

The Tramp*

The Great Deserter

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 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 his voice says nothing: he does not communicate, he does not speak, he 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

* The Tramp is also known as Charlot in several languages. Charlot is “The Tramp” but, above all, is also “a” tramp. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Chaplin, in the credits of films featuring the “vagabond” as the protagonist, does not refer to himself as “The Tramp”, but rather as “a tramp”, with the indefinite article and without the capital letter, to emphasize the generic and universal features of his character.

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.

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.

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* (1940), 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.

Where does this movement of abandonment lead him? What form does his irrepressible desire for desertion take? The Tramp, blind to his condition and to the condition of his people, *sees* the truth of the phantasmagoria of merchandise: there is no longer any outside. Desires, passions, deliriums are captured in the spectrality of objects to be consumed. Charlot's clairvoyance is the evidence of his poetry: the illiterate poet announces that the universe we inhabit is a prison without limits. The bars of this jail lock people in battlefields, in Fordist factories, in the dreams that this economic system allows to emerge among the merchandise it ceaselessly produces. Charlot, the new *picaro*, lives in a world with no way out. And yet he moves.

Consider, for example, the end of Chaplin's film on the world of the circus (*The Circus*, 1928), in which he depicts the constant precariousness and disequilibrium - the ever-concrete possibility of catastrophe - in which *a Tramp*, like all his kind, lives. The Tramp remains alone as the circus caravans leave (he even deserts the world's most distant world). The camera moves away from his emotional face, from his particular silhouette, and rises to film Charlot from above. He really is tiny (*a tiny life*), enclosed within the circle drawn by the space where the big top once stood. *Limina*, a furrow drawn in the sand, imprisons him. This is the normal situation of the poor. Art, poetry and the circus cannot save them; they are illusions, as the worker and the girl in *Modern Times* will also testify.

Charlot sits down. He does not seem to find a way out. After a few seconds, he hops over the invisible bars and leaves. Why are there limits that enclose the character? Why is there this moment of suspension before he moves?

Charlot deserts in all his films. Even in his last, transfigured film performance, as Calvero in *Limelight*, the Tramp is a defector who abandons the world..., life itself. In fact, his desertion signals an im-possibility. The Tramp knows he is living in a world with no possible escape, where all he can do is create, fight and live for an impossible escape.