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CHAPLIN

REDUX

Charles Silver

Culver Pictures

A new national retrospective as well as a cache of lost footage should mend the Tramp's tattered reputation.

It is in some ways astounding to consider that thanks to the availability of Thames Television's three-hour *Unknown Chaplin* and the "Chaplin Lost and Found" package of films currently touring the United States, the reputation of one of the screen's great artists will be "restored" to its former glory.

During the silent era, it was inconceivable to even question Chaplin's artistry; he was regarded as an indisputable genius by nearly everyone who cared about movies in any remotely serious manner. In recent decades, however, revisionist film historians have challenged this assumption. David Thomson, for example, has attacked Chaplin's dated values: "[The Tramp] is a character based on the belief that there are 'little people.' Whereas art should insist that people are all the same size." Jean-Pierre Coursodon has attacked Chaplin's technique, remarking on the "flat, shadowless, monodimensional look of all of [Chaplin's] films." Even as staunch a Chaplin defender as David Robinson concluded in 1968, "The eclipse of Chaplin's reputation is practically complete."

Chaplin's critical standing suffered further damage with the return to circulation in recent years of Buster Keaton's silent classics. The specter of

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Chaplin's only serious rival has been raised in hindsight as the exemplar of all the things Chaplin was not. Keaton, it is argued, was "modern" both in his vision and in its creative implementation, and Chaplin was "Victorian" and "primitive." Richard Roud sees Keaton's films as "more interesting as cinema." Robert Benayoun, in *The Look of Buster Keaton*, writes of Chaplin's "discouraging meanness" and claims, "There probably was something of the parvenu about Chaplin." He also notes Buñuel's famous assessment of Chaplin: "Only the intellectuals laugh at Charlie; the children are bored by him, country folk don't get him."

But Andrew Sarris has cogently argued that because of his unparalleled resources as an actor, Chaplin had no need to seek or rely on technical virtuosity—his face was his mise-en-scène. Sarris recently wrote: "Charles Chaplin is arguably the single most important artist produced by the cinema. . . . He remains the supreme exemplification of the axiom that lives and not lenses stand at the center of cinematic creation."

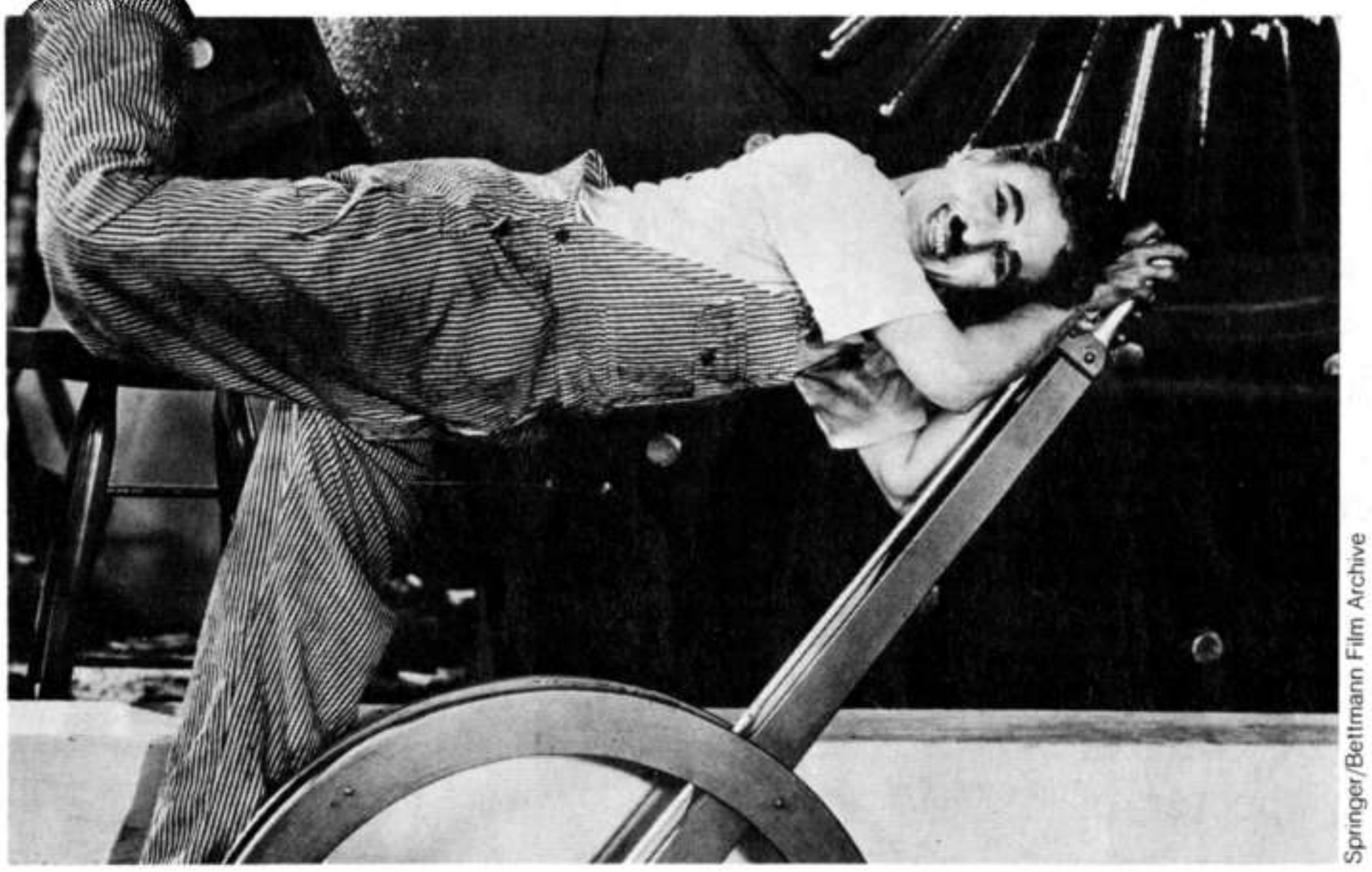
It was Keaton's great misfortune to lose control over his destiny while he was in his early thirties and at the height of his creative powers. Chaplin, however, was able to make his own extraordinarily personal films into his old age, creating a veritable celluloid autobiography. There are resonances and complexities in Chaplin's characters and the subjects and issues he tackled that understandably bespeak a greater maturity than young Buster was able to muster before his professional emasculation. We can analyze the brilliant cyclone sequence in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* on a Steenbeck to the point where we can begin to grasp how it works, but no amount of analysis, I think, can unveil the mysteries at the heart of the final moments of *City Lights*. As I wrote in *Film Comment* twelve years ago, "Chaplin never felt the need to compete with the brilliant hocus-pocus of Murnau, Eisenstein, and . . . Welles. Chaplin . . . was always too preoccupied with depth of feeling to worry about depth of focus."

