



Citation: R. Ibarlucía (2019) Revolutionary Laughter: The Aesthetico-Political Meaning of Benjamin's Chaplin. *Aisthesis* 12(2): 135-150. doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-10732

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Revolutionary Laughter: The Aesthetico-Political Meaning of Benjamin's Chaplin

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Abstract. This paper discusses the aesthetic and political motivations of the great importance that Walter Benjamin gives to Charlie Chaplin in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935-1936). First, it proceeds to identify the main paragraphs that Benjamin devoted to Chaplin's films in the different versions of his famous essay. Then it examines Chaplin's reception in Weimar Germany both in the field of avant-garde art and that of press criticism, highlighting the philosophical, ethico-political and psychological arguments exchanged in a wide and intensive debate on the human dimension of the Tramp character. By focusing on Sigfried Kracauer's and Rudolf Arnheim's chronicles, it seeks to illustrate two approaches that are contemporaries to Benjamin's *Rückblick auf Chaplin* (1929), a brief review based on an essay written by the French surrealist poet Philippe Soupault. Lastly, it analyzes some notes on Charlot's gestuality discarded from this famous essay and a fragment in which, six years before *The Great Dictator* (1940), Benjamin compares Chaplin to Hitler.

Keywords. Film art, Chaplin's reception in Weimar Culture, German avant-garde, Humor, Hitler.

In *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935-1936), Walter Benjamin presents Charlie Chaplin as the hero of his art theory. As Fabrizio Desideri points out, he finds in Chaplin's movies «the most significant expression of his thesis about the “new form of art” that is affirmed with film and with the principle of reproductibility of image vitality whose structure it defines» (Desideri [2012]: xL)¹. In the following pages, I will intend to unravel the aesthetic and political motivations by which Benjamin attached such importance to Chaplin within the framework of the deep cultural transformations that accompany the emergence of cinema. First, I will proceed to identify the main paragraphs that Benjamin devoted

¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Any modification of existing English translations are marked [tm] = translation modified. I thank Laura Guidi for her collaboration on the final wording of this paper.

to his films in the five versions of *Das Kunstwerk* compiled in the critical edition of Benjamin's work. Then I will examine Chaplin's reception in Weimar Germany both in the field of avant-garde art and that of press criticism, highlighting the philosophical, ethico-political and psychological arguments exchanged in a wide and intensive debate on the human dimension of the Tramp character. By focusing on Sigfried Kracauer's and Rudolf Arnheim's chronicles, I will illustrate two approaches that are contemporaries to Benjamin's *Rückblick auf Chaplin* (1929), a brief review based on an essay written by the French surrealist poet Philippe Soupault, where he found relevant information later used in *Das Kunstwerk*. Lastly, I will discuss some notes on Charlot's gestuality discarded from this famous essay, and a fragment in which, six years before *The Great Dictator* (1940), Benjamin compares Chaplin to Hitler.

THE FIRST OCCUPANT OF THE MODERN STAGES

Benjamin's most famous remark on Chaplin in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* is undoubtedly that referring to the modification of mass aesthetic behavior vis a vis cinema in contrast with modern painting: «*The extremely backward attitude toward, for example, a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film*» (Benjamin [2012]: 81, 128, 187, 236-237; [1935-1938]: 116; [1938-1940]: 264). The progressive attitude toward Chaplin's is defined in terms of «an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure – pleasure in seeing and experiencing – with an attitude of “expert appraisal”»; such a fusion would be an important «index» of the social role of film, as it eliminates divergence between enjoyment and criticism, which affects the reception of traditional artworks, including those of Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism or Surrealism: «As it clearly seen in the case of painting, the more reduced the social impact of an art form, the more widely criticism and enjoyment of it diverge in the public. The conventional is uncriti-

cally enjoyed, while the truly new is criticized with aversion» (Benjamin [2012]: 81, 128-129, 187-188, 237; [1935-1938]: 116; [1938-1940]: 264).

Another comment on Chaplin appears, in the third and the fifth German versions of *Das Kunstwerk*, in an extensive footnote headed by a quote from André Breton's *Position politique du surrealism* (1935). It illustrates how traditional art forms, at certain stages in their development, strain laboriously for effects which are later effortlessly achieved by new art forms: «Before film became established, Dadaists performances sought to stir in the audience reactions in the public which Chaplin then elicited more naturally» (Benjamin [2012]: 133-134 n., 162, 241 n.; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 118; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 266).

The next assertion, removed from the fifth version, serves to exemplify Benjamin's idea of film as the paradigm of a «assembled artwork» (*montierbar Kunstwerk*): to produce a movie like *A Woman from Paris* (1923), «which is 3,000 meters long, Chaplin shot 125,000 meters of film» (Benjamin [2012]: 32, 66, 111-112, 176; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 109). Chaplin's first proper feature length film shows that a new quality of the artwork has become crucial with cinema, as an art form entirely determined by its reproducibility. This quality is «its capacity for improvement» (*Verbesserungsfähigkeit*) and places it in the opposite pole from that of the Greeks, amongst whom the sculpture was the art form which expressed the ideal of perfection and its products were literally all of a piece: «The finished film is all but a *one* shot creation; it is assembled from many images and sequences, amongst which the editor has the possibility to choose from – images that can even be improved at will from the initial take to the final cut» (*ibid.*).

One more statement about Chaplin, also eliminated in the fifth version of *Das Kunstwerk*, is connected to the representation of modern social scenarios and the notion of «optical unconscious» (Benjamin [2012]: 37-38, 83, 131, 190; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 118). Most of the aspects of reality recorded by the camera, magnifying and minimizing objects, slowing down and speeding up imag-

es, lie outside «*normal* spectrum of sense impressions», points out Benjamin: «Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams» (Benjamin [2012]: 84, 131, 190; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 118). With cinema, distorting perceptions, sadistic or masochist fantasies have become ordinary for the first time; however, this was not achieved by providing «representations of the oneiric world», but rather through the creation of «characters from the collective dream, such as the globe-encircling Mickey Mouse» (Benjamin [2012]: 84, 132, 191; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 118). The same «*technification*» that has engendered «*dangerous tensions*» in the masses has also produced «*the possibility of psychic vaccination* (psychische Impfung) *against such mass psychoses by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochist delusions prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses* (ibid. [tm])».

