

The Chaplin Machine

Slapstick, Fordism and the
Communist Avant-Garde

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Americanism and Fordism – and Chaplinism

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Constructing The Chaplin Machine: The Constructivist International Encounters the American Comedians

If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large – tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character – one also has to recognise that the same technologisation has created the possibility of psychic immunisation against such psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such pre-emptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilisation. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. Their forerunner was the figure of the eccentric. He was the first to inhabit the new fields of action opened up by film – the first occupant of the newly built house. This is the context in which Chaplin takes on historical significance.

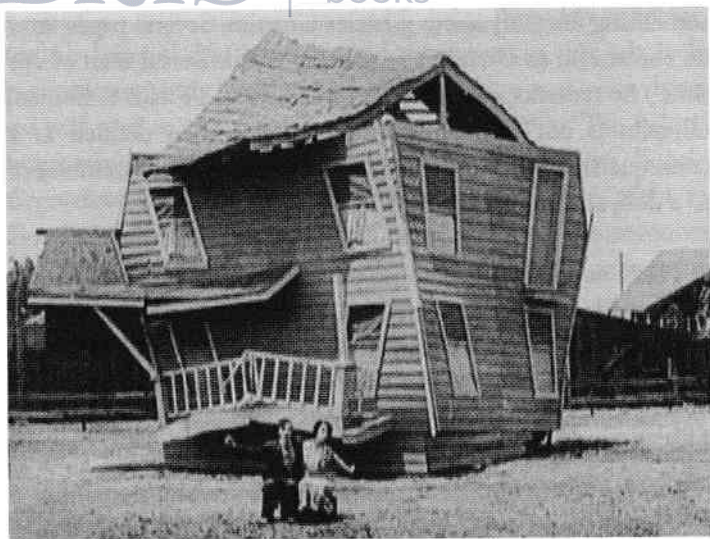
Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', 1936¹

For Walter Benjamin, the new landscape of the 'Second Industrial Revolution', with its mass production factories, new means of transport and communication, and its increased geographical spread and its concentration of population and

labour, is incarnated as a ‘newly built house’ – but a newly built house which, we can expect, resembles the theatrical constructions of Vesnin and Popova, or, as we shall soon see, of Buster Keaton – a house full of trapdoors, mass-produced, jerry-built or prefabricated, but with a new spatial potential, where its multiple pitfalls can be faced without incurring real pain, real physical damage – traversed, if not transcended. The person that can live in it is the Soviet figure of the Eccentric, who has adapted himself to the precipitous new landscape, and has learned to laugh at it; in turn the audience, who may well live in these new houses too, learn to live in them in turn. To get some notion of what the newly built house is like, we could turn to the one in Buster Keaton’s *One Week* (1920): a prefabricated house whose pieces are assembled in the wrong order, which is alternately dragged along a road and knocked down by a train, but which in between provides a series of vivid and joyous surprises for its inhabitants and the audience. Alternatively, it could be like the house in Lev Kuleshov’s Americanist gold-rush melodrama *By The Law* (1926), another minimal, wooden construction placed in the barren Western expanse, which begins as a sweet petit-bourgeois homestead but soon becomes consecutively an execution chamber and a flooded, marooned wreck, left desolate and hopelessly bleak.

Comic Anti-Humanism

According to Benjamin, the Eccentric is Chaplin. But what sort of a man can live in this new house? Is Chaplin a man at all? In *Movies for the Millions*, a 1937 study of the popular consumption of cinema, the critic Gilbert Seldes made the observation, in the context of a discussion of the comic film, that there was



Buster Keaton's newly built house



A house stranded, in Lev Kuleshov's By The Law

something uncanny about Charles Chaplin. Several pages after an encomium to Chaplin's genius (as 'the universal man of our time') he remarks, almost as an aside, '(W.C.) Fields is human. Chaplin is not'. Chaplin's inhumanity is then defined as a consequence of this universalism, combined with a resemblance to a doll, an automaton.

He is not [human] because perfection is not human and Chaplin achieves perfection. A French critic has said that in his early works Chaplin presented a marionette and in his later masterpieces endowed that marionette with a soul. That is one way of putting it. It is also true that he created a figure of folklore – and such figures, while they sum up many human attributes, are far beyond humanity themselves.²

This provides an interesting contrast with the more familiar idea of Chaplin as a mawkish sentimentalist. 'Chaplin' is not a human being, and is not a realistically depicted subject – he is both machine and archetype. In this he serves as an obvious paradigm for the avant-garde. In his earlier films (principally those made for the Essanay, Mutual and First National studios in the late 1910s, before the character of the 'little Tramp' was finalised, humanised) 'Chaplin' is involved, largely, in everyday situations, albeit in dramatic versions. He is a cleaner in a bank, he is a stroller in a park, he is a petty criminal, he is pawning all his possessions. This universal everyday is made strange, through use of the accoutrements of the everyday for purposes other than those intended, and through the peculiarly anti-naturalistic movements of Chaplin's own body. Chaplin wrote the preface to *Movies for the Millions* (where he uses the opportunity to denounce the Hays code), so we can assume

he had no particular problem with being branded inhuman (or sur-human). Yet however odd they seem in this relatively mainstream study, Seldes' observations were not new. Here we will turn to the avant-garde takes on Chaplin. The field is huge, ranging from El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg's *Veshch-Gegenstand-Objet* to Iwan Goll, from Erwin Blumenfeld to Fernand Léger; but here we will concentrate on the accounts of Viktor Shklovsky, Oskar Schlemmer, the Soviet magazine *Kino-Fot* and Karel Teige.

