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THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Charlie Chaplin, right, circa 1914: a "Wobbly esprit de corps that infuses his hatred of work"

Chaplin at 100: A Radical for Modern Times

AFTER THE GOLD RUSH

HE SLEEPS in the gutter and uses a rope to hold up his pants. He is frequently homeless and at best marginally employed. When he does work, his disorderly conduct often wrecks his employer's business, injuring innocent bystanders and bringing the police down. His world is filled with cops, to whom his instinctive response is instant flight—a madly determined, arm-flailing dash.

He is sneaky and sometimes violent. He desecrates public property. A petty thief when need be, he has no respect for authority. He is, of course, Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp," and if we stepped over him today on the streets of New York, we might scarcely recognize the prototype for the world's greatest film star, once the most popular man on earth, the icon of the 20th century, Jesus Christ's rival as the best-known person who ever lived.

Charlie Chaplin, born in London a century ago this Saturday and the subject of a modest fete at the Museum of Modern Art, enjoyed sustained popularity on a scale that is difficult to imagine and may never be duplicated. He was not exactly a plaster saint, although if we judge him by the quality of his enemies (Hedda Hopper, Howard Hughes, HUAC, Hitler), his luster could hardly be greater. Scarcely a corporation man, Chaplin used his power to defy Hollywood mores and go his own way—ignoring the conventions of talking pictures, making highly personal political tracts, reinventing his image in a way no studio would have permitted.

Chaplin wasn't simply the first mass cultural icon, the embodiment of mass man, he *was* mass culture—vulgar, repetitive, shameless, addictive, utopian. In his disdain for language, he personified the universality of silent movies. As Charles Silver points out in his new monograph, Chaplin's two-reelers were immediately apprehendable: "No particular level of sophistication or even literacy was necessary . . . to see that he was special: you only had to *see*." As ancient as these artifacts are, children don't have to be educated to find them funny. His love of play and passion for disorder mirrors their own, although Chaplin's uncanny appeal is perhaps innate. (Is it that toddler walk and those spaniel eyes that, like Mickey Mouse's outsized, infantlike head, push the love button in our brains?)

Although Chaplin has been encrusted with sentimentality (much of it his own

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BY J. HOBERMAN

IN THE LIMELIGHT

THE CELEBRATION of Chaplin's 100th birthday, at least in New York, seems curiously unfocused—no academic conferences, Radio City extravaganzas, or fabulous reissues. Still, the event is hardly passing without comment.

Opening Friday, the Museum of Modern Art's two-week retrospective includes 35mm prints of all the Chaplin features from *The Kid* through *A Countess From Hong Kong*, plus five of his shorter films. (*A Dog's Life*, showing as part of *The Chaplin Revue*, is the pick of the latter, and save time for the lobby show, designed by Mary Corliss, which, in its deployment of artifacts, simulacra, and video, suggests a mini-Disneyland.) Although Chaplin's features have been withdrawn from theatrical distribution, all are available in good quality transfers from Key Video at a retail price of $19.98.

Three books have been published to mark the Chaplinennial. Charles J. Maland's engrossing *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton University Press) analyzes the tumultuous relationship between Chaplin and his audience as brokered by the media. *Remembering Charlie: A Pictorial Biography* (Doubleday) is a discreet but chatty scrapbook of post–World War II Chapliniana compiled by longtime associate Jerry Epstein. Deftly pitched somewhere between the two, Charles Silver's *Charles Chaplin: An Appreciation* (Museum of Modern Art) is an impassioned fan's notes, filled with pithy observations on individual movies and a multitude of classic stills. —J.H.

