

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno

Chaplin Times Two

Translated by John MacKay

Translator's Introduction

In his writings on contemporary culture, Theodor W. Adorno was inclined to treat laughter with suspicion, in particular the kind of laughter generated by popular film comedies and other products of the "culture industry." What received its comic comeuppance in such films, he claimed, was anything opposed to or unassimilable by the status quo; such mirth produced a false sense of liberation masking blind conformity to a cruel social order. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he glumly observed:

In the false society laughter is a disease which has attacked happiness and is drawing it into its worthless totality. To laugh at something is always to deride it, and the life which, according to Bergson, in laughter breaks through the barrier, is actually an invading barbaric life, self-assertion prepared to parade its liberation from any scruple when the social occasion arises. Such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity. Its members are monads, all dedicated to the pleasure of being ready for anything at the expense of everyone else. Their harmony is a caricature of solidarity. What is fiendish about this false laughter is that it is a compelling parody of the best, which is conciliatory. Delight is austere: *res severa verum gaudium*.¹

Nonetheless, like his associates Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, Adorno was a great admirer of the screen's most celebrated comedian: Charlie Chaplin. For all three men this admiration was informed by a sensitivity to the political overtones of Chaplin's work; Benjamin remarked that Chaplin had directed himself "toward both the most international and the most revolutionary affect of the masses--laughter,"² while Kracauer noted "a touch of utopia about [Chaplin's] challenges to space, time, and gravitation."³ The two brief essays which follow are Adorno's responses both to the tough poignancy of Chaplin's art and to Chaplin the man, whom he got to know during his Californian exile (1941-49). His comments, which culminate in a remarkable personal anecdote, hint at an alternative conception of laughter, of a critical laughter soberly aware of its own affinities to domination.

The first essay appeared under the title "Kierkegaard prophesies Chaplin" in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 22, 1930; the second as "Chaplin in Malibu" in *Neue [End Page 57] Rundschau*, Vol. 3, 75th year, 1964; they first appeared together under the present title in the volume *Ohne Leitbild* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 89-93.—jkm

I

Prophesied by Kierkegaard

In *Repetition*, one of his earlier pseudonymous writings, Kierkegaard gives a detailed treatment of farce, true to a conviction which often leads him to seek, in the refuse of art, that which eludes the pretensions of art's great self-contained works. He speaks there of the old Friedrichstädter Theater in Berlin and describes a comedian named Beckmann⁴ whose image evokes, with the mild fidelity of a daguerreotype, that of the Chaplin who was to come. The passage reads:

He is not only able to walk, but he is also able to come walking. To come walking is something very distinctive, and by means of this genius he also improvises the whole scenic setting. He is able not only to portray an itinerant craftsman; he is also able to come walking like one and in such a way that one experiences everything, surveys the smiling hamlet from the dusty highway, hears its quiet noise, sees the footpath that goes down by the village pond when one turns off there by the blacksmith's-- where one sees [Beckmann] walking along with his little bundle on his back, his stick in his hand, untroubled and undaunted. He can come walking onto the stage followed by street urchins whom one does not see.⁵

The one who comes walking is Chaplin, who brushes against the world like a slow meteor even where he seems to be at rest; the imaginary landscape that he brings along is the meteor's aura, which gathers here in the quiet noise of the village into transparent peace, while he strolls on with the cane and hat that so become him. The invisible tail of street urchins is the comet's tail through which the earth cuts almost unawares. But when one recalls the scene in *The Gold Rush* where Chaplin, like a ghostly photograph in a lively film, comes walking into the gold mining town and disappears crawling into a cabin, it is as if his figure, suddenly recognized by Kierkegaard, populated the cityscape of 1840 like staffage; from this background the star only now has finally emerged.