The laugh that these films produce, Benjamin writes in the first version of the essay, is «a revolutionary laugh» (Benjamin [2012]: 37). «Collective laughter», he points out in the following versions, «is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis [...] American slapstick comedies and Disney movies cause a therapeutic explosion of the unconscious» (*eine therapeutische Sprengung des Unbewussten*) (Benjamin [2012]: 84, 132, 191; [1935-1938]: 118 [tm]). It is no coincidence that the triumph of «eccentric films» (*Exzentrikerfilme*) dates back to the early twenties, «when the world revolution seemed possible» (Benjamin [2012]: 37). The character of the «eccentric» was their forerunner; in the new «rooms for play» (*Spielräumen*), the scopes for action and imagination opened up by film, «he was the first one to be at home: its dry dweller (*ihre Trockenwohner*)», its first occupant, says Benjamin: «In this context Chaplin has his place as historical figure (Benjamin [2012]: 84, 132-133; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 118 [tm])². The image of the Berliner

proletarian homeless, to whom the real estate speculators left to occupy a flat in a new building without paying until the plaster of the walls dried and made the house legally fit for inhabitation, replaces the no less suggestive one of the first version: the eccentric as a «professional» of the spaces originated by the camera, «where he organizes the maneuvers in which a new type of human is practiced» (Benjamin [2012]: 38)³.

GERMAN AVANT-GARDE ART AND CINEMA POETRY

Benjamin's quoted observations in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* should be seen within the broadest context of Chaplin reception in Weimar Republic. Even years after the First World War had ended his comedies were unknown, in contrast with the frenzy they caused in the most important metropolis around the world. As far as we know, the first critic to talk about Chaplin in the German press was the Berliner journalist and writer Hans Siemsen (see Hanisch [1991]: 26). In *Zwei Postkarten und ein Buch*, a chronicle published in March 1920 in the pages of *Die Weltbühne*, forum of postwar leftist intellectuals, he described Chaplin's figure from two Swiss postcards: the first one was a portrait of Charles Spencer, smiling and without makeup, whose pale dehumanized face evoked «the mask of a Chinese actor»; the second one reproduced a scene of the short film *Dog's Life* (1918), in which the character of the Tramp, with very sad eyes, big shoes and «an absolutely impossible hat», was sitting on the landing of a staircase next to his puppy (Siemsen [1920]: 84).

Siemsen asserts that he had heard much about Chaplin in Paris among the young French poets and artists, but he had no idea of his appearance. Suddenly, on a long train trip from Osnabrück to

and «field of action» and interaction in this and other texts see Hansen (2004) and (2012): 183-204.

³ On the historical figure of the *Trockenwohner*, see Grimm (1917), 22: 761, Rosenhaft (1983): 10-11, Ritter and Tenfelde (1992): 582, 617.

² For an illuminating discussion on Benjamin's literal and figurative use of the term *Spielraum* as «room for play»

Bremen in a lonely and cold third-class car, fate had placed in his hands those two photographs and «a beautiful and tremendous» book by Emmy Hennings, Hugo Ball's companion and co-founder of the Cabaret Voltaire, whose title *Gefängnis* (1919) he took as a historical metaphor of the order to which «our thought, our laughter and our language» were subjected (ibid., 87). Siemsen's intuition on the link between Chaplin and German avant-garde art had corroboration in the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe*, an «exhibition and sale» of about 200 hundred «Dadaist products» that was held from June 30 to August 25, 1920 in a Berlin gallery owned by Dr. Otto Burchard, an expert in Song period Chinese ceramics (see Herzfelde [2003]: 93). Georg Grosz has presented there two pieces alluding to Chaplin, probably the items 132 and 153 of the fair catalog: *Der Schmerz des Kronprinzen über die Fahnenflucht seines Vaters. Charlie Chaplin gewidmet* and a collage titled *Ehrenporträt von Charlie Chaplin* (see Grosz, Hausmann and Heartfield [1920]: 4; Simmons [2001]: 7, n. 19).

Maybe the first German avant-garde artist to emphatically celebrate Chaplin as an icon was the Alsatian poet and play-writer Yvan Goll. He had emigrated to Switzerland during the Great War and was friendly with the Dadaists of the Cabaret Voltaire. He lived then in Paris and, some years later, he would become a rival of André Breton's group, which also worshiped Charlot's movies, for the interpretation of the term *surréalisme* coined by Guillaume Apollinaire⁴. This «Courtelaine expressionist» – as Bertolt Brecht called him with admiration (Wackers [2004]: 54, n. 124) – wrote the essay *Apologie des Charlots*, published in *Die neue Schaubühne* in February 1920, within the framework of a series of critical texts on theater and cinema (Goll [1982]: 220-222). «To condemn war, hate the bourgeoisie, and become indignant

with corruption, is stupid», states Goll emphatically. «One cannot other than ignore them. Complain and litany, after the crime has been executed and consummated are merely good to concierges» (Goll [1982]: 220). What men and women of the new generations are expecting to arise in these times of decadence is not «the resurrected Christ proclaimed by all engraving artists, writers of manifests and supreme chiefs of the Salvation Army, but rather a fool that makes them laugh» (ibid.). It is needed «a tremendous satire, an excessively grotesque funny face that entails for us a yell of ingenuity, something that comes from childhood» (ibid.). Charlot, the little man with a little moustache, a cane and a bowler hat who smiles and makes everybody laugh from the screens, responds to that demand: «he is the greatest philosopher», «the most shameless of all contemporaries», «the genius of our times» (ibid., 221).

