

# HIP CHAPLIN: SUPERFICIAL NOTES ON CHARLIE

M I C H A E L F O U R N I E R

CHAPLIN'S TRAMP IS OFTEN REDUCED TO THE GLYPHIC SILHOUETTE of a derby hat floating above the square patch of a black mustache, an image that at one time virtually everyone in the world could recognize. Young people today who have never seen a silent film (much less one in black and white) can still identify this image as Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin's tramp character, Charlie, was no mere emblem, but a remarkably complex creation that underwent considerable evolution during the twenty-five or so years when he was virtually the only character the actor portrayed. One can interpret that evolution in a variety of ways, foregrounding Chaplin's artistic growth, political consciousness, or his response to audience expectations, but throughout that evolution Charlie remained always an outsider, operating on the fringes of society, militating against its prevailing norms even as he sometimes took advantage of them. Unlike Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, or Harry Langdon—each his own variety of Everyman seeking and ultimately suited for success in a conventional social order—Charlie is continually engaged in critique, parody, and appropriation of that society, a society from which both Charlie and his creator were marginalized.

In this and other respects, Chaplin's tramp character represents a prototype of the hipster as characterized by Norman Mailer in "The White Negro," and it may be worth pointing out at the outset that, while Mailer never mentions Chaplin in his essay, he took great pride in a friendship with Chaplin that dated back to 1953. The two regularly attended parties together and played tennis together during Mailer's stint in Hollywood. Near the end of his life, Mailer claimed that he had only met four geniuses in person: Ezra Pound, Muhammed Ali, Fidel Castro, and Charlie Chaplin (Lennon 264).

In “Hipster and Beatnik,” his footnote to “The White Negro,” Mailer observes that “A hipster as opposed, Mailer argues, to the slovenly and awkward beatnik, moves like a cat, slow walk, quick reflexes; he dresses with a flick of chic; if his dungarees are old, he turned the cuffs at a good angle” (373). The jitteriness of silent film memories aside—they run much more smoothly than we recall—it is easy to see these characteristics of the hipster in Chaplin’s quick-witted tramp, whose movements are leisurely, precise, and even elegant when he’s not being chased, and who rarely passes up the opportunity to adjust his bedraggled wardrobe in a mirror, or to adorn it stylishly with a flower. This hipster quality persists through the naive innocent of the *The Gold Rush*, the resourceful and responsible father in *The Kid*, the selfless idealist of *City Lights*, the sympathetic, unwitting radical of *Modern Times*, and the graceful Jewish barber in *The Great Dictator*. These and most versions of Charlie are outcasts from a world they nonetheless seek to refashion subjectively for themselves. And there is more than a touch of Dada in their efforts to do so, as in *The Gold Rush*, where Charlie eats a boiled shoe with the greatest aplomb, in *City Lights* where he is first revealed curled asleep in the arms of a public statue at its unveiling, or in *Modern Times* where having been subsumed and regurgitated by a machine, he begins adjusting a coworker’s buttons and nose with a wrench. Unable to integrate into society of which he longs to be a part, Charlie, like the hipster, must turn its outward conventions into his own in subjective acts of necessity and imagination. As Lisa Stein Haven has argued, these are the precise qualities that attracted the Beat Generation writers, who saw in the tramp an affirmation of life over the deadening and stultifying conformities of post-war American society. Writers like Bob Kaufman, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and above all, Lawrence Ferlinghetti found in Chaplin a model for the “poetic madman” rootless and unfettered. Ferlinghetti, who under an imprint named after a Chaplin film published “The White Negro” in an iconic edition, would, as Haven observes, “equate the poet with both Socrates’s gadfly, an enemy of the state, and Chaplin’s Little Tramp,” and his famous poem, “Constantly Risking Absurdity” specifically references Chaplin’s last completely silent film *The Circus*. In his 1977 elegy for Chaplin, “Adieu a Charlot,” Ferlinghetti would succinctly articulate the importance of Chaplin to the Beat movement:

Chaplin is dead but I'd wear his bowler  
 Having outlived all our myths but his  
 The myth of the pure subjective. (qtd. in Haven)

Implicit in that myth is the existential experience that Mailer identifies as the “burning consciousness of the present, exactly that incandescent consciousness which the possibilities within death has opened” (Mailer 342).