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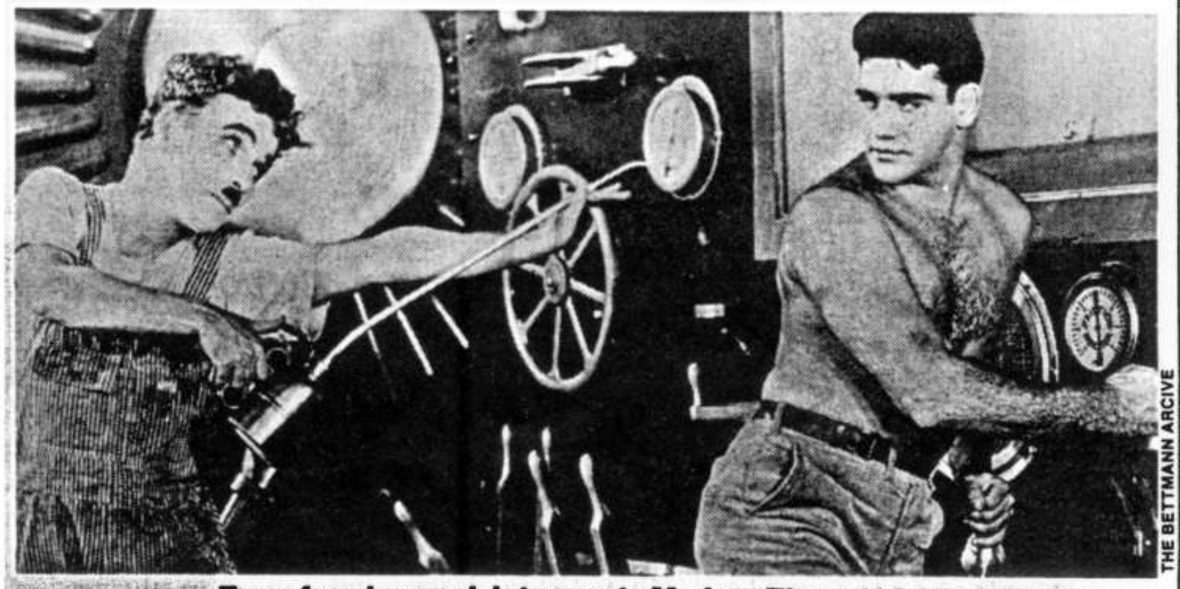
doing) and relegated to the realm of the timeless, he is and was a historical being. In the late '60s, when I came of age as a self-conscious moviegoer, Chaplin was being displaced by a revisionist reappreciation of Buster Keaton. Back then, Keaton's formalism and reflexiveness, his stylized cool and absence of sentiment seemed far more interesting than Chaplin's puppy dog, in-your-face humanism and crude theatricality. The icon obscured the artist: Chaplin's well-worn divinity concealed the radical nature of his enterprise, the degree to which his pre-1919 two-reelers thrive on urban chaos and visceral class awareness, the Wobbly esprit de corps that infuses his hatred of work, which he continually subverts and transforms into sport.

The subject and object of mechanical reproduction, Chaplin was the original parody automaton. In a recent issue of *Radical History*, Charles Musser contextualizes him in terms of Henry Ford's newfangled assembly line and the industrial efficiency technique known as "Taylorism." Indeed, reeking of class hostility, the baldly titled *Work* (released in 1915, four months after *The Birth of a Nation*) features Charlie as an assistant paperhanger employed by a bourgeois family called the Fords. *Modern Times* (1936), Chaplin's most elaborate production, is a virtual anthology of such slapstick two-reelers, every skit revolving around the struggle for survival at its most primal level. (Few movies have ever been more obsessed with the act of acquiring food). "I came away stunned at the thought that such a film had been made and was being distributed," the critic for *New Masses* wrote. "*Modern Times* is not so much a fine motion picture as a historical event."

A historical event but not, relatively speaking, a hit. Today, *Modern Times* (which, among other things, allegorizes the process of studio filmmaking) seems Chaplin's definitive statement. Contrary to the five-year run of IBM commercials that have been spun off it, *Modern Times* criticizes not just industrial capitalism but work itself—as well as authority, the family, and the very nature of adult behavior.

