through the factory with balletic, sweeping curves, cutting across the straight lines and angles of the factory. He displays what Susan McCabe has called a 'bodily forgetfulness',[49] an ability to switch from automated movement to a hypnotic (because fantastical) balletic one. While, as I have shown, this juxtaposition is common in the earlier films, in *Modern Times* it becomes something less of an anarchic, unmotivated metamorphosis, and more an explosive climax to the human-machine interaction. In both this film and *Behind the Screen* for example, Charlie moves a lever back and forth – in the former to stop the factory machine, in the latter to open a film-set trapdoor. Both have the same kick of the heel, the same gleeful grin and the same pause for the camera, but the Charlie of *Modern Times* is a saboteur, destroying the machine which has unhinged him. The fluid movements of this dance, in the context of the factory, symbolize not childlike playfulness, but mental breakdown: the smooth connected lines of a carefree dance used to represent the interior of a man shocked by the full effects of the unforgiving machine.

Encrusted with the mechanical Charlie is part-human, part-machine, but it is *Modern Times*'s ability to present both simultaneously, to present inversions of man and machine at every possible moment, that aligns it with the earlier films as formal commentary. The impish Charlie makes himself into a devil with spanner ears, and chases his fellow workers around the factory, squirting them with an oil can and so exposing the fact that they have, as North puts it, ‘relinquish[ed] their humanity in the face of an apparatus’.[50] An identical oil can loosens Charlie’s elbows in *Behind the Screen*, and, even more comically, silences his squeaky shoes in *Pay Day*. Here, its role is more tragic than comic, choking and blinding the workers with the food of the machine.

---

[48] The comic element of his inability to keep up with the machine is more fully realized in such films as *The Floorwalker* (May 1916, Mutual) with a mischievous escalator, and *One AM* (August 1916, Mutual) with a clock pendulum that repeatedly knocks out Chaplin playing an inebriated gentleman.

[49] McCabe, p. 81.

Modern Times was the last film in which the tramp would appear; walking towards the camera in the film’s closing scene, he re-enters the lens from which he was born, at the same time that Chaplin finally got his films to talk. It was the work in which Chaplin’s theoretical excursions went beyond film technique into a narrative of modernity itself, where a man produced in silence is thrust into a world in which rapid movement is not merely playful and anarchic, but threatening and disorientating. Such experimentation makes Chaplin, defined through Clair’s ‘*spirit of curiosity*’, part of a film avant-garde. “You see”, Chaplin said in an interview in 1920, “I am a being made inside out and upside down. When I turn my back on you in the screen you are looking at something as expressive as a face.”[51] He invites an audience to *view* him; directing and working in film, he was the subject of his own art and a critical commentary on it, truly self-reflexive. Hybrids of human and object, a fluid and not always clear transition between the two, and a thorough scrutiny of camera technology in the silent era, provide Chaplin’s films with a comic counter rhythm to cinematic realism and the relentless forward movement of camera and projector. Such commentaries in his earlier films with Keystone, Essanay and Mutual, inquire into the nature of cinematic art; when carried into *Modern Times*, abstraction becomes reality post-Depression. Synchronized sound, synecdoche for many of the European avant-garde for rapid industrialization, is scrutinized by Chaplin for its threat to his own gestural art, and for its wider significance in a quickly mechanizing world. When asked about ‘‘talking films’ and coloured films’ still only possibilities in 1925, Chaplin called them ‘distortions’ adding, ‘[w]hy, we lose half our quality if we lose our limitations!’[52] Sound, like all technology, drastically redefines the parameters of life. The ‘limitations’ of silent film shapes art and its meaning, defining cinema’s scope.

---

[50] North (2009), p. 186.
[51] Interviewed by Benjamin de Casseres, “The Hamlet-Like Nature of Charlie Chaplin”, for the *New York Times Book Review and Magazine* (12 Dec. 1920), reproduced in *Charlie Chaplin: Interviews* ed. Kevin J. Hayes, (Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2005), pp. 46-50, p. 49.

---

[52] Interviewed by Robert Nichols, “Future of the Cinema: Mr. Charles Chaplin” for the *Times* (3 Sept. 1925), reproduced in Hayed (ed.), pp. 80-83, p. 82.

Filmography:

At Keystone – January-December 1914

Making a Living, dir. Henry Lehrman, February 1914

Kid Auto Races at Venice, dir. Lehrman, February 1914

A Film Johnnie, supervised by Mack Sennett, March 1914

The Masquerader, dir. and written by Charles Chaplin, August 1914

At Essanay – February 1915 – May 1916

From this point, all directed, written by and starring Chaplin

His New Job, February 1915

The Tramp, April 1915

Work, June 1915

A Night in the Show, November 1915

At Mutual – May 1916 – October 1917

The Floorwalker, May 1916

One A.M., August 1916

The Pawnshop, October 1916

Behind the Screen, November 1916

Easy Street, January 1917

At First National – January 1918 – July 1922

Shoulder Arms, October 1918

Pay Day, April 1922

The Pilgrim, February 1923

United Artists

The Circus, January 1928

City Lights, February 1931

Modern Times, February 1936

The Great Dictator, October 1940

Ballet mécanique, Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger, 1924

Bibliography

Primary:

Abel, R., *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939* vols. I and II, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988)

Aragon, L., "Du Décor", (1918), in Abel I, pp. 165-168.

Artaud, A., "Cinéma et réalité", (1927), in Abel I, pp. 410-412.

---------- "The Premature Old Age of the Cinema", (1933), in Abel II, pp. 112-125.

Bergson, H., *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* ed. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell, (London: MacMillan and Co., 1911)

Casseres, B. de, "The Hamlet-Like Nature of Charlie Chaplin", *New York Times Book Review and Magazine* (12 Dec 1990), p. 5, reprinted in Hayes (ed.), pp. 46-50.

