

1953

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Recommended Citation

Neiman, Gilbert. "Charlie Chaplin, or the Absurdity of Scenery." *New Mexico Quarterly* 23, 1 (1953).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol23/iss1/10>

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BOOKS and COMMENT

Gilbert Neiman



CHARLIE CHAPLIN, OR THE ABSURDITY OF SCENERY

IN A WAY, it is impossible to write about Charlie Chaplin. He has said it all so completely himself that a commentary is scarcely needed. Yet he seems to challenge writers of all sorts to write about him, and he is the subject of many long works, both in English and other languages. The three books at hand,¹ of which the two written in English proclaim themselves definitive, are well worth looking into—if only to look beyond, at the creation and the creator. Some kind of critical commentary is necessary because the prints of the pictures themselves are fading away into oblivion. After 1918 Chaplin kept the rights to his subsequent films, so that they, at least, will be preserved for whatever use he decides to make of them. He refuses to let the commercial world draw and quarter the Charlie he has drawn and quartered himself.

The main value of these books is that they offer you the opportunity to evaluate what *you* think about Charlie Chaplin. And this is a real opportunity for both intro- and retrospection, for the reader finds, on re-viewing these pictures through the medium of the printed page, that the little comedian has wormed

¹ *charlie chaplin*, by Theodore Huff. New York: Henry Schuman, Inc., 1951. 354 pp. \$4.50.

The Great God Pan, by Robert Payne. New York: Hermitage House, 1952. 301 pp. \$3.75.

Charles Chaplin, Genio de la Desventura y la Ironía, by Francisco Pina. México, D.F.: Colección Aquelarre, 1952. 255 pp.

himself into more nooks and crannies of his memoried existence than he ever suspected. The amazing thing about the two English books (which I doubt either author would admit) is how similar they are. Factually, the authors differ now and then: Huff has Chaplin born in London, England; Payne in Fontainebleau, France; one says he is partly Jewish, the other *au contraire*; and so it goes. Perhaps fifteen factual discrepancies between the documentation of the authors could be listed; but who would care? Both books agree on so many points that they are like shavings drawn to a magnet. This power, this force, this where-are-we-now of Chaplin's is the object that blends these critics.

The difference between an artist and a craftsman is that the artist does more than he knows. We have a school of criticism in this country which says you do *just* what you know. Charlie Chaplin is a good refutation of this theory. The birth of The Little Tramp took place in 1914, in a film finally titled *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (California). He was pushed out fast by Mack Sennett, with instructions to emerge in a funny costume. It was all an accident. He grabbed what he saw about him. He took Fatty Arbuckle's pants; Ford Sterling's size-14 shoes, reversing them so they would stay on his small feet; a derby belonging to an actress' father; another actor's bamboo cane; and he cut down one of Mack (the giant of *The Gold Rush*) Swain's moustaches. All Sennett had commanded was, "Get in front of the camera!" In this costume he kept getting in the way of the camera that was supposed to be filming the races, a camera behind the camera photographed it all, and the Charlie we know was born. In the middle of a street. The delivery took forty-five minutes. When Chaplin became the character that we are familiar with, it was without much knowing on his part. He says he realized that day out in the street that he was in the clutches of something greater than he knew. The remainder of his career has been more or less an attempt to surpass the creature that was born that day.

The liking and the disliking of the four pictures which he has

made in the last twenty-two years² has been mainly based on how well he fits into the pattern of that early Charlie whom everyone presumes to know. Everyone has, if prodded, the most personal kind of opinion about that Charlie. He comes out either so close to a person's heart that he is a part of that heart, or he is so far away from it that he is consigned to the limbo of trivia. But no one is lukewarm when it comes to placing Charlie right where he ought to be. Chaplin has seen to that. As far back as *Modern Times* he said of his screen personality: "In the new film he will not be quite so nice. I'm sharpening the edge of his character so that people who've liked him vaguely will have to make up their minds."

About the Chaplin of the screen, critics have split up into two camps. One camp wants the little clown, the old Charlie, etc., and claims that Chaplin's new characters are unrelated to that one. The other camp says that the *Limelight* and *Monsieur Verdoux* roles are not only extensions but developments of that Charlie the world once adored. One group sees him as an egomaniac who has succumbed to his many skills. The other group sees him as a present-day embodiment of the "Beckmann who delighted Kierkegaard, Grimaldi who delighted Dickens, and Debureau who delighted Gautier." They find Charlie's ancestry in Pierrot, Punch, Harlequin, Indian *koshares*, Commedia dell' Arte players, Robin Goodfellow, and the spirits in the medieval Feast of Fools. And more than any other character he has been compared, by Spaniard and non-Spaniard alike, to Don Quixote.