Goll's optimism in this defense of Chaplin contrasts with the rather somber vision that he printed in *Die Chapliniade. Eine Kinodichtung*, which appeared in Dresden in 1920, illustrated with four drawings by Fernand Léger⁵. Written in verse and prose, the plot of this cinema poem – Sabine Hake comments – «praises Chaplin as the embodiment of modernity» and «speculates on his importance as a figure of reconciliation between art and technology, high culture-educated and mass society» (Hake [1990]: 89). One day, Charlot comes out from a street poster and walks through a large metropolis that roars «with a tumult of lies, the stupidity of telephones, the craziness of telegrams» (Goll [1960]: 60; Goll [1965]: 510). With sorrow, he sees how people have become worried about banalities and that poetry has vanished from the world. To his surprise, everybody will see him as a Caesar, a prophet or demigod destined to perform «the communism of the spirit»

⁴ About this dispute, see Behar (2002): 113-130, Stubbs (1997), Ronsin (1994), Tonnet,-Lacroix (1979) and Ibarlucía (2016). On the texts Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault and Paul Éluard devoted to Chaplin in this period, I remit to Ibarlucía (2013): 82-92.

⁵ The piece was published in French with the title *La Chapliniade ou Charlot poète. Poème, drame, film*, in the July number of 1921 of «La Vie des Lettres et des Arts», and collected two years later in «Le Nouvel Orphée», as *La Chapliniade ou Charlot poète poème cinématographique*, together with four other plays (Goll [1923]: 9-41).

and «free humanity from boredom» (Goll [1960]: 61; Goll [1965]: 510). Horrified by how men have become material and their love false, Chaplin escapes to the Black Forest, where he lives in the company of a deer, surrounded by birds, writing bucolic poems with a «*verse making machine*» (Goll [1960]: 62; Goll [1965]: 512). His love words turn the deer into Reha, a beautiful young girl, but after a while she reproaches him for his sentimentalism and his «miserable hypochondria» and leaves with a hunter. «I believed in dreams:/but even the nymphs have become bourgeoisie», says Chaplin with sarcastic melancholy (Goll [1960]: 63; Goll [1965]: 513). Desperate, he tries to hang himself from a tree and, as he fails, he decides to put an end to his life by drowning in a pond. With the water to his knees, as Reha is being shot dead, he exclaims:

*Now I am poorer than the first day!
My fate trickles down me like raindrops,
My heart is frozen like a dead watch:
And that is Chaplin!
Lonelier than the others!
Europe laughs, New York laughs, and all the cities
laugh
And do not believe in my deep sorrow.
Even she, the little mother behind the curtains,
Who for more than twenty years,
Has been waiting for a letter from Charlie:
She, the only one who has never gone to the movies,
If she saw me sobbing,
She would laugh too! (Goll [1960]: 63; Goll [1965]:
513-514 [tm])*

THE PHILOSOPHER AS A COMEDIAN

Between 1921 and 1922, Chaplin's comedies, with the exception of *Shoulder Arms* (1918), whose anti-Prussian plot failed to escape German censorship, finally opened in the Weimar Republic. Siemsen then published a series of articles in *Die Weltbühne*, later collected in a book (Siemsen [1924]), in which he established the four axes of the reception of this «little and great artist», whom the Germans until that moment only knew by

hearsay, but who was already «the national hero of the rest of the world» (Siemsen [1922a]: 367). Praising Chaplin's talent as a librettist, Siemsen began by pointing that his comedies were not only the best in the cinema, but also «the first and really the only cinematographic poems» ever written (Siemsen [1922b]: 387). From a political point of view, he stated secondly, «the content of the chaplinades» was invariably the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors: «Chaplin is always the oppressed, the weak, the small, the persecuted; he is never the general, the bank director, the magistrate, the rich bourgeois, corpulent, powerful. He is always the subordinate, the prisoner, the employee, the servant of the house» (Siemsen [1922c]: 415). Third, Siemsen said that Chaplin embodied «a new type of actor, the film actor, who has basically broken with the theatrical tradition» (Siemsen [1922d]: 447). Lastly, he asserted that Chaplin had built his motion pictures with a taste, with an eye that only in Daumier, Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri Rousseau and Picasso can be trained (Siemsen [1922e]: 473) and emphasized his ability to delight ordinary people and the most refined audience alike, erasing the boundaries between art and entertainment, between high and low culture:

He destroys barriers. He makes human beings be what they should always be: human beings. He demolishes all the things that stop them from being human beings: barriers related to social status, education, upbringing, titles, hierarchy, power, lack of intelligence. This little and funny clown is the greatest thing a man can be: a world perfectioner. (ibid., 474)

Charlot's humanity and universalism was also highlighted by Kurt Tucholsky. In an article published in the «Prager Tageblatt» in July 1922, under the title *Der berühmteste Mann der Welt*, the great Berlin writer and journalist stated that Chaplin had created «a comedy of nonsense that is quite outrageous» (Tucholsky [1975]: 230). Chaplin, said Tucholsky, «has an extraordinary power of observation, a stealing eye» (ibid., 231) in order to imitate the characteristic gestures of all trades. He manages to ridicule other people by his mere

appearance: «All he has to do is come up with the little hat, with the little stick, with the little mustache, waddle on his impossible legs – and everything around is suddenly wrong, and he's right, and the whole world has become ridiculous» (ibid., 231). If Chaplin's movies are for children, they are in a much deeper sense of what is said: «the reflexive comicality» and «the funny tragicity» bring out «the child within every human being, which has remained the same for all peoples: the indestructible strength of youth»: «He represents that in the most primitive way, but genially. And he shows how ridiculous it is being an adult who takes himself seriously» (ibid.). Chaplin, «like all great comics», is a philosopher: «Do not miss to look at him. You will laugh your head off and will be grateful for that laughter as long as you live» (ibid., 232).

