

How far is Chaplin the filmmaker at work in his early films, 1914-1917 ?

Francis Bordat

My subject is certainly a minor one by comparison with the important questions raised by Chaplin's and Charlie's genius. However, I have devoted a big book to precisely this : how far is Chaplin's comedy, and how far is the character of Charlie himself, conditioned and sustained by the specific techniques and art of *cinema* ? This is related to a larger problem, which I have also tried to address in my works. It seems to me that there remains a paradox in Chaplin criticism : the artist whom everybody is ready to acknowledge as one of the greatest comedians of all times has never achieved full recognition as a movie director. As for me, I am still ready to fight for the idea that Chaplin was no less a genius as a filmmaker than he was as a clown, and that he might very well have been a *lesser* clown if he had not been *also* a major director. Of course, the cliché about Chaplin's indifference for film technique is easy to explain : when Charlie walks into the screen, it is difficult, not to say impossible, for *any* spectator, to focus his attention on anybody or anything else. And this difficulty has been aggravated by Chaplin himself, who was always careful *not* to draw our attention upon his work as a filmmaker.

One example I have often quoted to illustrate resulting misunderstandings is the famous lion cage sequence in *The Circus*. Writing in the fifties, one of Chaplin's best analysts, the highly influential André Bazin, seemed to remember that sequence as a long take in long shot. Bazin even argued that the thrilling mix of fear and comedy produced by the sequence was due to the actual presence of Charlie *and* the lion in the same cage (and in the same shot). Now if you analyze that sequence as it is now possible to do it (with VCR's and DVD's), you can check that it is composed of no less than sixty-one shots and that it uses practically all the rhetorical devices of film language : shot and reverse shot, the full range of shot lengths and camera angles, and a lot of editing indeed, down to the final comic ellipsis when we discover Charlie at the top of the pole — but no one saw him climb. Besides, only a rather elaborate process of *montage* allowed Chaplin to carry out the shooting of the scene without endangering his own life, since *two* lions, as David

Robinson recalls, one tame, one wild, were used for the sequence, the editing only producing the illusion of a single feline.

What I have also contended for a long time, and what is now easier to defend after the beautiful restoration of his early films, is that Chaplin's art as a filmmaker was already manifest in the Keystone, Essanay and Mutual series of 1914-1917. This is what I wish to submit in this short paper, on the basis of just a few significant examples and excerpts.

To begin with the very beginning, it must be emphasized that from his first appearance on a screen in *Kid Auto Races*, Charlie established a *unique* relation with the motion picture camera and with the motion picture audience, which testifies to Chaplin's singular *awareness* of his new medium and to the profoundly *reflexive* nature of his art. The comic of practically every shot in this short film relies on Charlie trying to squeeze into the frame and draw the camera's attention upon himself, thus achieving his own direct contact with the public, to the detriment of the legitimate subject, the auto race normally being shot. All witnesses and historians report that the director of the film, Henry « Pathé » Lehrman, who also happens to be the director *in* the film, did not like Chaplin much, but this film shows that he was clever enough to see into Charlie's fascinating persona, and into his potential comic as a camera addict. I would like to draw your attention upon the third shot of the film: a fifty seconds and 180 degrees « panoramique descriptif » which the director in the film has obviously planned in order to provide the audience with a general view of the race event. The pan shot starts on the spectators on the left (« The Grand Stand » as announced by a title), slowly moves right across the track where the cars are running, and reaches the crowd sitting or standing on the other side. Charlie, here again trying to force himself into the picture, breaks into the moving frame, but cannot adjust his pace to the regular rhythm of the pan shot, since he is repeatedly scolded or pushed back by the film crew. Even so, he manages to transform the intended « panoramique descriptif » into an unscheduled « panoramique d'accompagnement »: it is interesting to notice that the cameraman cannot help freezing his panning movement once or twice for a short while, as if the eye of the camera itself was caught and held back by the little man. Chaplin has thus fully succeeded in *appropriating* the shot. But he does not merely « steal » the picture: he

actually substitutes his own *mise-en-scène* to that of the regular director — *in and of* the film. **[Excerpt 1 : *Kid Auto Races*]**