II

In Malibu

The fact that profundity is irritated by profound topics, that it would rather, according to Benjamin's phrase, latch onto that which is devoid of intention, would be reckoned a good thing if only profundity, so self-satisfied and untrammelled by an object, would not then wear itself out. For the most part, [End Page 58] profundity uses unhackneyed topics as a pretext for vagueness and banality, exploiting the apparent inability to resist of that which from itself sets forth no meanings and which possibly, to the extent of its immediacy, itself tends toward banality or stupidity just like the empty ideas on which it is sharpened by the clever mind. The link between mind and clown is as understandable as it is unfortunate. The children's darling is spared no demonology; one owes it to him to certify once again the laughter he arouses before decorating him with the trumpery of great categories, which hang more loosely and less amusingly on him than his traditional costume. At least he should be allowed a long and thorough grace period. Psychoanalysis tries to relate the clown-figure to the reaction formations of earliest childhood, before any crystallization of a stable self. As always the situation is the same: more information about the clown is to be found among children who, as mysteriously as they do with animals, communicate with his image and with the meaning of his activity, which in fact negates meaning. Only one capable in the language common to the clown and to children, a language distanced from sense, would understand the clown himself, in whom fleeing Nature bids a shocked adieu, like the old man in the illustration "Winter ade": Nature, so pitilessly suppressed by the process of becoming an adult, is, like that language, irrecoverable by adults. Its loss demands silence, and especially in the face of Chaplin. For his precedence over other clowns, among whose number he proudly counts himself--as far as I know, their club is the only one to which he belongs-- encourages interpretations which inflict more injury

the higher they elevate him. In this way they move away from the conundrum whose solution is the only interpretive task worthy of Chaplin.

I do not wish to offend in this way. Only because I knew him many years ago would I stress, without any philosophical pretensions, two or three observations which might contribute to a descriptive account of his image [zur ecriture seines Bildes]. It is known how different Chaplin looks in private from the vagabond on the screen. However, this difference pertains not only to his *soigné* elegance, which as clown he in turn parodies, but to expression. This has nothing to do with sympathy towards a begging, abandoned and unshreddable victim. Rather, his powerful, explosive and quick-witted agility recalls a predator ready to pounce. Only through this bestial quality would earliest childhood have brought itself safely into wide-awake life. There is something about the empirical Chaplin that suggests not that he is a victim but rather, menacingly, that he would seek victims, pounce on them, tear them apart. One can well imagine that Chaplin's cryptic dimension, or precisely that which makes this most perfect clown more than his genus, is connected with the fact that he as it were projects upon the environment his own violence and dominating instinct [sein [End Page 59] Gewaltsames und Beherrschendes], and through this projection of his own culpability produces that innocence which endows him with more power than all power possesses. A vegetarian Bengal tiger: comforting, because his goodness, which the children cheer, is itself in a compact with the very evil that in vain seeks to destroy him--in vain, for he had already destroyed that evil in his own image. Presence of mind and omnipresence of mimetic ability also characterize the empirical Chaplin. It is well known that he does not confine his mimetic arts strictly to the films which, since his youth, he produces only over great intervals of time and in an intensely and openly self-critical spirit. He acts incessantly, just like Kafka's trapeze artist, who sleeps in the baggage rack so as not to ease off training even for a moment. Any time spent with him is an uninterrupted performance. One scarcely dares speak to him, not from awe of his fame--no one could set himself less apart, no one could be less pretentious than he--but rather from fear of disturbing the spell of the performance. It is as though he, using mimetic behavior, caused purposeful, grown-up life to recede, and indeed the principle of reason itself, thereby placating it. But this endows his incarnate existence with an imaginary element beyond the official artforms. If Chaplin the private citizen lacks the features of the famous clown (as though these features were under a taboo), he has all the more of the juggler about him. The Rastelli of mime,⁹ he plays with the countless balls of his pure possibility, and fixes its restless circling into a fabric that has little more in common with the causal world than Cloudcuckooland has with the gravitation of Newtonian physics. Incessant and spontaneous change: in Chaplin, this is the utopia of an existence that would be free of the burden of being-one's-self. His lady killer was schizophrenic. Perhaps I may justify my speaking about him by recounting a certain privilege which I was granted, entirely without having earned it. He once imitated me, and surely I am one of the few intellectuals to whom this happened and to be able to account for it when it happened. Together with many others we were invited to a villa in Malibu, on the coast outside of Los Angeles. While Chaplin stood next to me, one of the guests was taking his leave early. Unlike Chaplin, I extended my hand to him a bit absent-mindedly, and, almost instantly, started violently back. The man was one of the lead actors from *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a film famous shortly after the war; he lost a hand during the war, and in its place bore practicable claws made of iron.¹⁰ When I shook his right hand and felt it return the pressure, I was extremely startled, but sensed immediately that I could not reveal my shock to the injured man at any price. In a split second I transformed my frightened expression into an obliging grimace that must have been far ghastlier. The actor had hardly moved away when Chaplin was already playing the scene back. All the laughter he brings about is so near to cruelty; solely in such proximity to cruelty does it find its [End Page 60] legitimation and its element of the salvational. Let my remembrance of this event and my thanks be my congratulations to him on his 75th birthday.