HE KNEW HIS AUDIENCE. One thing he never sentimentalized was the rich. "No comedian before or after him has spent more energy depicting people in their working lives," writes Robert Sklar in *Movie Made America* of the star whose first film—a Keystone two-reeler released in February 1914—was aptly called *Making a Living*.



THE BETTMANN ARCIVE

Transforming work into sport: *Modern Times* (1936)

PHOTOFEST

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/FILM STILLS ARCHIVE

With cop in *Modern Times*; with Edna Purviance in *Sunnyside*, 1919

Chaplin exploded out of the Keystone ensemble at a time when the movies had again become rowdy, shaking off the five or six years of defensive gentility that followed the antinickelodeon crusades of 1908. Fittingly, the revolt against the new decorum was led by Mack Sennett, who had apprenticed with order's architect, D. W. Griffith. Although Chaplin perfected his supreme creation several months after leaving Keystone, it was there that he had his first and most extensive contact with the American people, that he mastered his timing and internalized Sennett's grotesque assault on the social order.

Within a year of leaving Sennett, Chaplin was considered the essence of laughter—although not everyone was amused. After *Work* was released, Sime Silverman, the founding editor of *Variety*, complained that "the Censor Board is passing matter in the Chaplin films that could not possibly get by in other pictures. Never anything dirtier was placed on the screen than Chaplin's 'Tramp.'" The association of Chaplin with impurity—sexual, racial, political—was something that would dog him for the next 40 years.

That spring, however, Chaplinitis swept the English-speaking world. By now Chaplin was his own trademark; the tramp was totally industrialized. There were Chaplin songs, Chaplin dances, Chaplin sketches in theatrical revues, Chaplin cocktails, Chaplin dolls, Chaplin shirts, Chaplin ties, Chaplin postcards, Chaplin animated cartoons, and a Chaplin comic strip. It was as if a new religion had been born and everyone wanted a piece of the cross. Placed beneath a marquee, the cardboard image of the little man with the skimpy mustache—his silhouette rendered indelible by bowler hat, baggy pants, and outsized shoes—was sufficient in itself to fill a theater. Demand far outstripped supply. The 26-year-old actor could not produce movies quickly enough to satisfy his fans.

Imitators were legion. "Among the happy youths of the slums, or the dandies of clubdom or college, an imitation of a Chaplin flirt of the coat, or the funny waddle of the comedian, is considered the last word in humour. To be Chaplinesque is to be funny; to waddle a few steps and then look naïvely at your audience," *Motion Picture Magazine* reported in a 1915 article simply called "Chaplinitis." Soon Chaplin look-alike contests were being held in amusement parks all over the U.S. Leslie T. (later Bob) Hope won one

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such in Cleveland. So many comedians were impersonating Chaplin on the screen—among them Stan Jefferson (subsequently Laurel)—that Charlie had to file suit. It was said that for a time costume balls were ruined, because 90 per cent of the men appeared dressed as the Little Tramp. (In *The Idle Class*, Chaplin attended one such ball dressed as himself.)

America definitely had Chaplin on the brain. In Cincinnati, a holdup man used a Charlie Chaplin disguise. In a mysterious occurrence on November 12, 1916, the actor was simultaneously paged in 800 hotels. Chaplinitis spread to Europe and raged throughout the Great War. According to the British film historian Kevin Brownlow, Chaplin cut-outs were kidnapped from the lobbies of British movie theaters and born off to the trenches: "These life-sized models were popular with the troops, who would stand them on the parapet during an attack. The appearance of a crudely painted tramp, with baggy trousers and a bowler hat, must have bewildered the Germans, who had no idea who he was. To add to the confusion, British officers with a sense of humor would cultivate Chaplin mustaches, and in prison camps, every hut had its Chaplin impersonator." Nor were the French immune. "Charlot was born at the Front," wrote Blaise Cendrars. "The Germans lost the war because they didn't get to know Charlot in time."