As we all know, *framing* is a determining element of film technique and art. It is the key to making things, people and actions visible and understandable on screen — and, when it comes to comedy, to draw the best laughs out of them. In terms of framing, Chaplin's shorts show no less variety and creativity than the best productions of his time. Nothing is more unfounded than the still common belief of Chaplin invariably shooting in long take and long shot, as with a motionless camera facing a theater stage. There *are* long takes in Chaplin's early film, but far from being a sign of carelessness, they are methodically preferred whenever Chaplin needs time and attention to convey especially complex and subtle meanings, as it is the case in the outstanding two-shot where Charlie meets the phony preacher at the beginning of *Police*. As for the long shot, it cannot be considered as a standard of Chaplin's shooting style either : as early as 1914, films like *The Masquerader* or *Those Love Pangs* already use the full scale of camera placements, from establishing shot to close-up. What Chaplin himself writes in *My Autobiography* about his Keystone year must therefore be taken to the letter :

... with more experience I found that the placing of the camera was not only psychological but articulated a scene ; in fact, it was the basis of cinematic style. If the camera is a little too near, or too far, it can enhance or spoil an effect. [...] Placement of camera is cinematic inflection.

Chaplin's pictorialism and his art of « tableau vivant » are other qualities of his early films. And those qualities have played a decisive part in engraving many scenes in our minds, some of which have become world famous icons : like the celebrated shot of the immigrants watching the Statue of Liberty. Note that contrary to another critical commonplace, Chaplin often departs from the orthogonal, stagy perspective in which the optical axis of the camera forms a 90 degrees angle with the backcloth. Diagonal shots, for instance, abound in the first three series : they pictorialize and they dynamize the action, as is typically the case in the first and last shots of *The Tramp*. There would be also much to say about the quality of Chaplin's sets and photography, because here again, there is far more diversity and invention than is generally estimated. One can even

argue that decors and photography are a key to specific *moods* in Chaplin's early films : the crude naturalism of *Police*, the hard-edge expressionism of *The Cure* or the soft focus impressionism of *The Vagabond*. Chaplin's use of orthochromatic black and white photography is also the source of precisely controlled effects and atmospheres, ranging from the grotesque (as in *The Cure*) to poetic realism (as in *A Jitney Elopement*).

Frames within frames are another feature of Chaplin's style. They provide even his first movies with a number of scenes « à la Tati » in terms of composition and visual irony. As in Tati's masterpieces, those shots appeal to the spectator's intelligence : one beautiful example of cinematic hide and seek occurs in *The Count*, when Charlie chases the pretty odalisque through various pieces and planes of the stage structure. Tricks proper should not be overlooked either in Chaplin's camerawork : the famous oblique shot which gives the illusion of a steep slope in *Work*, the camera mounted on a pendulum for the boat sequences of *Shanghai'd*, the rolling stage of *The Immigrant*, not to speak of the fade-ins, fade-outs, dissolves and other double exposures which achieve rather simple, but forceful special effects (as the passage from reality to dream and vice-versa in *His Prehistoric Past*). Far from revealing disinterest in technique, Chaplin's films have always evinced a genuinely *experimental* trend. I think that he was ready to explore *any* resource of film language when it was likely to serve his comedy — even stop motion in the manner of Melies, as can be seen in *A Night in the Show*.

Last but not least, one cannot disregard the influence of the camera eye on Charlie's idiosyncrasies themselves. In some instances, it seems to me that the nature of the film medium actually *determines* Charlie's behavior. The best example I can find of this is Charlie's famous ninety degrees turn on one foot : Theodore Huff writes that this « little gag » appears for the first time in *Mabel's Strange Predicament* when Charlie takes a turn in the hotel corridor. Personally, I cannot spot this gesture before *Between Showers*, and what strikes me here is that nothing in the surrounding decor actually justifies its occurrence. David Robinson reports that Billy Denvers, one of Chaplin's colleagues at Karno, recalled that a « gag » resembling this one was performed by some vaudeville actors at the turn of the century to better adapt their numbers to the small theater stages in suburban London. Chaplin may have remembered that trick when he strove to adapt his comedy to the restricted space of the motion picture frame. In *Between*