My own respect, since I am a member of the respectable public, commenced with *Monsieur Verdoux*, and now extends backwards in time over all the other pictures. I had always thought *The Kid* was an especially great picture, but after Mabel Normand died I wasn't too much interested. But now I was growing old. Charlie Chaplin would always be up there; I was the one growing old. So I was anxious to discover, at long last, what this

² My acquaintance with *Limelight* has been limited to reviews.

magic was that Chaplin always seemed to work upon an audience.

When I went to see *Verdoux* that night in San Francisco it was in the same theater where twenty years before I had seen *City Lights* with my first love sitting beside me (we were splitting up for good) and neither one of us had found anything in the picture to laugh at. We could have laughed at ourselves, I suppose. But this time I had grown up, I was wise, I could listen. Luck had it that the ushers were lost. I told the girl I was with to stand by the door while I walked down the aisle backwards. I wanted to listen to the audience before I saw any of the picture. If Chaplin was so great, I wanted to hear the respectable public reacting to his greatness. I heard it. I felt it. I smelled it. It was as though a pepper-grinder were working from the ceiling. No two people laughed at the same time. It was unbelievable. I had never heard laughs like this before from an audience at either a picture or a play. Sporadic, spontaneous, uncommunicative, separate. Each person was laughing to himself. I listened for a while, then I got my companion and we sat down. My eyes began watching *Monsieur Verdoux* and I started doing the same thing I had just heard the audience do. When I laughed, no one around me was laughing, so I tried to hold the laughter back. It was a great guilt to laugh.

This, I think, is the essence of *Monsieur Verdoux*: you feel guilty to laugh.

If you laugh, you're condemned.

I saw the picture twice again, spacing my visits two weeks apart, and the audience was always this way, laughing a guilty laugh, one at a time. Maybe that's why it was a financial flop. The people weren't laughing together, as they had once upon a time, at Charlie's antics.

The idea of the picture seemed to me to be that we can all sit back quietly in our seats and relish murder. The end of the picture seemed to me to be that all of us would love to see someone in the electric-chair, if only we could buy passes. I was reminded

of England. Cromwell. The Restoration. The turn-out of the populace, the consistency of the ribald enjoyment of the hangings. I was reminded of the number of requests for passes to the latest execution at San Quentin. This picture was not laid in France but in Every Country. It seemed to me to ask the question: since you like murder, don't you deserve to come to your inevitable end in the violent way that Charlie does? The picture was a challenge to the passive murderers in the audience, to those who enjoy mass slaughter but dread to think of one individual being slaughtered. Then I knew I liked Chaplin, that he was the genius he was touted to be, because here he was on a pulpit higher than any I had seen in our cathedrals and churches. This was the same sentimental yet tough rascalion who nurtured *The Kid*, who thought a flower should remind men of life; here he was, thumbing his nose once again at the sheep in the audience who applauded slaughter. Here he was, saying, "We are all one, but how we can kill!"

The North American, Theodore Huff, goes into one when he thinks of *Monsieur Verdoux*, but Robert Payne, the Britisher, and Francisco Pina, the Spaniard, feel as I felt all three times I saw it: the greatest film ever made. Chaplin himself said of the character: "... the most terrible image that has ever crossed the screen, and one of the most human."

What bothered the public most was the end. Also, as with the end of *The Great Dictator*, the critics were disturbed by what they considered an overweening insertion of Chaplin as writer-director into Chaplin as actor. Such monologues should have died with Shakespeare! Yet, on inspection, they are not even slightly dead. I must give you the last philosophical remarks of Monsieur Verdoux, who has killed, wrongly of course, for the preservation of his wife and child; he is about to die, and is in the death cell. A reporter says, "You'll have to admit crime doesn't pay." Verdoux, who has done well enough at it, replies, "Not in a small way." (Ah, waterfront!) The reporter has his henchmen

with him and asks, "What's all this talk about good and evil?" To which Verdoux answers, in clink clothes and all: "Arbitrary forces, my good fellow! Too much of either would destroy us." The reporter editorializes: "We can never have too much good in this world." Verdoux says: "The trouble is we've never had enough. We don't know." Then comes a minute of monologue, in which Verdoux says: "Wars, conflict—it's all business. One murder makes a villain; millions, a hero. Numbers sanctify!" After the reporter, a priest comes in. I like to remember Verdoux's answer to the priest's question, "Have you no remorse for your sins?" Verdoux's unforgettable reply is: "Who knows what sin is—born as it is from heaven—from God's fallen angel? Who knows what ultimate destiny is served? After all, what would you be doing without sin?"