Edging into the philosophical implications of Chaplin's films, a considerable part of the German press argued that, in comparison to Buster Keaton, Fatty Arbuckle or Harold Lloyd, he stood out because of what Hans Pander had defined in the influent magazine "Der Bilwart" as his «human content». Thomas Saunders explains: «Some identified this human content as his support for the mass of downtrodden and oppressed; others as his exploitation of the underlying link between the tragic and the comic; others as his transcendence of the mechanical world» (Saunders [1994]: 187). The «profoundly human dimension» of the character of the Tramp served to label Chaplin's cinema and made of it «the exemplar of artistic values which antedated the motion picture, indeed which belonged by and large to a world which interwar Germans felt had been lost» (ibid.). By contrast, journalists like Kurt Pinthus, a promoter of Expressionism, and Alfred Polger, theater critic of "Die Weltbühne", rejected this humanist interpretation and refused to derive «ethical or philosophical principles» from Chaplin's movies, alleging that «their meaning lies in their meaninglessness» and the «suspension of conventional logic and morality» (ibid., 182-183). On the other hand, in the eyes of an ultraconservative critic like Michel Wilhelm, who wrote books about Rain-

er Maria Rilke and Friedrich Hölderlin, Chaplin was the demon of the Americanism that corroded Old Europe, the incarnation of moral and cultural decadence of the Western culture, «the hero of the subhuman», «a little half blood without a race» (Hake [1990]: 91).

The debate about Chaplin's comedies, which had spread to the intellectual circles in Vienna, acquires a peculiar light through a contemporary text of Sigmund Freud. In 1927, when the wave of Chaplinism was at its height, he wrote *Der Humor*, a brief essay read first by his daughter Anna at the "10. Internationales Psychoanalytischen Kongress" of Innsbruck and published months later in the "Almanach" of the Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag. Freud returns in this text to the developments of the seventh chapter of *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (1905) to lay out a hypothesis about the role of humor that connects with two Benjamin's complementary remarks in *Das Kunstwerk* that we have highlighted above: on the one hand, the analogy of the cinematographic perception and the psychotic hallucination and, on the other hand, the cathartic function of Chaplin's comedies and Walt Disney's cartoons, that is, the psychic immunization against mass psychoses, the «therapeutic explosion of the unconscious» they cause in the audience (Benjamin [2012] 16: 84, 132, 191; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 118 [tm]).

In his essay, Freud holds that humor «has not only something liberating like the joke and the comic, but something of grandeur and elevation»: its power «clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, in the victorious affirmation of the ego's invulnerability» (Freud [1991]: 385; Freud [1999]: 162). Through «the rejection of the claims of reality and the imposition of the pleasure principle», it approximates to «the regressive or reactionary processes» so extensively studied by psychopathology (Freud [1991]: 385-386; Freud [1999]: 163). Humor builds a defense system analogous to «the methods which the human psyche has deployed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer»; it emphasizes «the invincibility of the ego by the real world and victoriously maintains the pleasure prin-

ciple», without resigning the psychic health, unlike what occurs in neurosis and delirium (Freud [1991]: 386; Freud [1999]: 163 [tm]). Although these two operations may seem to be incompatible, humor combines both in such a way that the person «over-staffs» his/her super-ego and becomes dominant (Freud [1991]: 388; Freud [1999]: 165 [tm]). In other words, «*humor would be the contribution made to the comic through the mediation of the super-ego*» (ibid.). While in all other psychic fields the super-ego appears as «a severe master», it condescends here to enabling the ego to obtain a small yield of pleasure by «repudiating reality and serving an illusion» (Freud [1991]: 388-389; Freud [1999]: 166). That is why we feel humorous pleasure especially liberating and elevating. The super-ego tries to console the ego and protect it: «The main thing is the intention which humor carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people. It means: Look, here is the world that seems so dangerous. A children's game, just good to joke about!» (Freud [1991]: 389; Freud [1999]: 166, [tm])

THE MIRRORED LABYRINTH AND PLATO'S CAVERN

Before going further, I would like to focus on the texts written by two important German film critics around the time that Benjamin released his first approach to Chaplin. At the beginning of November 1926, Siegfried Kracauer published in the "Frankfurter Zeitung" a review of the *The Gold Rush* (1925). He held in it that Chaplin's film art seemed to be inspired in remote and almost secret resources. The Tramp character – pointed Kracauer establishing an analogy with Grimm brothers' *Märchen* – resembled Hans Dumb and other characters from fairy tales who are «no heroes at all» and led to the fulfillment of Lao-Tsé's proverb according to which «the world is moved by the weakest» (Kracauer [2004a]: 269). Charlot has no will and no conscious ego; he is «a man without surface», aside from social relations: «In pathological terms, this is called dissociation

of the self, schizophrenia. A hole. But out of the hole shines the pure, breakable and disconnected human good» (ibid., 269-270). Before this fragile little man, who walks scornfully on the ledge of a snowy mountain, nature's elementary violence is reversed: «Even the bear becomes friendly with him, like a fairy tale bear. His helplessness is dynamite; his comedies conquer laughs and collect more than emotion, because they move the foundations of our world» (ibid., 270)⁶.

In a second chronicle, published in February 1928, Kracauer asserted that *The Circus* (1928) had no comparison with *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin's masterpiece. The story was conventional, the dramatic resources were overused, and the screenplay moved through a comedy of errors that can barely provoke laughter. The whole merit of the film resided in the mosaic of gags it was composed of. The mirror maze scene, however, seemed highly revealing for Kracauer: persecuted through the fair by a policeman, who has mistaken him for a pickpocket, Charlot takes refuge in a labyrinth, where he is trapped among the crystals that mockingly multiply his fragmented and distorted image. According to Kracauer, Chaplin's entire film art turns around this disturbing idea: «Chaplin lives in the mirrored cabinet of the world» (Kracauer [2004b]: 33). At the end of the movie, the circus leaves and he remains seated on a box, in the middle of the abandoned ring, under the open sky: «His face is old, as it had never been seen before, old and overwhelmed. Will the mirror break into pieces? Will the nightmare ever end? Then he gets up and does a pirouette; he is a little man funny to see from behind» (ibid., 35).