Showers, whose merciless slapstick tends to kick actors out of screen only seconds after they have broken in, Charlie's 90 degrees turn looks to me as a clever antic to save time, to remain in the picture a little longer than the other guys, to display one's energy without finding oneself expelled by its centrifugal force. Instead of bumping in or out in the manner of his sidekicks, Charlie enters left of the image, far away in the depth of field, walks three steps in profile, turns ninety degrees towards us, walks to the camera until he reaches foreground, turns again ninety degrees toward center to finally come face to face with his antagonist. This « lazy line » is utterly dysfunctional : it is the longest possible route between two points. *But it allows Charlie to better and longer show off*, with an amazing awareness of the limits of the picture — as if the frame were somehow miraculously printed in the actor's own field of vision. Charlie's itinerary is *not* determined by the nature of the scenery (no corridor, no street corner : the location of *Between Showers* is the wide open space of a park) ; it follows the borders of the square screen. In this manner, Chaplin has taken advantage of the specificity of his medium ; but conversely, it can be argued that his medium has *conditioned* Charlie's mannerism. I have selected two passages to illustrate this point, in *Between Showers* and *The Champion*. **[Excerpt 2 : *Between Showers* and *The Champion*]**

Chaplin's directing also provides occasional information on Charlie's personality or *psyche*. One interesting example occurs in *The Face on the Bar Room Floor*. As we know, the Keystone series was far more daring in sexual matters than the following shorts, whose eroticism was gradually repressed by Chaplin himself as he developed the sentimental dimension of the Tramp. But Charlie's sexual fantasies are not merely conveyed by Chaplin's *acting*. They can also be signified by Chaplin's *mise-en-scène*. As in the following passage : **[Excerpt 3 : *The Face on the Bar Room Floor*]**. What Charlie begins to sketch on canvas (after casting a quick glance at Madeleine's back) is obviously his model's rounded bottom. However, no spectator can miss the fact that the sweet memory of Madeleine's bum is triggered by the insistent display of the sailor's ass in the preceding shot (which in fact *initiates* the dissolve to the painter's studio — with a flashback structure not so common yet in 1914). Chaplin's *editing* thus hints at his hero's sexual ambivalence. As for the painter's obvious desire to sketch his beloved in the nude, Charlie suppresses it when he hastily self-censors Madeleine's bum into a vase with flowers. But here again, Chaplin's *directing* makes up for Charlie's *acting* by its original

placement of the two statues in the depth of field : the sculptures seem indeed to *carry out* Madeleine's undressing, as if the long piece of cloth in which she is rolled up like a mummy (in the foreground) had been unrolled (in the background) from the marble bodies of her bolder look-alikes. Note that Chaplin fully repeats this fantasy ten years later in the famous Latin Quarter sequence of *A Woman of Paris* — where ellipsis is also called for, but with other stylistic means.

The increasing sophistication of *editing* in Chaplin's early comedies must also be underlined, especially because editing was not just supervised by Chaplin : we know that he usually took on this task *on his own*, during long days and nights of exhausting work. For instance, it was a staple stylistic device in Sennett's studio to show one character brutally ejected out of frame in shot number one and no less brutally landing in whatever stage setting of shot number two. The way Chaplin reappropriates and develops this device in one scene of *His New Job* (his first film after he left Mack Sennett) strikes me as original — and very funny too : Charlie is propelled across no less than four different sets — and shots. Another example of the minute precision of Chaplin's editing is the famous sequence of the kitchen doors in *The Rink*. Note that the accuracy of Chaplin's cutting in this scene (which in all likelihood could only be achieved by using two cameras — one on each side of the doors) completely conditions the efficacy of the gag, if only not to break the rhythm of the action. **[Excerpt 4 : *His New Job* and *The Rink*]**

Another persisting prejudice about Chaplin's style is that his camera never moves. Chaplin's camera certainly does not move *much*, unless we consider the numerous, though discreet reframings of Rollie Totheroh's takes — which were rendered necessary by the often unpredictable improvisations of the actors. But Chaplin's camera does not move *less* than the cameras of contemporary Hollywood filmmakers. Besides, there *are* remarkable camera movements in Chaplin's early films. Though inconspicuous, as I said was Chaplin's rule, these movements reinforce and occasionally *produce* comic or dramatic effects. One example in *Easy Street* deserves special attention. Charlie has just begun his new job as a policeman. He appears, a very small figure at the far end of Chaplin's archetypal « T set ». Half of the screen is occupied by the huge Campbell in the foreground, who has just destroyed one of Charlie's colleagues and who threateningly

