

Call for papers

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The Tramp¹

The Great Deserter

Chaplin has become the greatest comedian because he has incorporated into himself the deepest fears of his contemporaries.

W. Benjamin

Tumbles, emigrations, unexpected gestures, ordinary situations overwhelmed by sudden events, inexhaustible and unpredictable escape routes, dominated by randomness and desire, by a revolt that rejects itself because, the Tramp (Charlot in several languages) knows nothing about himself. The Tramp does not inhabit another world, but staggers, stammers, falls, and runs, in the world he rejects without any specific awareness of what he is doing as already revealed in 1914 *Kid Auto Races at Venice, Cal.* the first, fabulous film-documentary where the tramp appears and the cinema becomes pure improvisation. The Tramp's desertion is a profound desertion of the unconscious, which probably could only come into being in the cinema. Yet the material character of existence is not forgotten in The Tramp; what it means to be poor (see, for example 1921 *The Kid*), to have nothing but remain (who knows how) free. In the maelstrom of misery, the chance of the greatest love, friendship, even happiness is unexpectedly given, knowing that it is a moment, a grace, devoid of any solidity or duration. In wandering, the Tramp only stages wandering, nothing more: the pure fragmentation of accidents in anyone's life.

The Tramp is born in front of a camera, and after more than twenty years, he vanishes, refusing to take the floor and deny his own abysmal difference. With *Modern Times*, The Tramp takes leave of the cinema, letting his own voice be heard, but it says nothing: it does not communicate, it does not speak, it does not convey any meaning, but emanates clandestine, almost barbarian, sounds, like an infant. For the Tramp, to take the floor, turns out to be an extreme gesture of misdirection.

We witness, in fact, the event of a (non)language that precedes and surpasses every language, identifying a threshold of extreme tension between silent and sound movies. After all, the Tramp thinks in images and therefore does not speak; he does not allow himself to be framed and recognised. Chaplin is lucid: the Tramp lives in gestures, not in words; he survives words but cannot embody them at the risk of losing the capacity to violate any *value* as if he were there by chance. The Tramp conceives the most radical parody of the world of security because he eschews every judgement and moral claims. On the contrary, he assumes no position of power, of superiority, but he simply profanes the structures of all orders through a delirious and joyous laughter. The Tramp desecrates every value: family, cars, mothers, freedom, country, authority, the film industry. He lays bare the phantasmagoria of the commodity and gives it the weight it has: a thing. Who is he? A homeless man who wears the deformed clothes of a grand lord: an aristocratic plebian. In short, he embodies a fierce antagonism by the mere fact of existing on-screen, by the mere fact of coming into the limelight.

¹ The Tramp is also known as Charlot in several languages

By unleashing a universal 'revolutionary laughter', the Tramp unhinges hierarchies, rules, and roles, always putting the Law in check. Who is the Tramp? Nobody knows. He does not say I. Perhaps he is the nameless of all names, the pure anonymity of those who are thrown to the front line, of those who must leave and are shipwrecked, of those who have nothing and yet know how to laugh, without showing any subordination to power; The blindfolded dance on the abyss in the department store in *Modern Times*, leaves no doubts: the Tramp moves into catastrophe; on the brink of the world's end. A catastrophe that no one can see and from which only those who, like him, know how to distance themselves by circling, resisting death can be saved. In other words, our survival is not delivered to what we can see but rather to what we can see, when we can no longer see (in particular, the Tramp can no longer see the goods in the warehouse). In the end, à la Benjamin, the Tramp places in catastrophe an absolute political chance to imagine another form of life.

The vagabond is the most marginalised of the marginalised, the most excluded of the excluded; with the latter, he does not even share the condition of the unemployed, which nevertheless remains inscribed within the coordinates of the social division of labour. However, this is exactly where cinema comes into play, showing how what history excludes and rejects is, therefore, not erased once and for all from history. Chaplin's silent movies are subversive because they allow a radical difference (i.e., the Tramp) to survive and be seen by employing a silent language, which cannot become a vehicle for any language or information.