In 1929, the German psychologist and historian of art Rudolf Arheim, whose book *Film als Kunst* (1932) is quoted by Benjamin in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, wrote in "Die Weltbühne" an article titled *Alte Chaplinfilme*, which offered a complementary interpretation of Chaplin's film art. «When Plato

⁶ For a complementary reading of this review in relation to Benjamin's considerations on Chaplin, see Hansen (2012): 47-48.

tells in his *Republic* the famous parable of the people who sit in a dark cave seeing in front of them only the shadows of real things», affirms Arnheim, «it is obvious that he is speaking of cinema, but he would never have dreamed that technological progress would allow the shadowy representations on the wall to take on a more real appearance than life itself» (Arnheim [1929]: 21; Arnheim [1996]: 311 [tm]). In Chaplin's movies, however, this happens in a way that is not the widely proclaimed realism. The «mythical creatures» of Chaplin's world have «mysterious occupations» that, if examined more carefully, show them to be «the occupations of everyday life, changed by a strange twist of fate into ghosts and madness» (ibid.). The simple fact that «this romantic with the nerves of a sarcastic oddball» has succeeded in conquering a planet «buzzed by radio waves and Morse signals with his extreme un-American worldview should give the apostles of "Objectivity" an occasion for reflection» (Arnheim [1929]: 21-22; Arnheim [1996]: 312-313 [tm]).

Chaplin's first movies «are fifteen years old, and nothing in them has aged except the heroine's hairdo», argues Arnheim: «They have their style, which in the history of film art will one day be called the early style [*Frühstil*] because it is shaped by a very primitive idea of the possibilities of film» (Arnheim [1929]: 22; Arnheim [1996]: 313). The majority of the good films, even the most recent ones, become quickly obsolete: the lighting and special effects, the scenography and facial expressions of the actors seem outdated. By contrast, Chaplin shows that in film, as in the other arts, «technical progress for the first time does not entail the devaluation of previous works» (ibid.). His early movies are masterpieces, «just as the frescoes of a Masaccio», which «have not lost their value because one understands better today how to draw a squatting figure» (ibid.). The most vehement development of cinema won't destroy what Charlie Chaplin, as well as Buster Keaton and other American comedians, have achieved:

In seventy years time, there will be a film museum, and film lovers will sometimes go into a cool projection room, where the best years are

stored, to see an old master verified as authentic by a report from Privy Councillor Coogan⁷, and valued at a hundred thousand marks in the art market. There they will wriggle in their seats for an hour, and then, with eyes rolling, stagger into the street like drunken ducks and then whisper each other's ears bulging ears in a perfectly synchronized and veiled voice: "No trick, an authentic Chaplin!". (Arnheim [1929]: 23; Arnheim [1996]: 314, [tm])

CHARLOT'S EXPRESSIVE WORLD

Benjamin devoted other writings to Chaplin, closely related to the developments of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, although not very much considered by the critic. The first one is a brief review, titled *Rückblick auf Chaplin*, which appeared in "Die Literarische Welt" in February 1929, a few months after the essay *Der Surrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz*⁸. Apparently polemicizing with Kracauer's conclusions about *The Circus*, Benjamin writes: «*The Circus* is the first late work (*Alterswerk*) of film art. Charlie has grown older since his last film. But he also performs that way» (Benjamin [2011]: 170; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 222 [tm]). With these ironic words, far from suggesting the aging of Chaplin's movies, Benjamin intends to exalt his expressive maturity, for «what makes this film so moving is the feeling that Chaplin, overlooking now the circle of his potential effects, is resolved to achieve his goal with them and only with them» (ibid. [tm]). The variations on his most significant subjects reach their peak in the persecution inside the mirrored labyrinth, the imitation of the automats exhibited in one of the fair stalls and Charlot's unexpected apparition, under the circus tent, during the act of magic.

⁷ Arnheim alludes to Jackie Coogan, the child star of *The Kid* (1921).

⁸ See the scheme of this review in Benjamin (1892-1940), VI: 137-138 and Benjamin (1927-1930): 199-200. About Benjamin's essay on French surrealism and its politico-historical context, allow me to refer to Ibarlucía (2017).

«The lesson and the warning that emerge from this great work» – states Benjamin at the beginning of the following paragraph – have led Philippe Soupault «to attempt the first definition of Chaplin as a historical phenomenon» (ibid.). In the November edition of 1928, the Paris review “Europe” published an essay by the surrealist writer «containing a number of ideas around which a definitive picture of the great artist will one day be able to crystallize» (ibid.). Chaplin's comicality, argues Soupault in the French text, is of a «superior essence», like the one that animated surrealism; as Henri Bergson has observed, «if the comic illusion is an oneiric illusion, if the logic of laughable is dream logic, it is expected to find in the logic of laughable all the particularities of the logic of dream» (Soupault [1928]: 392; Bergson [1917]: 192). Chaplin's humor is often attached to poetry, «daughter of dream»: «It is not only random that in almost all of his movies the main character is overcome by a dream. Also, it is difficult to separate some of Chaplin's comic findings from his poetic findings. In his films we can assist to the materialization of poetic images, eternal images that are always new» (Soupault [1928]: 392). In this sense, comments Benjamin, Soupault is right when pointing out that «Chaplin's fundamental relationship with his movies is not that of the actor at all»; following his reasoning, «it can be said that Chaplin, seen in its totality, is so little actor as the performer William Shakespeare» (Benjamin [2011]: 170; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 222 [tm]; see Soupault [1928]: 392).

The undeniable superiority of Chaplin's films, Soupault writes, is founded on the fact that they are «tinted with the poetry that we experience within ourselves without ever being aware of it» (Soupault [1928]: 392). Obviously, Benjamin points, this not only implies that Chaplin is «the author (*Dichter*) of his films *scripts*», but, in a broader sense, that he is also «the author of his films, that is to say, the *régisseur*», or, as it is literally expressed in Soupault's French text, «a director of first order» (Benjamin [2011]: 170; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 222 [tm]; Soupault [1928]: 393). This last aspect is for Benjamin of the greatest importance:

Soupault has seen that Chaplin was the first (and the Russians have followed his example) to construct a film with a theme and variations – in short, with musical composition – and that all of that stands in complete opposition to the traditional concept of suspense action. This explains why Soupault has affirmed more forcefully than anyone else that the pinnacle of Chaplin's production is recognizable in L'Opinion publique. In this film, as it is well known, he does not appear, and it was premiered in Germany with the silly title Die Nächte einer schönen Frau [The Nights of a Pretty Woman] (The Kamera Theater ought to show it every six months. It is a foundational document of the film art). (Benjamin [2011]: 170-171; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 222-223 [tm]).