Just as the war ended, Chaplin released his own vision of the trenches, the totally apatriotic *Shoulder Arms*, a spiritual precursor of *Catch-22* whose bits include a fantasy of shelling the Germans with Limburger cheese and, an even more vis-

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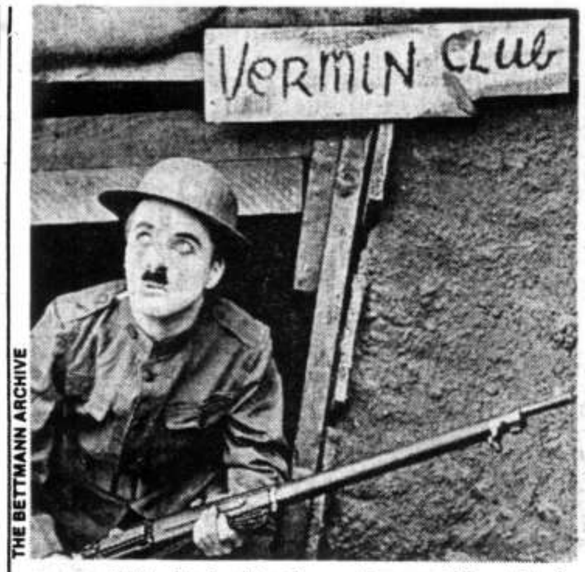

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Who's imitating whom: Chaplin in *Shoulder Arms*, 1918; Adolf Hitler

CULVER PICTURES

***The Gold Rush*, 1925; IBM ad: "a flack for the corporate order"**

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ceral evocation of combat, sleeping in a bunk that's virtually under water.

HE WAS TAKEN SERIOUSLY almost immediately. The author of "Chaplinitis" called him a "genius" and boldly stated that "once in every century, a man is born who is able to color and influence his world.... Charles Chaplin is doing it with pantomime and personality." In May 1916, *Harper's Weekly* published "The Art of Charles Chaplin," an appreciation by a well-known stage actress that bracketed "the young English buffoon" with Aristophanes, Shakespeare, and Rabelais.

In France, Charlot was the subject of the first monograph on an individual film artist. In the Soviet Union, archformalist Viktor Shklovski published a book on Chaplin in 1923. Chaplin was the movies' first *esque*, the only mass culture figure one could bracket with high modernists Eliot and Joyce, a fitting subject for a Cubist collage. (Later, Léger featured him in *Ballet Mécanique*.) It's easy to imagine Chaplin as a character in a Brecht play or Kafka novel, but in America, he was seen as the ultimate Horatio Alger hero. He arrived here a penniless immigrant—bona fide wretched refuse—and, within 24 months, became the highest paid actor in the world. (That Chaplin refused to consummate the myth by becoming an American citizen would be held against him later.)

As an artist, he infused the pathos of the British proletariat—Dickens and the music hall—with the jazz rhythms and streamlined optimism of the newer, American variety, absorbing by osmosis French aesthetic and Jewish soul. (Feckless *Luftmensch* that Chaplin played, he was perceived as Jewish by both Jews and anti-Semites.) In a sense, Chaplin was the mascot of Western democracy. He was mobbed in Paris and London during his 1921 European tour, but ignored in Berlin, where—although some hipster had included his photo-

THE SUBVERSION OF PUBLIC ORDER, THE POTENTIAL FOR ANARCHY, WAS INEXTRICABLY BOUND UP IN THE CHAPLIN PERSONA.

graph among the Heartfields and Pica bias of the 1920 Berlin Dada Fair—his films had not yet been released. O course, the Germans would soon get their own Little Tramp/Hero of the Trenches Man of the Century.

