

*Charlie's silhouette
and
Chaplin's narrative*

by

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“...On the way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes ...I had no idea of the character ...”¹

The Charlie character was invented independently of any scenario . For the audience, he appeared the first time on the screen as Charlie in the second film of his filmography, *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (feb. 7, 1914). And after making ten or so short-reels authored by others, did Chaplin suggest to Mac Sennett to write his own scripts.

The costume will change into details (the baggy pants too short will be afterwards too long, and so on), nevertheless the shape will be the same in general.

But for most often, a Chaplin's scenario seems not written haphazardly, but is custom-made. More precisely, it appears as a projection of the Charlie-paradigm on the syntagmatic axis of narration.

In other words, the figure is characterized by different traits, which will be transposed, *mutatis mutandis*, in the narrative development.

The Fallen Gentleman (social pattern)

The first pattern is social. With his too narrow jacket and his too

¹ Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, Penguin Books, 1966, p. 145-146.

small bowler hat, with his too wide trousers and his oversized clumsy shoes, Charlie appears as an aristocrat above the waist, and as a tramp below it ². From top to bottom on his body, he wears the class hierarchy, and even the class struggle. And this social paradigm, this static and vertical pattern, that Theodor Huff called the “fallen gentleman” ³, will be developed horizontally, in time, through the narration. Indeed, he is often caught up in an upper-class environment by *quid pro quo* (see *Caught in a Cabaret*, one of his first scripts as a screenwriter, 11K) or even mistaken for a rich man (see *The Idle Class* where Charlie plays the rich man and the poor look-alike tramp). And so in his adventures, he meets with ups and downs, rises and falls. He would like to climb the social ladder, but remains stuck on its lowest. It is more subtle, in *City Lights*, where the spectator sees him as poor, but the blind flower-girl imagines him as a wealthy man, also two in one like his silhouette. Perhaps, without his ambiguous clothes, Chaplin would never have imagined a story as *City Lights*.

The creation of “Charlie” (of his silhouette) happened like a big bang : all his universe will come out of it.

The Man-Child (Age Pattern)

A second feature is an age pattern . Charlie wears adult clothes. But with his ill-fitting attire, he looks like a growing child, whose body has grown too fast above the belt and not enough below it ⁴. So he will naturally encounter children : babies (in the beginning of the films : *Easystreet*, *The Circus*), boys (in the middle of the films : *Easystreet*, *City Lights*) and finally he will produce *The Kid*, with Jackie Coogan, a doppelganger.

² Nysenholc, *L'âge d'or du comique*, 1979 : 200, reed. 2002.

³ Huff, 1953 : 36.

⁴ Nysenholc, 1979 : 233.

This dialectical age pattern will be echoed in other instances of narrative chiasmus. So he starts off, by playing a small protecting father for Edna, as for the Kid, and winds up being saved, protected by her (though the end of *The Kid* is not clearly a happy end). And the tragedy of the finale in *City Lights* is that the blind girl, who recovers her sight thanks to him, a childish tramp, is disillusioned, and may not take him under her wing.

Thus, in its verticality, the body of Charlie is the carrier, not only of class conflict, but also of generation conflict. This impression is strengthened by the large size of the head, a disproportion which is reminiscent of a baby's body, and lots of other childish traits ⁵.

When Chaplin's art is rooted in mime, Charlie's silent roles reinforce his *infant* side ⁶ of his character (the etymology of latin *infans* is "speech-less"). His films are as silent as his photograph at it first appearance. And although Charlie may occasionally whisper a word, he usually remains silent ; he seems not endowed with speech , - or rather, not yet, as if he were still at the dawning of his existence. His trousers are held with a safety-pin (*The Vagabond*) and the seat of his pants is often wet, almost like a diapered baby. His gags are continual "liftings of an inhibition", as if he were in constant lack of repression (in the sense of Freud ⁷), and therefore not well integrated socially. He elicits the laughter of "social sanction" ⁸ (in Bergson's view).

But, Chaplin himself speaks out vehemently "Against the Talkies" in his article (1928). "When Charlie opens his mouth",

⁵ cf. A. Nysenholc, 1979, 2002.

⁶ Nysenholc, 1979 : 47

⁷ Freud, 1969 : 179

⁸ Bergson, , 1967 : 150.

he writes, “ he will cease to be ”. This fundamental trait of the hero who, most of the time, exists in an extra-linguistic, or rather in a *pre-linguistic* universe, conditions Chaplin’s whole narrative strategy. Each story is told and shot in such a manner as to preserve Charlie’s mutism. Elie Faure ⁹ has called him a *cinemime*. It must be conceded that words would have added nothing to the dance of the rolls (*The Gold Rush*), or to the reunion of Charlie and the *Kid* in the van, etc.

And finally, one understands why Chaplin preferred to be filmed from head to foot, when he could be seen in his full contradiction, which was displayed throughout his cinematic adventures.

The Sentimental Puppet (aesthetic viewpoint)

From the beginning, he was not devoid of feelings. He shows himself as vain, self-contented, combative, blusterer, stubborn (in *Kid Auto Races at Venice*), flirtatious (in *Mabel’s strange Predicament*). And at the Keystone, Chaplin will fight with the directors in order to slow down the rhythm so that he could express his emotions. And, later freed from the slapstick, one may see close-ups, at key moments, shots which express his deep emotions, especially when he falls in love. The top part of his body is the seat of high, noble feelings. “Tragedy”, says Chaplin “is life in a close-up” ¹⁰. And this quasi melodramatic aspect allows the identification between the spectator and the character ; while comedy creates a distance between the two -- notably when the character walks away with his bow-legged, spread-footed gait, where he reminds us of our own first steps... ¹¹.