The Tramp deserts desertion; he deserts revolution; he does not even make community with the wretches like himself; he lives in the pure contingency of randomness. He has no consciousness of his own marginality and therefore he is never a victim of situations but, on the contrary, he unpredictably governs them, unfailingly sniffing out how to save his skin. And yet, he is called to a pharaonic work: a popular and mass desertion. This is more or less what happens in *Strike* (1924), the first feature film by S.M. Ejzenstejn, who – not by chance and despite the distance - nurtured an unreserved admiration for Chaplin, so much so that he dedicated a piece of writing to him titled *Charlie "The Kid"* (1937) which was supposed to merge into his last theoretical work, *The Method* (1932-1948). The two met for the first time in Hollywood during Ejzenstejn's trip to the United States, and recognised each other: they were both critics of a universe that cinema should have transformed with its own means. Editing is, for Ejzenstejn, the instrument of this radical change i.e. a new order that cinema could give to things. In Chaplin, the same type of subversion is allowed by the ironic gesture. They both know this and make their cinema say it. The Tramp embodies Chaplin's anarchic dream: a cyclopean work of art capable of showing the power of nothingness: an overflowing anti-classism- that of the Tramp - orchestrated in the name of 'no class' but for a world to come where the red flag, as it happens in *Modern Times*, falls to the ground and anyone, a man who doesn't even recognise it, without any particular intention, can pick it up and start the impossible. The Tramp is thus the great deserter: a figure of the plebs of the world. Poverty is seen as a material condition, but at the same time as a chosen condition together with the waiver of, the desertion of any imposed or induced desire for well-being.

The Tramp questions any hendiadys. In *Modern Times*, for example, he does not want to leave his cell because, after all, the whole society defined by capitalist production constitutes an immense social prison for those who, like him, have nothing. To this extent, the Tramp does not resist simply because he is not against any power. He is always elsewhere when power is concerned. From this perspective, one could say that the Tramp embodies the eternal child: one can read childhood in Chaplin's cinema as a figure of desertion and thus as a force on the run from history.

The Tramp is certainly a figure that does not represent anything, nor can it be read as the mask of any poetic, philosophical, moral or political claim. The character played by Chaplin, is the always fragmented image, in which, from frame to frame, the movement of wandering comes into presence. In the course of *Modern Times*, the Tramp is arrested countless times. Yet the movement of which he is the intermittent image of, always leads him to take a further step, to make another departure/escape to who knows where. In this way, the actor-director enacts a gesture of subtraction that takes place at the last moment, in that 'moment of danger' in which, following Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*, a 'historical knowledge' is truly given. In this sense, we would, be dealing with a movement - that of the images of the Tramp assembled in the film - which, ambiguously, serially denies itself: with every step he takes, the little guy is

catapulted into a limbic space, where, for an instant, the movement ceases, risking to undermine any (pre)determination of its destination.

K. journal argues that the Tramp invented by Chaplin, the protagonist of silent films between 1914 and 1936, is a formidable materialisation of a conceptual figure linked to desertion. The lines of research may thus focus around the following areas of investigation:

- The Tramp and the war. *Shoulder Arms* (1918; Tramp soldier): desertion is first and foremost an affair of war. But, precisely in the film about the First World War, the Tramp's position presents some ambiguities: is it a denunciation of the war as such, of its madness, or is it the occasion for the Tramp to tolerate the logic of the state?

- The Tramp and the arts. Music and dance: The Tramp's dancing is an almost musical body that creates his universal language and becomes the main poetic and comic force of his art. It is also his political force because it is to the rhythm of his dances that the Tramp escapes from the world.

- The Tramp and Literature(s): The Tramp embodies the figure of a hero of interstitial life: those are the heroes who, after the thud of 19th-century positivist ideology, and the terrible crash of the Great War, "ask to live not above, nor within, but beneath history" (Mazzacurati). With this in mind, it would be interesting to study the possible friendship between the silhouette of the Tramp and certain famous anti-heroes of European literature: Monsieur Teste, Zeno Cosini, Mattia Pascal, Karl Rossmann, Leopold Bloom, Godot, etc., etc.

- The Tramp's language: why does the tramp refuse to speak? Rather than speaking, the hypothesis is that desertion is the result of a gesture. In this sense, all cinema (not only silent movies) that recognises the centrality of the image rather than words (the visible rather than the sayable, as Rancière puts it) is a reservoir within which to trace the very possibility of desertion, of derailment.

- Comedy and/or humour. As in Plessner and in Bergson, the comic (and the laughter it provokes) is the outcome of the sudden interruption of the supposed naturalness of the body's movements: the desertion of the human in favour of the machinic or animalistic. Comedy triggers laughter, but in Chaplin, it also aims to awaken reflection. What is at play then, only comedy or a particular form of 'humour'? What has the Tramp in common and what distinguishes him from other great examples in film history: from Buster Keaton to Jacques Tati, from the Marx Brothers to Peter Sellers, without forgetting Totò and the great tradition of Italian comedy?

- In 1927, when world cinema switched from silent to sound movies, Chaplin tried to organise a form of resistance by relying more and more on the musical eloquence of his films. It is in this way that he wants to defend his silent Tramp. How is the Tramp transformed when, the word and the images themselves, having become stentorian and omnipresent, spread across the globe? *Limelight* (1952) is an extraordinary film about the end of a world, but perhaps also about its possible 'survival' à la Benjamin

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