The reference to *A Woman of Paris*, premiered in Paris with the title *L'Opinion publique*, gives us a clue about the non-explicit source of the remark on this movie in *Das Kunstwerk*. As we have indicated above, opposing the «capacity for improvement» of the «assembled artwork» of the age of technical reproduction to the one-piece work of Greek sculpture, which has consecrated eternal values as a paradigm of traditional art, Benjamin writes: «To produce *L'Opinion publique*, which is 3,000 meters long, Chaplin shot 125,000 meters of film» (Benjamin [2012]: 32, 66, 111, 176; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 109). The same information about Chaplin's feature length motion picture is taken from Soupault's essay and appears also at the beginning of a paragraph of *Rückblick auf Chaplin*:

Learning that for this 3,000-meter work, 125,000 meters were shot, gives us an idea of the enormous devious work that is behind Chaplin's masterpiece. It also gives us an idea of the capital this man requires, and this is at least necessary to him as it is to a Nansen or an Amundsen to make his voyages of discovery to the poles of film art. We must share Soupault's concern that Chaplin's productivity may be paralyzed by the dangerous financial claims of his second wife, as well as by the competitive struggle of American trusts. It is said that Chaplin is planning both a Napoleon-film and a Christ-film. Shouldn't we fear that such projects are no more than gigantic screens behind which the great artist conceals his

fatigue? (Benjamin [2011]: 171; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 223 [tm])

Benjamin evidently agrees with Soupault's assertion on Chaplin's international reception: the audience «loves Charlie, Charlot or Carlitos», while those who are called by the «nasty name of *cinéastes*» have not understood him at all (Soupault [1928]: 396). Snobs have underestimated his talent and «considered him a clown» or «a mere notable actor»: «They expect to forget that Chaplin has modified the cinematographic point of view. Do they actually know – adds Soupault – that for *L'Opinion publique* he used 125,000 meters of negative film to make a 3,000 meter movie?» (ibid.) But Benjamin's accordance with Soupault is even deeper and it is based on Chaplin's election in favor of popular cinema, a position which Benjamin defends openly in the *Passagen-Werk*, warning about the risks entailed in abstraction for the exploitation of revolutionary energies in cinema:

It is impossible not to mention the fact that Charlie Chaplin deliberately detaches from the so-called artistic cinema that was in vogue a few months after the projection of The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari and which was mainly the result of the efforts of German producers.

Charlie Chaplin considers, in effect, that cinema should only deal with life; that it should make us see better than the way we see through our eyes, and that the more it detaches from life, the higher the risk of losing it.

The recent Russian films that have more or less consciously adopted Chaplin's point of view seem to give him reason⁹. (Soupault [1928]: 393)

Benjamin greets the fact that, when the time passed starts resembling on Chaplin's fictions, Soupault evokes his youth and the local origins of his art, tracing a profitable comparison with Charles Dickens, «the creator of modern English novel»: «Both of them were going to satisfy a huge

public and they both sought to capture what they called life» (ibid., 395). Neither the popular storyteller of the country of the Industrial Revolution that attracted Karl Marx, nor the film maker most beloved by the proletarian masses have known how «to avoid the pitfall of sentimentality» and have extracted «all their inspiration almost only from their infancy, elapsed without joy in the streets of London» (ibid., 395-396). Chaplin's art, writes Soupault in a paragraph translated into German by Benjamin, has its roots in his personal experience of the great metropolis:

Walking untiringly by the streets with red and black houses, Charlie Chaplin learned to observe. He himself has said that, watching the little employees walk by the strand, he had the idea of creating the character of the man with the top hat, stuttering walk, little short mustache and bamboo cane. With this appearance and clothing, he pretended to capture the will of a man «who has his dignity». It is also in London where Chaplin finds all social kinds which appear in his movies: the sweet and shy, naive and charming young girl, the «bully» always ready to fight and escape when he realizes they are not afraid of him, the pretentious man generally dressed up in a top hat¹⁰... (Soupault [1928]: 380; see Benjamin [2011]: 171-172; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 223)

With his art, Benjamin states, Chaplin confirms the old romantic intuition that «only an expressive world (*Ausdruckswelt*) that is firmly supported by a national and territorial society, is able to evoke the great, uninterrupted, yet highly differentiated resonance that exists between nations» (Benjamin [2011]: 172; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 223-224 [tm]). In Russia, people cried when watching *The Pilgrim* (1923); in Germany, they are interested in the «theoretical implications

⁹ For testimonies and reflections on Chaplin made by Soviet directors, see Einsenstein, Bleiman, Kozinzev, Luk-
evic (1955).

¹⁰ Benjamin quotes this passage of Soupault's essay also in his radiophonic writing *Kinderliteratur* (1929) and highlights the fact that during the interview with a German journalist (*Der größte Eindruck meiner Kindheit*, in "Die literarische Welt", 2 yr., number. 49, December 3, 1926) Chaplin, when asked about his favorite childhood book, answered: "*David Copperfield*" (Benjamin [1892-1940] VII, 1: 254-255).

of his comedies»; in England, «they like his sense of humor» especially:

It is no wonder that Chaplin himself is puzzled and fascinated by these differences. Nothing points so unmistakably to the huge significance of film as the fact that nobody comes up, or may come up, with the idea of subordinating it to an instance higher than the audience. In his movies, Chaplin appeals to the most international and revolutionary emotion of the masses: the laughter. «Admittedly», says Soupault, «Chaplin just makes you laugh. But aside from the fact that this is the hardest thing to do, it is socially also the most important». (Benjamin [2011]: 172; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 224 [tm]; see Soupault [1928]: 402)