The reception of Chaplin by the Soviet and Weimar avant-garde from the early 1920s onwards³ hinges precisely on a dialectic of the universal and the machinic. Viktor Shklovsky edited a collection of essays on Chaplin in Berlin in 1922, and in *Literature and Cinematography*, published in the USSR the following year, he devotes a chapter to Chaplin; in fact, he is the only 'cinematographer' mentioned by name in this dual study of literature and film. Shklovsky describes this early use of multiple identities as 'a manifestation of the need to create disparities, which compels a fiction writer to turn one of his images into a permanent paragon (a yardstick of comparison) for the entire work of art.'⁴ In this sense, then, Chaplin's universalism would seem to be a means of enabling the other characters, or the events in the film, to take place, giving them centre stage. This doesn't at all tally with the idea of Chaplin as unique 'star', and clearly suggests Shklovsky was only familiar with the short films preceding the feature *The Kid* (1921), where the tramp character emerged fully developed. The remarks that follow, however, are more insightful:

Chaplin is undoubtedly the most cinematic actor of all. His scripts are not written: they are created during the shooting [...] Chaplin's gestures and films are conceived

not in the word, nor in the drawing, but in the flicker of the gray-and-black shadow [. . .] he works with the cinematic material instead of translating himself from theatrical to film language.⁵

Chaplin is immanent to cinema, and this is what makes him interesting for Shklovsky's purposes: formulating a theory unique to film as an art form, disdaining the 'psychological, high society film'⁶ which merely imposes theatre upon a new, radically different art. Chaplin moves in a new way, through a new space.

Shklovsky's short discussion of Chaplin includes two observations which, as we will see, are common in the avant-garde's reception of his work, which are to do with how the body of the Chaplin-machine moves through cinematic space. First, again, we have Chaplin as machine, something about which Shklovsky is initially rather tentative: 'I cannot define right now what makes Chaplin's movement comical – perhaps the fact that it is mechanised.' Similarly, this movement – mechanised or not – is something which immediately sets him apart from the other protagonists in the films, which marks him out from the ordinary run of humanity. 'Chaplin's ensemble moves differently than its leader.' Shklovsky claims also that Chaplin is an artist who bares his devices, something that would be picked up over a decade later in Brecht's 'V-Effects of Chaplin'.⁷ More specifically, a baring of the 'purely cinematic essence of all the constituents in his films' occurs. This is done partly through the avoidance of intertitles (and, he notes, one never sees Chaplin move his lips to simulate speech), and partly through a series of devices physical or technical: 'falling down a manhole, knocking down objects, being kicked in the rear'. So, in Shklovsky's brief, early discussion of Chaplin we find three

principal elements which are usually ascribed to the products of the avant-garde: a sort of impersonal universalism, a human being who isn't a 'subject', and an alien element thrown into the everyday; a mechanisation of movement; and the baring of technical devices.

An instructive example of this correspondence being put to use, although not a cinematic one, can be found in the Bauhaus master Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, which shows the influence of these three elements: figures which, as in the *Commedia dell'arte*, are (to put it in Eisenstein's terms) 'types', not subjects; a focus on mechanisation (here taken much further, with the costumes seemingly borrowing from the forms of ball-bearings, lathes, spinning tops and other toys); and an acting style which makes the construction of gesture obvious, rather than concealed. It is unsurprising, then, that Schlemmer can be found making similar remarks about Chaplin. In a Diary entry of September 1922, written while formulating the *Triadic Ballet*, he writes of a preference for 'aesthetic mummerly' as opposed to the 'cultic soul dance' of communitarian, ritualistic forms of dance. Schlemmer argues for an aesthetic of artifice and mechanised movement:

The theatre, the world of appearances, is digging its own grave when it tries for verisimilitude: the same applies to the mime, who forgets that his chief characteristic is his artificiality. The medium of every art is artificial, and every art gains from recognition and acceptance of its medium. Heinrich Kleist's essay *Über das Marionettentheater* offers a convincing reminder of this artificiality, as do ETA Hoffmann's *Fantasiestücke* (the perfect machinist, the automata). Chaplin performs wonders when he equates complete inhumanity with artistic perfection.⁸