In *Modern Times*, Chaplin bid his greatest creation farewell. For the first time, the tramp's voice was heard (sing ing a nonsense song in a routine that contains in embryo all early Fellini) while the movie's last shot showed the tramp walking off down the road—no longer alone, but hand-in-hand with Paulette Goddard. "It is an ironical thought that the mustached face of Adolf Hitler will be the only living reminder of the little clown," *The New York Times* nostalgically editorialized shortly after the film's release. The thought bothered Chaplin as well. Before Hitler took power, he had been attacked by the Nazi press as "a little Jewish acrobat, as disgusting as he is tedious." (In fact, Chaplin wasn't Jewish, but, as a matter of principle, he never contradicted such accusations.) During Hitler's rule, Chaplin's movies were banned and all mention of his name proscribed. It was inevitable that this pair would go one on one.

Like twin gods in some fertile-crescen myth, the two most compelling personalities of the 20th century were born four days apart, in April 1889. They were both raised in poverty and domestic disorder, both lived as vagabonds, both dreamed of being artists, both captivated the masses, both sought absolute control over their worlds. Many, including Chaplin, believed that Hitler even borrowed his mustache from the Little Tramp. What was the secret of the atom compared to the source of Chaplin's power? Chaplin thought he understood the origin of Hitler's. In *The Great Dictator* he once and for all broke the speech barrier with a full-fledged Hitler rant in gibberish German. Thus did the Little Tramp acknowledge the tyranny of sound.

HIS REPUTATION has had violent ups and downs. In 1919 *Theatre Magazine* published an article, hopefully entitled "Is the Charlie Chaplin Vogue Passing?" which scored "the appeal of every Chaplin picture to the lowest human instincts." Even when his artistic reputation was at its highest, Chaplin carried intimations of the underclass. "You have to go to squalid streets and disreputable neighborhoods if you want to see Chaplin regularly," Gilbert Seldes advised his readers on the eve of *The Gold Rush*.

No doubt Ronald Reagan would have pieties to mouth on Chaplin's birthday, but there were periods in Chaplin's career when his most passionate defenders were Surrealists or Communists, and not even the mature success of *The Gold Rush* prevented American women's clubs from organizing a boycott of his pictures because Lita Grey divorced him. As moviephobe H. L. Mencken noted with no small satisfaction, "The very morons who worshipped Charlie Chaplin six weeks ago now prepare to dance around the stake while he is burned." A quarter of a century later, he suffered the most dramatic fall of any star. Small wonder that he would ultimately cast himself as the genteel mass murderer in *Monsieur Verdoux*.

Once a tramp, always a tramp: The subversion of public order, the potential for anarchy, was inextricably bound up in the Chaplin persona. He always found a way up authority's nose. Chaplin was attacked as a draft dodger during World War I, spuriously indicted for violating the Mann Act during World War II, threatened with deportation, and ultimately red-baited out of the United States at the height of the McCarthy period. But all that is forgotten now. On the 100th anniversary of Chaplin's birth, his progeny are everywhere and nowhere—as Garry Wills pointed out, Ronnie and Nancy mimed the last shot of *Modern Times* (embellished with an affectionately Chaplinesque kick in the butt) in *New Morning in America*, the movie shown to the world at the 1984 Republican Convention.

Chaplin at 100 has become a free-floating image and an all-purpose *esque*—familiar now because he was familiar then. He is a neutral symbol of the information age, a million dollar trademark licensed to IBM to make their personal computers seem user-friendly. Leasing the Little Tramp's image from his heirs, IBM upgraded his wardrobe and occupational status: a floppy Little Yuppie for the Age of Reagan. (To approximate the full flavor of what in better days we called cooptation, one has to imagine a blue-chip corporation entrusting their $25 million advertising campaign to Richard Pryor in his "Bicentennial Nigger" heyday.)

Welcome to postmodern times: Released from the assembly line, transmuted into the pure being of empty signifier, the Little Tramp has been put back to work; he's making a living once more, earning his keep, sentenced in his afterlife to labor as a flack for the corporate order. But remember that *Modern Times* is set in Brazil and *The Kid* on Lafayette Street; that *City Lights* is a film about Donald Trump and Billie Boggs. Look at the early movies and then look around you. See if you can't find Chaplin—our contemporary—out there on the street.■