

Charlie Chaplin: Take Three

By Sheldon Goodman

Charlie Chaplin is a Don Quixote of wit whose flexible bamboo cane is no match for any lance and is infinitely more ridiculous. He is a Robin Hood with baggy pants who trips over his own oversized shoes and falls on his rear end, but gracefully. In fact, the whole secret of Chaplin's appeal is that he represents that moment in the transition to maturity when the child can look back at the humiliations and defeats of the toddler period, confident that he has now mastered the anguish but still sufficiently close to the experience to empathize with the awkwardness and to reassure himself that he is in control of the situation.

When Charlie walks into the sunset with a girl on his arms, we do not believe it for even the briefest of moments. We do savor it with the same suspension of disbelief that we accord art. We enjoy it with the same hopeful aspiration of the incredible, fairytale ending. We have no doubt that they will live happily ever after because it is never to be for Charlie Chaplin to succeed. We recognize the scenario as a fantasy and his masterful portrayals never let us forget this as it is deeply embedded in our collective minds that the anguish and hurt are reality in and we can never forget them either. Charlie Chaplin is the mythic hero of childhood, of childhood in any society who has survived in every adult. He is the incarnation of the reality denying, esteem raising, wish fulfilling fantasies of the toddler, overwhelmed by the confusion and pain, by the anxieties and humiliation of growing up in a world dominated by all-powerful adults, adults who are at

times experienced as arbitrary, capricious, tyrannical and threatening.

As Charlie does not use words or speak in his early movies we have come to appreciate that his humor comes from word play translated into the realm of motor activity. Much of what he does can be seen as motor puns or metaphoric jokes, similar to the word play that children use, when they have difficulty differentiating various word categories or separating similarities from identities. Part of the refusal that his characters portray resides in their not wanting to grow up, to accept the tyranny of rules of grammar and syntax. If shoelaces are long and stringy like spaghetti, why can't they be eaten? We might take a glance at another aspect of metaphoric confusion: the little child who unconsciously regards his feces as a valuable product and presents it as a gift of love to the parent. The parent perceives this as an act of aggression and defiance, Compare the scene in "Modern Times" where Charlie picks up the red flag which has fallen down behind or out of the truck. As a gesture of good will he picks up the flag and wishes to return it to the truck. Immediately a group of strikers fall in line behind him and Charlie is arrested as an agitator and revolutionary. His act of generosity is interpreted by the authorities as an act of rebellion.

Another example from "Modern Times" - in the opening sequences, shows Charlie working at the assembly line endlessly tightening nuts with his wrench. As the tempo of the machine picks up, his gestures become more frantic, the whole world has been reduced to the experience of tightening nuts with a wrench. By a primary process of displacement, everything in the world is conceived of as a nut provided it has the slightest resemblance to the nut. As we

would expect Charlie proceeds to behave accordingly. The situation becomes comic when he tries to do the same to two buttons strategically placed on a women's dress over where her nipples would be. This is displacement on the basis of similarity in form and permits a re-emergence of the unconscious sexual wish, under circumstances which can be interpreted as "innocent" because of the work mania.

Charlie is always embattled in a war he never declared. He appeals to the revolutionary latent in every individual who ever was a child, who ever felt hungry, frustrated and humiliated by the self-assured, power-centered world of grownups. This makes him a dangerous revolutionary because his constituency is practically all of mankind.

Charlie is the young child in rebellion against the tyranny of the secondary process over the pleasure principle and wish fulfillment. It makes him an enemy of logic and causality. The misconception of our world in terms of the child is a fantasy and experience is brought out in every level. "Modern Times" gives a wonderful caricature of coercive feeding where the child's experiences the mother's entreaty to "eat it's good for you".

Further elaboration of the fantasy of being devoured can be seen in "Modern Times" where Chaplin is incorporated into the machine and spewed out as well as in the "Gold Rush" where he appears in the guise of a potential chicken dinner. The essential feature in all of this is that Charlie remains totally unperturbed through all of this imparting an air of invulnerability and invincibility at precisely the moment of greatest anxiety. The most reassuring remembrance

of the lost sense of omnipotence is part of the process of maturation.

Charlie is always the outsider, the banished, the overlooked and the downtrodden. A child's view of their relationship with the world of adults- he is inferior in size, in power and in anatomical endowment. He tries to compensate for it by dressing up in a grownups clothes but it never works. No surprise, right? He is his own caricature of a child's attempt to pary unsuccessfully, but in doing so he also becomes a parody and caricature of the pretensions of the adult world. Most of Charlie's enemies are variations of grownups, the powerful and the rich, the self-centered and the snobbish. He tries to break into their circle but for him it inevitably is like trying to run into a closed door, he is inevitably thwarted but he never gives up. He represents the epitome of surface subservience and carries the banner of those who are defeated but unconquered, who yield but do not give in.

Chaplin is the essential undaunted, unwilling victim. He may be swallowed alive but he comes out whole. He exudes a self-assurance that we now acknowledge as being undeserved but nonetheless choose to believe it because it makes him and us fell better. He has an aplomb that can never be justified. Chaplin has become the prophet of the underprivileged. Momentarily, the prophecies may come true but no prophetic vision is ever realized. Charlie is the prophet of lost hopes and impossible dreams.

Charlie in his portrayals characterizing the infant became the unflagging mute accuser against mankind because this universal accusation of the infant becomes the universal accusation of the downtrodden.