It must be granted that the upper part of the figure often inspires

⁹ Elie Faure, 1953 : 35

¹⁰ Tyler, 1947 : 93.

¹¹ Nysenholc, 1979 : 13

pity. Chaplin reports how, through a body-language effect, he hunches his shoulders to appear smaller in front of a big bully, to elicit sympathy and “welcoming laughter”¹². On the contrary, the bottom part of his physique tends to appear grotesque, ugly, and to attract “exclusive laughter”. The seat is fated to receive kicks-in-the-pants, which are nevertheless received with dignity.

But these two affective poles may be reversed in the body : the tiny bowler hat may have a ridiculous effect, while the enormous shoes may elicit pity. The tension generated by this chiasmus will recur throughout all the films which will, - from *The Tramp* (1915) onwards, - increasingly exploit the sentimental vein as well as the burlesque one. Chaplin knows how to powerfully combine tears and laughter.

According to Henri Bergson, the laughter “surimposes the mechanical on the living”. And Charlie, from the beginning, was somewhere mechanical in his funny gait. Because of his big shoes, he had to walk with them from ten to ten, and with the kneecaps outside. That make his legs a bit stiff almost as puppet legs in wood. Charlie is often called as “puppetlike”. In *The Circus*, as a tightrope artist, he hangs by a thread like a marionette à fils ; and he flies like that in the air (with an invisible thread) in the dream of *The Kid*.

Leprohon calls Charlie a “sentimental puppet ”. In fact, from the beginning, the fallen gentleman, with his old rags and his young funny gait, is tragi-comic.

The Sacrificed Savior (ethical figure)

So from debut at Keystone’s onwards, the top of Charlie’s body tries to preserve its dignity (a fact attested by his hat doffing). Charlie will often stand up to a boss’s order (as to the director, in *Kid Auto Races at Venice*), and refuse to obey with a categorical

¹² Dupréel, 1950 : 41.

headshake (so when he is chased away in *The Cure*).

But the lower part of his body is “low” in the moral sense as well (or a-moral, as if it represented someone who is not yet aware of social rules). He hides his spoils in his trousers (so in *Behind the screen*). But his flight on his beetle crushers expresses cowardice but also good sense, inspired by the instinct of self-preservation. He saves his life by running for safety. The coward may nevertheless be transfigured into a hero, when he manages to succour his protégés (girl, kid, dog).

This ethical duality adds up to the mythical figure of the sacrificed savior¹³ (Starobinski). Charlie brings joy to the others by giving the hope of salvation (he is the World War I hero in *Shoulder Arms*), but he also causes self sadness because he will be more and more sacrificed. In the finale of *The Circus*, he himself hands over his beloved to his rival. And, in 1931, in order that the blind girl would see the city lights, the false gentleman sacrificed himself. And when the film *The Great Dictator* finishes, one cannot be sure that he will survive his eventual unmasking by the Hynkel gang. The script stops just before the clown-prophet, who quotes Sint Luke, would probably ends in martyrdom.

Conclusion

Thus, Charlie is an inherently dual figure : gentleman tramp, man-child, sentimental puppet, sacrificed savior, comic & tragic - all these phrases reflect the contradiction between which he was torn from the start in 1914. They are actually variations on one and the same theme, but realised at different levels of his depth. Like a Russian doll, Charlie is a multi-layered being, and each component of his tragi-comic paradigm will be developed, by the script, in equivalent predicaments.

¹³ Starobinski, 1970 : 116.

In one way or another, the narrative is the recurrent echo, projected in time, of the original prototype, i.e. the image of the character. There is a continual correspondence between the macroscopic temporal structure (the scenario) and the microscopic spatial structure (the figure). The narrative gives the impression that everything, in this apparently meaningless tramp's life, is, nevertheless, necessary.

Chaplin solves par excellence the fundamental problem in the arts, the poetic function.

According to the linguist Roman Jakobson ¹⁴, “the poetic function projects the equivalence principle from the selectional onto the combinatorial axis”. In other terms, in a syntagmatic sequence where one would ordinarily find contiguity only as a contingent phenomenon, one encounters the similarities which characterize a paradigm ; and thus, one's attention focuses on the form of the message as well as on its content. For example, he quotes : We love Eisenhower vs I like Ike.

What Jakobson did not envisage, however, - not even in literature - was the case of formal parallelism between the hero and the narrative, which seems now perhaps more obvious in Chaplin.

The “homothetic” similarity between the character's creativity, and the author's narrative inventiveness ¹⁵, thus contributes to the aesthetic unity of Chaplin's cinematic oeuvre : Chaplin has written scripts which seem to spring from his hero's own being, from the original shape of his silhouette.

But there is more to it than that. As actor and director, Chaplin is present both before and behind the camera ; as author and producer, he is present both before, and after the film ; as director, his presence is felt in the image, and as composer he is

¹⁴ R. Jakobson, 1956 : 218.

¹⁵ Nysenholc, *La Légende des images*, 1987 : 92

there in the soundtrack. Like God Himself, his omnipresence pervades all of his creation.

The case is rare, and perhaps unique. And this may explain the strong coherence of the myth, and the resonance of his silent films throughout the century, as a parable of our age.