This consciousness does not entirely exclude convention, borne as it is of desire. Malaquais affirms in his critique of “The White Negro” that “Hip, says Mailer truly, Hip wants love, wants peace in a nice kitchenette, with a white apron around his girl’s waist” (Malaquais 362). This is, of course, precisely the dream Chaplin envisions for Charlie in *Modern Times*, except that in Chaplin’s dreamy version, as Mailer certainly knew, a cow can be summoned to the kitchen when milk is needed. Similarly, in *The Kid*, Charlie seeks to realize some conventional domesticity for the child he has adopted. He is sweet, really, this resourceful character who looks at the world from the outside in—“angel-headed,” if you will. And Malaquais, in his reply to Mailer, fairly describes Charlie’s worldview when he writes that “there is hardly a hipster alive who doesn’t long to conform (like his extreme representative, the psychopath, he is always a case of a frustrated conformist)” (361).

There is more than a hint of the psychopath in Charlie’s appearances in the Keystone and early essay shorts of the mid-to-late nineteen-teens. The version of Charlie at large in these films can be startling when compared with the more familiarly sweet iterations of the 1920s and 1930s. Chaplin’s first appearance as Charlie in 1914’s “Mabel’s Strange Predicament” finds him unappealingly drunk in a hotel lobby, where he makes advances to several women. Later, he happens upon Mabel Normand, accidentally locked out of her room in a hallway of the hotel, and the first of Charlie’s many lecherous chases ensues. Charlie’s next film, “Kid Auto Races in Venice” from the same year finds him disrupting a cameraman’s attempts to film a soapbox derby by entering the shot through various ruses, in the course of which, as Bazin notes, “he bites the nose of an inquisitive bystander completely without the slightest warning” (111). Moreover, the film finds Charlie constantly acknowledging the audience directly, breaking coolly through the fourth wall (as he will continue to do through

the 1950s), working from the margins to militate against that—whatever it is—of which he cannot be part. In virtually every single one of his one and two-reel early shorts, Charlie is an independent, narcissistic, disruptive force, impish, selfish, often frankly cruel and priapic, driven by pure id and more often than not, in one way or another, on the run, untethered, free.

Charlie's reaction to the society he views from the outside is often one of violence—often malicious or calculating, sometimes unwitting, but always seeking transcendence in a release of energy. While Charlie often takes action against authority figures (to say nothing of husbands and boyfriends) he does so not merely to redress an injustice, nor to acquire something, but often simply because he can, because the act and its accomplishment are the closest he can come, certainly on film, to orgasm. "Orgasm," Mailer writes of the psychopathic Hipster, "is his therapy . . . [but] in this search, the psychopath becomes an embodiment of the extreme contradictions of the society which formed his character, and the apocalyptic orgasm often remains as remote as the Holy Grail, for there are clusters and nests and ambushes of violence in his own necessities" (347). In 1916's "The Rink," for example, he claims a skating rink as his own arena for physical release, driving other skaters to the margins, terrorizing others less agile than he, not out of calculated malice but out of sheer exuberant physicality. If violence befalls those who encounter Charlie, whose grace transcends boundaries we must ourselves observe, he nonetheless achieves the kind of hipster transcendence, the mystic end of hipsterism that Mailer sees as essential (although Malaquais dismisses it). "Like children," Mailer asserts, "hipsters are fighting for the sweet" (349).