CHAPLIN AGAINST HITLER

Amongst the successive versions and variants of *Das Kunstwerk*, Benjamin has left some other reflections on Chaplin. The most extensive, on which Desideri has drawn attention, is found in the first version of the essay (see Desideri [2012]: LXI). It points out that the characteristic «continuity» of mass industrial production finds its correlate in the filmband, which technically consists in an assembly line of «discontinued images» (Benjamin [2012]: 38). If Chaplin's movies have been more successful than any others, it is because they take advantage of this process: «Chaplin's *gestus* is not properly that of a theater actor. [...] His singular meaning consists in the fact that he assembles human gestures – the corporal as well the spiritual attitude – according to film. This is the novelty in Chaplin gestuality: it disintegrates the human expressive movement in a sequence of tiny innervations. Every of his single movements are made up of a series of chopped particles of movement» (ibid.). Thus, in the way he walks, in the way he moves his cane or pulls up his hat, one can see «always the same fractional succession of minimum movements that elevates the film law of the sequence of images to the law of human motricity» (ibid.).

The remaining comments form part of the texts grouped in the critical edition of the essay

as *Manuscripts and notes for continuation*. In one of them, Benjamin appeals again to Soupault to support the idea that Chaplin «interprets himself allegorically» (Benjamin [2012]: 259). In this case the explicit source is the preface of *Charlot* (1931), in which Soupault reproduces one of the statements Chaplin made about the character of the Tramp to the French journal «L'Intransigeant»: «The cane represented his dignity, the moustache was his pride and the ankle boots expressed the tediousness of the worries from down here» (Soupault [1931]: II; Pattison-Knight [1931]: 1 and 3). Another short quotation comes from the page 212 of the first edition of *Film als Kunst* by Arnheim: «The special feature of Chaplin's character [...] which shows the dispossessed from the perspective of the property owners. The cheeky melon hat, the smoking jacket, the dandyish swagger stick and the moustache are: the poverty as lack of wealth» (Benjamin [2012]: 263-264; Arnheim [1932]: 178). Immediately below, Benjamin transcribes a statement from Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach's *Histoire du cinema* (1935): «The most certain aspect of Charlot [...] a sort of somewhat equivocal femininity, born of humiliation» (Benjamin [2012]: 264; Bardèche and Brasillach [1935]: 132).

All these last remarks are thematically related to a fragment of Benjamin, dated August 1934 in Svendborg, during his visit to Bertolt Brecht, which traces an astonishing contrast between the attributes of Chaplin and Hitler:

*Hitler's diminished masculinity –
to be compared with the feminine cast of the dispossessed as portrayed by Chaplin
So much luster surrounding so much shabbiness
Hitler's following
to be compared with Chaplin's public
Chaplin – the ploughshare that cuts through the masses; the laughter loosens up
the masses
the ground of the Third Reich was stamped down hard and firm, and no more
grass grows there
Ban on marionettes in Italy, of Chaplin movies in the Third Reich –*

every marionette can make Mussolini's chin and every inch of Chaplin's can make the Führer
The poor devil wants to be taken seriously, and instantly must call upon all hell
Chaplin's docility is in front of everyone; Hitler's only in front of his clients
Chaplin shows up the comic of Hitler's earnest; when he acts the fine man,
then we know how things stand with the Führer
Chaplin has become the greatest comedian because he has incorporated into
himself the deepest fears of his contemporaries.
Hitler's fashion prototype is not that of the military but of the better gentleman
(der bessere Herr); the feudal emblems of lordship are out of date; there
remained only men's fashion. Chaplin, too, looks to male's fashion. He
does this in order to take the master caste at its word. His little cane
is the rod around which the parasite creeps (the vagabond is no less
a parasite than the gent) and his bowler hat, which no longer sits so
securely on his head, betrays the fact that the rule of the bourgeoisie is tottering
It would be wrong to interpret the figure of Chaplin in a purely psychological
light. Rarely do such popular figures fail to carry with them sundry
properties or emblems that, from without, set the right tone for them.
In Chaplin's case, this role is played by the accoutrement with the
cane and the bowler hat.
"That happens only once, and never comes again".
Hitler did not accept
the title of president of the Reich; his aim was to impress upon the
people the uniqueness [Einmaligkeit] of his appearance. This uniqueness
works in favor of his magically transferred prestige.
(Benjamin [1892-1940] VI: 103-104; Benjamin [1931-1934]: 792-793 [tm])

The comparison between Hitler and Chaplin

may be associated in turn with an important paragraph of the second version of *Das Kunstwerk*, reduced to a footnote in the third version. Benjamin expresses here that politics, as well cinema actors, have experimented a deep transformation as a consequence of their «exhibition» in front of the machines: «*The crisis of the democracies can be understood as a crisis in the exhibition conditions (Ausstellungsbedingungen) of the political man*» (Benjamin [2012]: 75, 122 n.; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 128 n. 23 [tm]). Liberal democracies participate in an auratic regime, exhibiting the politician, in their own person, before the other representatives: «*The parliament is his public*» (ibid.). With the development of mass media, which allow orators to be listened to in the radio by an unlimited number of listeners, their voice be registered gramophonically and their image be reproduced in the news projected in cinemas, being exhibited in front of the microphone and the camera is the predominant tendency in the way of doing politics: «*Parliaments become depopulate at the same time as theaters*» (ibid.). The qualified performance of the professional cinema actor applies equally to the politician: «*It tends towards the exhibition of testable, even supervisable performances under certain social conditions, just as sports first has already promoted them under certain natural conditions*» (Benjamin [2012]: 76, 122 n.; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 128 n. 23 [tm]). Thus, the production techniques start up in the age of capitalism a sort of Darwinian process of selection before the apparatuses, «*from which the champion, the star, and the dictator emerge as victors*» (ibid.).