Chaplin, C., *My Autobiography* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964)

---------- *My Life in Pictures* (London: Peerage, 1985)

---------- *My Trip Abroad* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1922)

Clair, R., *Reflections on the Cinema* trans. V. Traill, (London: William Kimber, 1953)

---------- "Rhythm", (1925), in Abel I, pp. 368-370.

De Baroncelli, J., "Pantomime, musique, cinéma", (1915), in Abel I, pp. 125-128.

Delluc, L., *Charlie Chaplin* trans. H. Miles, (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd., 1922)

Dulac, G., "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema", (1924), in Abel I, pp. 305-314.

Eliot, T. S., "Dramatis Personae", *The Criterion* Vol. 1, No. 3, (Apr 1923), pp. 303-306.

Fondane, B., "From Silent to Talkie: The Rise and Fall of the Cinema", (1930), in Abel II, pp. 45-55.

Gance, A., "Images of Yesterday, Voices of Tomorrow", (1930), in Abel II, pp. 41-42.

Hayes, K. J. (ed.), *Charlie Chaplin Interviews* (Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2005)

Kracauer, S., "Silent Film Comedy" (1951), *American Writings: Essays on Film and Popular Culture* ed. J. von Moltke and K. Rawson, (London: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 213-217.

---------- “Why France Liked Our Films” in *American Writings* pp. 33-40.

Nichols, R., “Future of the Cinema: Mr. Charles Chaplin”, *Times* (3 Sept 1925), p. 13, reprinted in Hayes (ed.), pp. 80-83.

Seldes, G., *The 7 Lively Arts* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2001)

Soupault, P., “Note I sur le cinéma” (1918), in Abel I, pp. 142-143.

Vogdes, W., “Charlie Chaplin: Rather a Quiet Little Guy Who Takes His Pantomimic Art Seriously”, *New York Tribune Sunday* (30 Dec 1917), p. 8, reprinted in Hayes (ed.), pp. 27-32.

Secondary:

Abel, R., and R. Altman (eds.), *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001)

Andrew, D., and H. Joubert-Laurencin (eds.), *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Calhoon, K. S., “Blind Gestures: Chaplin, Diderot, Lessing”, *MLN* Vol. 115, No. 3, German Issue (Apr. 2000), pp. 381-402.

Conrad, P., *Modern Times, Modern Places* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999)

Danius, S., *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002)

Delson, S., *Dudley Murphy: Hollywood Wild Card* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)

Denby, D., “Modern Times”, *Film Comment* Vol. 8, No. 3, Chaplin Issue, (Sept/Oct 1972), pp. 19-20.

Donald, J., “Jazz Modernism and Film Art: Dudley Murphy and *Ballet mécanique*”, *Modernism/Modernity* Vol. 16, No. 1, (Jan 2009), pp. 25-49.

Fack, R., “Bazin’s Chaplin Myth and the Corrosive Lettrists” in Andrew and Joubert-Laurencin (eds.), pp. 246-253.

Flom, E., *Chaplin in the Sound Era: An Analysis of the Seven Talkies* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 1997)

Freeman, J., “Bridging Purism and Surrealism: The Origins and Production of Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique*”, in *Dada and Surrealist Film* ed. R. E. Kuenzli, (New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1987), pp. 28-45.

Gordon, R. B., "From Charcot to Charlot: Unconscious Imitation and Spectatorship in French Cabaret and Early Cinema", *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 27, No. 3, (Spring 2001), pp. 515-549.

Gunning, T., "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity", available at http://chaplin.bfi.org.uk/programme/conference/pdf/tom-gunning.pdf

Kamin, D., "Who is This Man? (Who Looks Like Charlie Chaplin)" in *Chaplin: The Dictator and the Tramp* ed. D. Kamin, H. Mehran and F. Scheide, (London: BFI, 2004), pp. 5-12.

Kerr, W., *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975)

Kosinski, D., "Léger, 1911-1924: A Language for the Modern World" in *Fernand Léger, 1911-1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1994), pp. 17-27.

Kuriyama, C. Brown, "Chaplin's Impure Comedy: The Art of Survival", *Film Quarterly* Vol. 45, No. 3, (Spring 1992), pp. 26-38.

Lawder, S. D., *The Cubist Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 1975)

Louvish, S., *Chaplin: The Tramp's Odyssey* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)

---------- *Keystone: The Life and Clowns of Mack Sennett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003)

Maland, C. J., *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989)

Mast, G., *The Comic Mind: Comedy at the Movies* (London: New English Library, 1973)

McCabe, S., *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Mellen, J., *Modern Times* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006)

Neibaur, J. L., "Chaplin at Essanay: Artist in Transition", *Film Quarterly* Vol. 54, No. 1, (Autumn 2000), pp. 23-25.

North, M., *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

---------- *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Paraskeva, A., "Wyndham Lewis vs Charlie Chaplin", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* Vol. 43, No. 3, (July 2007), pp. 223-234.

Raynauld, I., "Dialogues in Early Silent Screenplays: What Actors Really Said", in Abel and Altman (eds.), pp. 69-78.

Robinson, D., *Charlie Chaplin: The Art of Comedy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996)

---------- *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983)

Sarris, A., *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996)

Saunders, T., *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany* (California: University of California Press, 1994)

Simmons, S., “Chaplin Smiles on the Wall: Berlin Dada and Wish-Images of Popular Culture”, *New German Critique* No. 84 (Autumn 2001), pp. 3-34.

Stewart, G., “Modern Hard Times: Chaplin and the Cinema of Self-Reflection”, *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 3, No. 2, (Winter 1976), pp. 295-314.

Trotter, D., *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007)

Vance, J., *Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003)