I would like to suggest that this is very much the same Chaplin who a long time ago wrote the foreword to *A Woman of Paris*.

For those who like to identify Chaplin's thinking with dialectical materialism, I would give them these two statements to ponder. One: The first picture that Chaplin directed and did not star in—in which he only appeared for a moment, like Alfred Hitchcock—*A Woman of Paris*, had this foreword flashed on the screen: "Humanity is composed not of heroes and villains, but of men and women, and all their passions, both good and bad, have been given them by God. They sin only in blindness, and the ignorant condemn their mistakes, but the wise pity them." That was in 1923. Two: In 1907, Blaise Cendrars, who was then a juggler and who lived with Chaplin in the same rooming-house in London and worked with him on the same stage, saw him as a sallow youth with a ferocious quietness who believed that "everything is contained in Schopenhauer." In relation to the influence of Schopenhauer on Chaplin's life, I like to think of how Hans Vaihinger, perhaps the greatest German philosopher of this century, expressed the impact that Schopenhauer had upon him: "Schopenhauer's pessimism became in me a fundamental and lasting

state of consciousness, and all the more because of my own sad and difficult experiences. Even in earlier days, I have been deeply affected by Schiller's lines, 'Who can enjoy life if he sees into its depths!' I have not found that this outlook tends to weaken biological and moral energy."

Chaplin's three encounters with George Bernard Shaw seem to me to be particularly revealing. The first encounter was notable for turning out not to be one. A friend of Shaw's took him to the door of the famous house and had lifted the knocker when Chaplin said: "I do not desire to ape others; and I want to be individual and different; and I want Bernard Shaw to like me . . . I don't want to force myself upon him . . . No, I don't want to meet him . . . Some other time. We won't call today." The next scene took place in 1931 with Shaw and Chaplin both guests in the midst of the Cliveden set. Remembering Shaw's dictum that all art should be propaganda, and anticipating being drawn out on that score, Chaplin hastened to inform him that "... the object of art is to intensify feeling, color, sound—if it has an object—since this gives the artist a fuller range in expressing life." He was very relieved to find that Shaw wasn't interested. Scene Three: a few nights later. Chaplin is seated between Shaw and Lady Astor to see the London opening of *City Lights*. He's afraid that Shaw won't like it and will make remarks. Shaw does. The remarks are all favorable. Called to the stage to make a speech, Chaplin was, to use his own quotes again "... so thrilled and excited that nothing seemed to come out."

What I wish to point out is that he is human, all too human. On that trip abroad he was awarded the Legion of Honor in France. On his present trip that forgetful nation awarded him the rosette of the Legion of Honor again. New President, new Legion of Honor. But the same Chaplin. In his speech on the stage this time, he fell into the prompter's box at the beginning and the curtain was lowered on his head at the end. All impromptu, quite unrehearsed. When Monsieur Verdoux is in the death cell, the

priest assures him that God will forgive him, and he replies: "I think he will too. That's his job." When Chaplin had picked himself up from his fall into the prompter's box, he observed to the audience, "That's my job."

After reading perhaps too many of the disparaging reviews of *Limelight* (not all were slanted thus, I am glad to report), I think I have a few pertinent remarks to make on this "he-oughta-go-back-where-he-came-from" attitude which has become painfully prevalent in this country of late. He is human, all too human, but off the screen we won't permit him such license. (When I say "we" I am thinking of what the Spanish call "the respectable public.") The identification we feel with the Charlie we see on the screen, we forbid him to have in his own life, though that identification is the most liberating one we have experienced in motion pictures. We know now what George Bernard Shaw called him: "The only genius in motion pictures." That's a bit after the fact, and our memories are a bit after the fact. When we saw his last picture, we put that after the fact, and we are likely to do the same thing with his new one too. The fact might be that Charlie is a bit too absurd for us to take any more. We are accustomed to our children being accustomed to Superman. We like the gag and the wisecrack and we see the Ice Follies once a year. Due to his publicity from *Limelight*, Buster Keaton had some night club engagements recently, and he replied to an interviewer: Why the movie comics are such a washout on television is that they've never learned the rudiments of pantomime; they were brought up on the spoken gag.