brandishes his tattered uniform. The little man slowly strolls toward the camera until he reaches the big man's level. He evaluates his opponent, then wisely decides to turn round and retreat. Campbell follows him, and the camera slowly starts after the two. When they both about face, *Roland Totheroh continues to dolly in without changing speed* until he frames the couple in close medium shot. This unexpected movement powerfully dramatizes the scene, and the effect is further enhanced when the camera continues to follow the two guys to keep them in the right distance : panning right when Charlie walks to the middle of the street and considers the torn rags on the ground, panning left when he walks back with affected calmness toward the telephone on the lamppost. It is obvious that the comic and the suspense of the sequence, the hilarious contrast between Chaplin and Campbell, between the fixed idea of the bully and the intense, desperate cogitating of poor Charlie, owe to this complicated circulation in *plan séquence*, in which the camera never lets the protagonists move out of frame. **[Excerpt 5 : *Easy Street*]**

My last point today concerns *scenography*. I define scenography in cinema as the art of placing actors before the camera and directing their movements on the stage, with the purpose of expressing their mutual feelings and of dynamizing their action within the restricted perimeter of one given frame. I shall limit myself to one significant feature of Chaplin's scenography : *Charlie's centripetal tropism*.

To put it shortly : there is a special force in Chaplin's films that seems to keep Charlie at the center of the frame from which enemy forces (or the uncontrolled energy of his own crazes) consistently conspire to drive him out. The unique jubilation provided by many climactic sequences of Chaplin's shorts, even though they usually conclude with Charlie running away in long shot, is precisely due to this trend : Charlie *clings* to the picture, while his opponents are projected out of it by the centrifugal power of the chase. More generally, it can be argued that part at least of Chaplin's gags are based on visual « loops ». The longer the loop, the funnier it proves when it takes the hero back to the center (the street corner, the vacant lot) out of which his adversaries have wanted to expel him. Charlie's celebrated « resilience » is another word for this *resistance*, for this ability to caper around *without really moving*, to dodge, slip away, and stubbornly return to where he stood in the first place, *and where he wants to stay* — until he walks away at

the end of the film (but of course we all know at that stage that he'll be back in the next). If a motto should be attached to our Charlie, it could well be : « I shall not be moved ».

There is a lot of centrifugal energy in Charlie, too : lucky for him, if only to escape the cops, but his basic centripetal bent is paramount in the long run, and this bent is consistently sustained by Chaplin's *mise-en-scène*. The various devices or machines built by Chaplin's art directors for the Mutual films seem to have been conceived to precisely support and reinforce the hero's centripetal bias : typically, the turning table of *One AM* or the revolving door of *The Cure*, which simultaneously multiply and annul movement. But the roller rink of *The Rink*, and the opportunity it affords to test what I call Charlie's « punching ball » reflexes against Eric Campbell, testifies to exactly the same function. As for the frantic final chases of *Behind the Screen* or *The Adventurer*, they forcefully enhance the centripetal pattern in speeded-up motion — with the support of ingenious sets and props. But the main point is that nothing of this could really be conveyed to us without the meticulous selection of Chaplin's « cadrages ». The manner in which the director and his cinematographer actually *frame* the action utterly conditions our perception of Charlie's circulation on screen : from right to left, from top to bottom, from front to back — *with always the middle of the screen as the center of attraction and the ultimate goal of his apparently aimless antics*. This scenography is also supported by Chaplin's editing, whose carefully controlled rhythm and space continuity allow the thrill of the action never to relapse from one shot to the next : if Charlie *must* leave the shot, the next one immediately catches up with him. It must be concluded from this that Charlie's comic genius is unconceivable without the proper means of cinema, which decisively cooperate to everything he does. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the Mutual comedies. **[Extrait 7 : *The Adventurer* and *Behind the Scenes*]**

Conclusion

Charlie's character, behavior and comic cannot be dissociated from the art of Chaplin as a movie maker. Part at least of our laughing at or with Charlie is due to formal characters of Chaplin's cinematography. This is already significant in the early films of 1914-1917, and it particularly strikes us when we rediscover those films in their recent

restorations. Because we naturally tend to forget it, it must be reminded that Charlie has never existed outside films : « hors cinéma, pas de Charlot ».