I would suggest that the basic reason for Chaplin's critical decline has to do with contemporary notions of comedy. To a generation raised on the anything-goes satire of "Saturday Night Live" and *National Lampoon*, humor has become a badge of hipness, of being above it all. Chaplin's unabashed sentiment, his deliriously direct expression of feelings, must seem antiquated to a filmgoing public that finds the frenzied neurosis of Dudley Moore or the profane smugness of Eddie Murphy hilarious.

What is perhaps most revealing about *Unknown Chaplin* is the lie that it gives to the "no technique" charge against Chaplin. The program — produced by film historians Kevin Brownlow and David Gill—has been divided into three parts. The first, "My Happiest Years," deals exclusively with the two-reelers made for Mutual Film Corporation in 1916 and 1917. Chaplin's working method was essentially to rehearse on film. He had no script and only a vague concept of what the movie was to be about. He shot and printed hundreds and hundreds of takes when making a film, each shot a little experimental variation. (In a sense, Chaplin was a forerunner of today's filmmakers who work through some of their problems on videotape.) Ultimately, he either got the particular gag or sequence right or discarded it. Brownlow and Gill, through narrator James Mason, emphasize the importance to Chaplin of a logical context for a gag—it had to be more than merely funny.

The second episode, "The Great Director," takes us from *The Kid* (1921) through *City Lights* (1931), what most would consider Chaplin's best decade. Reverting to the format they employed in the series

Images of the Tramp: Modern Times *and* The Gold Rush, *below; with Jackie Coogan in* The Kid, *opposite.*



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"Hollywood," Brownlow and Gill elucidate their points through interviews with Chaplin players like Jackie Coogan, Robert Parrish, and on-and-off-screen leading ladies Lita Grey, Georgia Hale, and Virginia Cherrill. There's much unanimity in what these actors have to say about the intensity and detail of Chaplin's direction of their performances. Miss Hale (*The Gold Rush*) relates that Chaplin discouraged overacting by telling her to "walk through it," but that he also controlled "every flicker of the eye." Parrish (one of the street kids in *City Lights*, a director in his own right, and the author of the highly respected *Growing Up in Hollywood*) says, "He directed us by being us." This is reinforced by Miss Cherrill (*City Lights*): "You found yourself feeling that he was you."