We have grown so accustomed to the gag and the wisecrack that we have come to look down on comics who act out tragedy with every fiber of their bodies. (Or as Chaplin once put it, "Everything that touches upon death is of an astounding gaiety.") Yet Charlie is an image of our infancy: he is ours, we possess him, so he'd better live up to the image each one of us has of him, or to hell with him. Can the public always be right?

The purport of this article is to remind people of my generation that they grew up with Charlie Chaplin but he grew up without them. He has always felt responsible to his audience, but lately it has diminished. It has diminished through lack of exhibitors (in the film industry), and exhibitors are organized. I am speaking of this country. As for organization in Russia, *The Great Dictator* was finally banned there—too much dictator in it. A Soviet producer denounced Chaplin, after seeing *Monsieur Verdoux*, as “a traitor to the working class,” and the film was not shown any more in Russia. Here, war veterans and other organizations picketed the New York showing of that picture, and they recently had *Limelight* banned in Los Angeles by threatening to do the same. In the First World War, *Shoulder Arms* was the film most appreciated. In the Second World War, *The Great Dictator* was brought out at a time when things seemed to be going the way of der Fuehrer and il Duce. Comedy of this order in wartime is consummate courage.

Theodore Huff has quite a chapter on Chaplin's politics. It turns out that the comedian doesn't have many. When Max Eastman was sold on Russia in 1919, he discovered that Chaplin was not very good material for conversion. Other subsequent joiners and fellow-travellers, including even Jim Tully, have stated their opinions of Chaplin, and the opinions are all to the effect that Chaplin would never go very far with them. In intimate talk with a friend, Chaplin said in 1951 that there was no “ism” that could be tacked on him; if there was any label that would fit him it would be “social anarchist.” For anyone who followed the history of the last war in Spain, this idealistic confession of faith is hard to square with the undocumented accusations that Chaplin is a communist.

At the present time, now that Chaplin has left the United States and his character is officially suspect here, these new books about him are singularly apropos. With such authoritative character witnesses as Westbrook Pegler and Robert Ruark testifying

in the newspapers with the most damning generalities as to the total unfitness of Mr. Chaplin to live here ever again, it seems that the moment has arrived to get down to particulars. He has made the statement, "I am an internationalist, not a nationalist, and that is why I do not take out citizenship." Yet when informed that he might not be allowed to re-enter this country, his first reaction was to say that the people of the United States should be allowed to vote on whether he has a right to live here or not. If that is the case, one may ask, why did he leave? Several years ago he answered this, in writing, for a London publication. "Before long, I shall perhaps leave the United States, although it has given me so many moral and material satisfactions. I, Charlie Chaplin, declare that Hollywood is dying. Hollywood is now fighting its last battle and it will lose that battle unless it decides, once and for all, to give up standardizing its films—unless it realizes that masterpieces cannot be mass-produced in the cinema, like tractors in a factory." To a reporter of the *New York Times* he once said, half in jest, "If I were ever to take out citizenship papers it would be in Andorra, the smallest and most insignificant country in the world." I must add that about a year ago I received a letter from an old friend who is about to retire from a university after thirty years of faithful service. The letter read, in part, "If there was ever a country I would like to live in for the rest of my life, this is it." The letter was postmarked Andorra. I must say for this woman that she never belonged even to a "front" organization, so her predilection for Andorra cannot be suspect.

I would like to remind the reader that:

THE INDESTRUCTIBLE

mr unspeakable the whistler
 puts his pigtails in his pockets
 and pulls them out around the world

verboden past a glass
heart on his shoulder
he shrugs off deception

girls fairies warehouses
under a gentleman's feet
wary to fling up a butt

crusader for nothingness
never grown older
than a nasturtium

calling out all gods
for brotherhood's perfection
he has one

brother to brother
glass to glass
mirror to mirror

art's deception
the triumph of
the heart in May

berries over the fields
seen from the slums
of a sad city

destructible everywhere
the heart's cherry
always under foot

combat the walk
a partial journey
from where to where

in fog's thick glimpse
you prance and wince
at every thought

the man is sand
there is no earth
but a skirt

drooping unalloyed
the pure toys
of imperious reticence.