The impishness and self-absorption of the tramp became less pronounced as Chaplin gained more control and sought to sustain the character over more ambitious narrative arcs. The world did not treat Charlie any better in films like *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush*, *City Lights*, and *Modern Times*, but Charlie, although still at the fringe of society, rebelled against it less though it occasionally drove him mad, sought companionship more than mere gratification, and became unrelentingly optimistic. Twenty years later, in *Modern Times*, blindfolded and skirting an apocalyptic precipice after hours in a deserted department store, he shows off for a girl. This is the plucky, sentimental Charlie that we remember, dissolving into a heart-breaking smile at the end of *City Lights*, or walking away from us into the

distance with Paulette Goddard at the end of *Modern Times*, much as he simply walked away from us alone at the end of his last true silent film in 1928, *The Circus*.

In one sense, the redemptive end of *Modern Times* was the end of Charlie. But in 1940 *The Great Dictator* (Chaplin's first all-talking film) would bifurcate his tramp into the film's two principal characters—the sweet, guileless Jewish Barber (essentially the tramp, but for his integration into social life of the ghetto), and the megalomaniacal dictator, Adenoid Hynkel. This film, while moderately successful, led to some trouble for Chaplin with its strong anti-fascist, pro-equality sentiments, explicitly expressed in a five-minute speech at the end which found him breaking not only the fourth wall, but breaking character entirely. He would be publicly disparaged in the American press as a Communist (which he never was, despite left-leaning sentiments) and in 1947 Chaplin would be investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee on allegations that he was, among other things, a communist sympathizer who had been “prematurely critical of Adolf Hitler.” It was no coincidence that a few months prior to those allegations, Chaplin released *Monsieur Verdoux*, a vicious satire on capitalism whose main character was a dandy unrecognizable to fans of Charlie. Gone were the too-small vest, the too-big trousers, the bowler and the toothbrush mustache, replaced by bespoke suits, a homburg, and a neatly trimmed pencil mustache. Far from silent, he is a smooth talker, quick-witted, quoting Schopenhauer, and devastating in his wit. He is wealthy, invested in the stock market, and an incredibly adept seducer of women—wealthy women whom he marries and kills in order to make a living. He does this to support a wife and child whom he scarcely sees, who in some degree represent that hipster's pipe-dream of family. As Andre Bazin observes, “There is no feature of the former character that is not turned inside out like the fingers of a glove.” Bazin's metaphor dovetails nicely with Caroline Bird's observation in a passage Mailer chose as the epigraph to “The White Negro”: “The hipster,” she writes, “is an enfant terrible turned inside out.” And Verdoux is a hipster, what Mailer calls, “a philosophical psychopath, a man interested not only in the dangerous imperatives of his psychopathy but in codifying, at least for himself, the suppositions on which his inner universe is constructed” (342). And indeed, in his continual and darkly creative pursuit of his dream family, Verdoux exemplifies what Mailer identifies as a “burning consciousness of

the present, exactly that incandescent consciousness which the possibilities within death has opened for" him (342).

Which is why, as much as people loved Charlie, they hated Verdoux. One could always identify with the anarchic tramp, even when he was being nasty. But this was a calm, cool, attractive mass murderer whose defense of his actions was a razor-sharp formal accusation no one wanted to hear. "As for being a mass killer," Verdoux says, "does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and little children to pieces, and done it very scientifically? As a mass killer, I am an amateur by comparison." The Breen office, which determined standards of decency for American films between 1934 and 1955, approved that speech only after deleting lines that would have more directly confronted the audience, and not with stirring words of peace and brotherhood. Breen demanded Chaplin cut these lines: "To be shocked by the nature of my crime is nothing but a pretense . . . a sham! You wallow in murder . . . you legalize it . . . you adorn it with gold braid! You celebrate it and parade it! Killing is the enterprise by which your System prospers, upon which your industry thrives" (Robinson 530–531)! Enterprise, system, prosperity, and industry—these are concepts that distill the values that Verdoux mocks as his story ends in 1937, on the eve of Europe's entry into a war that saw killing industrialized and out of which emerged the hipster. For the Breen office, the lines in question were simply too much.