It is certainly surprising that, six years before Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, Benjamin opposes the figure of the *Führer* and the character of the Tramp. The first statement, that agrees with Bardèche's and Brasillach's comment on the «equivocal femininity» of Charlot, allows to establish an association with Curzio Malaparte's portrait of Hitler in his *Tecnica del colpo di Stato* (1931), an essay which had originally appeared in Paris in 1931 and was quite discussed at that time amongst the French leftwing intellectuals. Emma-

nuel Berl, an author closely followed by Benjamin, wrote a bibliographic review about this text for the magazine "Europe" (Berl [1931]: 585-588). Echoing the «singular judgment» of a certain Russian revolutionary, Malaparte argued that Hitler's spirit was in fact «profoundly feminine: his mind, his ambitions, even his will» were not «in the least virile» (Malaparte [2014]: 200; Malaparte [1932]: 238). According to the Italian writer, «something confused, equivocal, something morbidly sexual», was inherent in «Hitler's opportunist tactics»:

In the history of nations, at moments of great misfortune, after wars, invasions, or famines, there is always one man who rises above the masses and enforces his will, his ambition and his bitterness; who «wreaks a woman-like revenge» upon the whole people, for all the freedom, power and happiness that has been lost. In the history of European countries it is Germany's turn now: Hitler is the dictator, the «woman» Germany deserves. The feminine side of him explains Hitler's success, his domination of the crowd and the enthusiasm he rouses in the youth of Germany. (Malaparte [2014]: 201-202; Malaparte [1932]: 239)

On the other hand, Benjamin seems to approximate «Hitler's fashion prototype» to the character of Hugo Möbius in Walter Hasenclever's *Ein besserer Herr* (1926), a hugely successful comedy of the New Objectivity (see Spreizer [1999]: 120-125)¹¹. Möbius is an astute middle-aged swindler who sees in Lia Compass, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, the opportunity to rise socially. He runs efficiently a marriage agency and boast of dealing «with emotions» and having converted «the need of love into a technical formula» (Hasenclever [1926]: 71). In his first encounter with Lia, Möbius tries to impress her by acting the man of distinction who has just returned from Africa, but he ends falling in love with the young

girl and revealing his true profession. The final scene of the play is very significant in relation to Benjamin's remark upon «Hitler's docility in front of his clients». Möbius is accepted by Herr Compass as his son-in-law under the condition that he closes his agency and joins the family company. «You are the only one who measures up to me», says the captain of industry, extending his hand. «The country needs such strong men. Hail and victory!». The parvenu exclaims: «Long live business!» (ibid., 106)

In the closing paragraph, Benjamin stated in quotation marks a verse of a song, played by Lilian Harvey in Eric Charrel's musical comedy film *Der Kongreß tanzt* (1931), to satirize the reasons that Hitler employed, at the beginning of August 1934, immediately after Paul von Hindenburg's death, to justify the unification in the figure of the *Führer*, of the president's and chancellors' charges through the Laws of the German Empire (see Koepnick [1999]: 105; Benjamin [1892-1940], VI: 691). Lastly, when Benjamin says that Hitler did not accept the title of president in order to increase «his magically transplanted prestige» by reinforcing the «uniqueness of his appearance» before the masses, he seems to echo distantly the reflections that, in *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* (1924), Helmuth Plessner dedicated to «the force of the nimbus», incorporating a concept closely related to that of the de aura in the fields of philosophic anthropology and social philosophy (Plessner [1980-1985], 5: 79-94; Plessner [1999]: 129-147).

It's hard to believe Benjamin was not acquainted with this book in which Plessner criticized the ideal of a hierarchic society and the cult of the leader promoted by Gustav Wynecken, founder of the *Jugendbewegung*, to which Benjamin had belonged years prior to the Great War. To explain the nature of what he called *nimbus*, Plessner said that, in modern societies, «the unassailability of the individual is purchased with a representational meaning», which places distance from the others and «as compensatory form, counteracts a devaluing of the person in his appearance» (Plessner [1980-1985]: 84; Plessner [1999]: 135). The nimbus is «the simple respect before the unreal-

¹¹ A German film version of *Ein besserer Herr* – premiered in English as *A Better Master* – was made by Gustav Ucicky in 1928. After World War II, the play was performed in England and the United States under two different titles: *Man of Distinction* (1957) and *The Magnificent Hugo* (1961).

ity that presents itself in a certain form and function» (ibid.). All the social prestige of the individual depends on it: «The more inaccessible a position is, the greater attention and honor it will be accorded» (Plessner [1980-1985]: 84; Plessner [1999]: 136). Thus, in replacement of the «original nimbus», vulnerable and destructible, of all human beings, «an indestructible nimbus steps through the unrealization of the individual, one that solves the riddle to make a person maximally visible and secret at the same time» (Plessner [1980-1985]: 84-85; Plessner [1999], 136 [tm]). The «natural magic» in which a person appears as a mystery that awakens both seduction and rejection, fascination and reserve, gives way to the «artificial magic of the indestructible», which resolves the antinomy by transforming real personality into «mask and face» (Plessner [1980-1985]: 85; Plessner [1999]: 136).

Whether or not it is implicitly present in the elaboration of this critical fragment on Chaplin and Hitler, Plessner's theory of nimbus sheds some light on the approximation that Benjamin establishes in *Das Kunstwerk* between the cult of the movie star and the cult of the *Führer* fostered by the Nazi propaganda art. Hitler's «magically transferred prestige» is analogous to that «magic of the *personality*», with which the film industry «responds to the shriveling of the aura» (Benjamin [2012]: 32, 184, 231; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 113; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 261). It can be said that the artificial building of the personality, both of the movie star and of the *Führer*, seeks to preserve that magic «which has long been no more than the putrid magic of its own commodity character» (ibid.). Chaplin, the hero of Benjamin's materialistic theory of art, is the revolutionary opponent of Hitler in the battlefield of images in the age of their technical reproductibility. He has been banned in Germany, because he is a threat. He undresses Hitler's weakness behind his virile appearance and reduces to hilarity his aspirational emblems and bombastic gestures, revealing him as a mere puppet of capitalists.

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