That is my memory of Chaplin; these three books at hand evoked the crime, and I wonder if I will return to the scene of it. But there are more important things to discuss: the Spaniard's idea of Chaplin's sex life. The other authors, being Anglo-Saxons, have no ideas. Rather, I should say, they have the courtesy to have no ideas. This is not, of course, quite cricket, but a bull-fight is the substitute for cricket with Spaniards. So Francisco Pina does a long *adorno*: "That Charlie Chaplin has had little luck with his amorous relations with women is well-known throughout the world, and especially by the legions of admirers he has in the five continents." In this Spaniard's book we find a chapter entitled "Bluebeard's Dream," which should clear up all the details about Chaplin's sexual development that we might want to know. I had my own ideas, but after reading Sr. Pina I have given up my guessful thinking. And I don't mean to say that he might not be right.

"As a good reader and admirer of Schopenhauer, Chaplin was a bit of a mysoginist in his private life." "I love women, but I don't admire them," says M. Verdoux to the young girl he's attempting to poison. Sr. Pina quotes this to prove his point, then goes on to say that Chaplin is a Don Juan type who is only attracted to the opposite sex by beauty and the fact that they are the opposite sex. "These men that have imprinted on their minds the beautiful image of a woman idealized by their spirited imagination . . . they will be called up to have the greatest number of flukes." This admirable author goes on to quote from Upton Sinclair: "I know the story of his life and his marriages, and it is quite differ-

ent from all that has been written about it. Charlie has the fixed idea that the perfect woman exists for every man in the world, so therefore there is one for him too. What he *has* cured himself of, on the other hand, is the idea that before finding the perfect woman you should get married to an imperfect one. . . ." Both Pina and Theodore Huff find Chaplin matrimonially deficient. Pina is happy to announce that Chaplin has had four children by Eugene O'Neill's daughter, and hopes that their 9-year marriage has proved that Chaplin is at last of marital age. Huff describes all the hoaxes the young nit-wits—or former beauty queens, as far as the press was concerned—played upon their legal prey. I would like to point out that he, Chaplin, has had four wives in forty years, and I consider that spacing them pretty well. He casts both of his sons from Lita Grey in *Limelight*, while she can still make money singing in expensive Hollywood night clubs. Paulette Goddard has done well enough, also. In none of these three books can one encounter a single act of Chaplin's that is prejudicial or harmful to the women he has known. I have heard rumors in Hollywood, and each one I traced proved without any more foundation than the rumorers and friends. This worked out politically as well as sexually, the two scores on which I find Chaplin the most misjudged.

All three of these books apotheosize Chaplin—Huff's is a bit more documented and (I can't say *hence*) adversely critical. As one who grew up without being particularly fond of Chaplin, I can say to readers of English: If you like Chaplin visually, get Huff's book. He unrolls the film for you so you don't miss a thing. If you like Chaplin as a brain, as an Einstein, as a Modigliani or a Schnabel, as an artist who can not be raved about too much—get Robert Payne's book, *The Great God Pan*. The clearer narrative, the more professional ("iris in, iris out") is Theodore Huff's, but a better rounded, if more British, appreciation is Payne's. He seems to apply the mouldy band-aids of Dickens to Chaplin's wounds, and he does not forget to firmly root his sub-

ject in the cockney quarter of London where Chaplin knew humanity could sink no lower, where the background was the rock-bottom one of gin and blood on cobblestones which the comedian still delineates to this day. For the Spanish reader, Sr. Pina, who is known for his study of Pío Baroja, has written a book which is rather a compendium of European opinions on Chaplin for the last thirty-five years. His analysis of Chaplin's matrimonial vicissitudes seen from the Spaniard's point of view should be of interest to Margaret Mead, or, if not, at least to some of her ex's.

Before closing, I wish to repeat my conviction that this nation should not go on record as having said twice "You Can't Go Home Again."

There is one home that people in all countries have and it is no nation. We can all feel at home in the heart of that comic we have an inalienable right to criticize.

In the light of present attacks upon Chaplin, I should like to remind his detractors that he is the man who wrote this conclusion to the impassioned cry which ended *The Great Dictator*:

*The hate of men will pass, and dictators
die,
And the power they took from the people
will return to the people.
And so long as men die, liberty will never
perish.*