Chaplin would act out, again and again until he was satisfied with a take, precisely what he wanted from the supporting performers, and some of this survives in the vault footage. Chaplin's capacity to enter into another's persona extended even to animals. Eddie Sutherland, an uncredited assistant on *The Gold Rush*, tells us in an interview, "When he got into the chicken, he was a chicken." Since he personally performed so many functions, Chaplin seemed to be all over the set, or as Parrish says simply, "He was a dervish."

Chaplin's methods in this period remained essentially the same as those used in making the Mutual films; according to Virginia Cherrill, during the eighteen months spent shooting *City Lights*, most days were completely idle as Chaplin waited for inspiration. Miss Cherrill had a particularly hard time reproducing for Chaplin the performance he had acted out for her, and she rather sadly suspects he didn't like her and shunned her socially ("Perhaps he saw me as the blind girl"); maybe he was intimidated by the young Chicago socialite who found it so hard to hand him a flower with precisely the nuance he demanded. One only hopes that Miss Cherrill's pain has eased after a half century of knowing that she is the heroine of one of the cinema's greatest romantic masterpieces.

"The Great Director" also illustrates how Chaplin's need for total control was incompatible with location shooting. Much time and footage was spent on *The Gold Rush* location in Nevada before Chaplin decided to return to his studio and reshoot a lot of the film with artificial snow. The location delays allowed sufficient time for Lita Grey Chaplin to become visibly pregnant, and she was replaced by Georgia Hale, the near-novice star of Josef von Sternberg's *Salvation Hunters*.

Miss Hale tells of her childhood hero worship of Chaplin and of his personal remoteness during filming up to but not including their passionate fade-out kiss, for which Chaplin shot even more takes than usual. Brownlow and Gill show that Chaplin's 1942 reissue excised this shot, his passion for Georgia long having cooled.

"Hidden Treasures," the final hour of *Unknown Chaplin*, is in many ways the most fascinating. It includes home movies and abandoned projects that anticipate later Chaplin films. The ballet Adenoid Hynkel would perform with the globe in *The Great Dictator*, for example, was first performed in a 1929 home movie shot at Pickfair. Chaplin amused himself by making little films when dignitaries visited his studio, but even while he relaxed, his creative juices were flowing. The apple gag in the clown-training sequence of *The Circus* had its origins in a short movie he made with Scotch music-hall entertainer Harry Lauder. The shaving sequence in *The Great Dictator* was originally done for *Sunnyside* but discarded.

Although Chaplin was attempting to break out of his self-created mold (for instance, in the unfinished *Professor* of 1923), he found that he had to keep returning to the Tramp in spite of the character's constraints. Whether the consideration here was commercial or whether he simply reached artistic dead ends, we can only speculate. I think it can be said, however, that much of the material he never finished or released was of high quality. We must be simultaneously happy that it still exists and disappointed that we have only fragments of what might have been.

Chaplin made just eight films in the fifty-two years of his life after *The Gold Rush*. *Unknown Chaplin* gives us more than a hint of how many films he might have produced had he been less of a perfectionist. Brownlow and Gill also tell us that Chaplin burned other films—treasures

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CHAPLIN LOST AND FOUND

"Chaplin Lost and Found" is a traveling film festival that has been touring the United States since July. A comprehensive retrospective, it includes many rarely seen Chaplin features and shorts. It will come to the following cities at various times through the fall: New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Minneapolis, Seattle, Buffalo, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Dallas, Berkeley, San Diego, Sacramento, Denver, Atlanta, Milwaukee, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Philadelphia. For more information and details, contact Kino International Corporation at (212) 586-8720.

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that will remain lost forever.

In 1972, on the occasion of Chaplin's return to America after his long exile, I wrote, "When all the oeuvres have been run through the projector, I believe one cannot escape the conclusion that Chaplin has no equal." Twelve years later, Chaplin has returned to us once again. Fortunately, there are many who are sensitive enough to be touched and awed by Chaplin's genius; to them, as René Clair put it, "Charlie is our friend." *Unknown Chaplin*, plus the touring Chaplin retrospective, offer splendid opportunities to renew this friendship on a more intimate basis than we had ever thought possible.

Charles Silver supervises the Film Study Center at the Museum of Modern Art. He has written monographs on Marlene Dietrich, Lillian Gish, and the Western. He is presently working on a study of the romantic film.

The author wishes to thank Jennie Hinkle of the Media Guild and Maryann Chach of the Museum of Broadcasting for their assistance. Unknown Chaplin *is available for lease through the Media Guild, 11526 Sorrento Valley Road, Suite J, San Diego, California 92121. The tapes may also be viewed at the Museum of Broadcasting in New York.*