Even in bowdlerized form, Verdoux's final statement, registered in 1947, is a prophecy fulfilled, and his defense an accusation. Audiences had no desire to root for a hero who is a sociopathic murderer, particularly one so charming. Audiences do relish a good villain, and the cinematic example of Hannibal Lecter indicates that even the savor of outright cannibalism cannot overpower this relish. But a villain/hero who implicates one not only in his own murders but the Holocaust is something else entirely, and the Catholic League had the film pulled from theaters within weeks. Chaplin was hitting too close to home in this strange new guise.

It was not so strange that Jean Malaquais could not find in Verdoux a fair riposte to Mailer's essay. He identifies in Mailer's essay the presumption that the hipster is the conformist in reverse. If we accept, he reasons, Mailer's argument that man must live with death, then one must live with death and

“divorce oneself from society.” But in doing that, the hipster accepts the terms of death “for his private use” and thereby

conforms nice and clean . . . at the avant-garde of conformity. ‘Death you want?’ says Hip to society. ‘Good, death there’ll be!’ And there he goes, the small entrepreneur in death competing with industrial death. One Mr. Verdoux once made a superb parody of our death-bent hipster. (362)

To be sure, Verdoux’s defense—if one can call it that—is not that he is exempt from society’s rules, but is simply conforming to them. He is no outsider, but the hipster in reverse, or to use Bazin’s metaphor, the Tramp turned inside out.

As Lisa Stein Haven observes, Jack Kerouac, the noted Eisenhower Republican who celebrated non-conformity, was among those who took notice of Chaplin’s “willingness in that film to not conform to his beloved Little Tramp’s known attributes and assume the role of a killer.” Haven cites the 52nd Chorus of *Mexico City Blues*:

I’m crazy everywhere  
like Charlie Chaplin  
dancing in moral turpitude  
playing Bluebeard killer  
on satin asskiss couches  
with itchy mustache  
so well known to dreamers (Kerouac 52)

Kerouac is on to something here, but Bazin sees more deeply in his essay, “The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux.” Among the victims in *Monsieur Verdoux* is the Tramp himself, whom society has killed. How can the Tramp exist in a world that doesn’t really want to hear him when he would speak, that will commodify death through military-industrial means? Monsieur Verdoux rises, so to speak, from the Tramp’s ashes, hip, cool, and, as Malaquais observes, “death-bent.” At one point in the film, one of Verdoux’s wives (played by Martha Raye, stealing each of her scenes with Chaplin) almost catches him in the act of trying to drown her. He conceals this effort by curling innocently and quickly into a ball, flashing the Tramp’s exuberant

grin. Blink, and you miss it. But then he does it again. The example that Bazin cites is far more defining of the film: in the final shot, the once agile Verdoux (that dancer “in moral turpitude”) is now stooped and limping with age, exhaustion, and the fetters that bind his ankles as he is led to the guillotine. Walking away from us thus, he moves, as Bazin puts it “with a hop, a skip, and a jump. And then comes the sublimest gag of all, unspoken and unmistakable, the gag that resolves the whole film: Charlie is Verdoux! *They’re going to guillotine Charlie*” (109). The joke Bazin sees here is a grim parody of the final uncertain yet hopeful shot of *Modern Times* now turned inside out: here the murderous protagonist is revealed as Charlie only as he walks resignedly into the certainty of death.

One of the many arguments that Mailer makes in “The White Negro” is that “The nihilism of Hip proposes . . . that every social restraint and category be removed, and the affirmation implicit in the proposal is that man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself” (354). Charlie proposed this kind of nihilism from the beginning and, through the 1930s, he created his own worlds, or at least remade this one in anima versions to what the world presented him, sometimes instinctively, sometimes with care. There was an affirmation in Charlie’s stance that man, as Mailer hopes, would not destroy himself. “The White Negro” expresses very little in the way of certainty, and any definitive argument we can ascribe to it is limited by its opening disclaimer: “Probably, we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years” (336). Such is the uncertainty in which Mailer frames his superficial notes, the kind that indeed obviates social restraints and categories. Mailer seeks the creative in these circumstances and sees, in the wake of the Holocaust and the reality of the bomb, that the creative impulse does not necessarily replace the murderous impulse, but can complement it.

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