

Virginia Cherrill... A Blind Girl
 Florence Lee... The Blind Girl's Grandmother
 Harry Myers... An Eccentric Millionaire
 Al Ernest Garcia... The Eccentric Millionaire's Butler (as Allan Garcia)
 Hank Mann... A Prizefighter
 Charlie Chaplin... A Tramp
 Jean Harlow... Extra in restaurant scene
 Produced and Directed by Charles Chaplin
 Written by Charles Chaplin, Harry Clive, Harry Crocker
 Original Music by Charles Chaplin
 Cinematography by Gordon Pollock and Roland Totheroh
 Edited Charles Chaplin and Willard Nico

Selected for the National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board, 1991

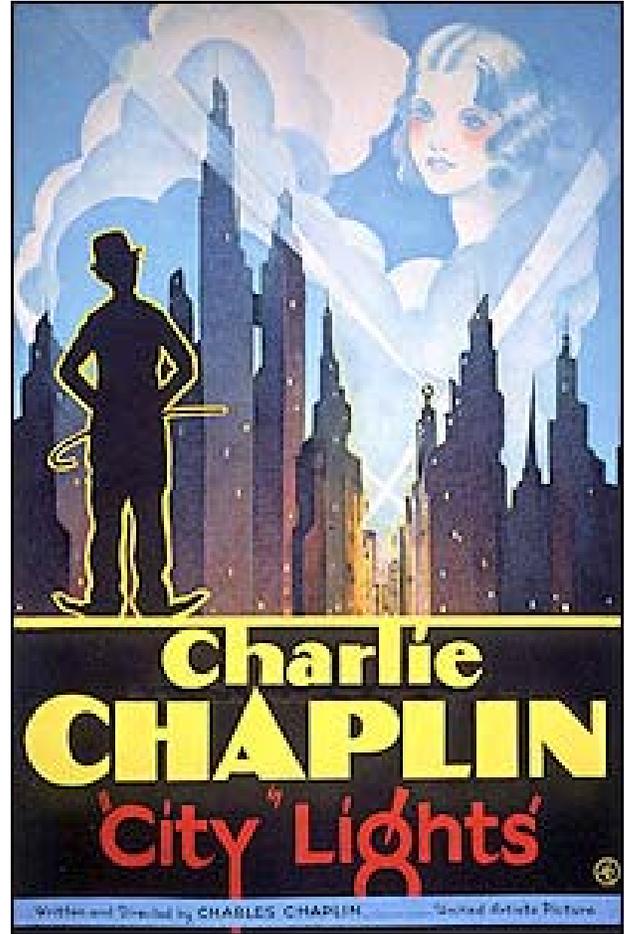
CHARLES CHAPLIN (16 April 1889, Walworth, London, England—25 December 1977, Vevey, Switzerland) acted in 87 films, beginning with *Making a Living* 1914, and ending with *A Countess from Hong Kong* 1967. He directed 75 of those films, beginning with *Twenty Minutes of Love* 1914, and he also produced most and edited many of them. He also wrote the music for the sound films. He won a Best Music Oscar in 1973 for *Limelight*, which had been released in 1952 but didn't open in Los Angeles until 1972, hence ineligible under Academy rules for 20 years. He was given an Honorary Oscar for his entire career in 1972 and an earlier one for *The Circus* in 1929. He had been nominated for best actor that year, but the Academy gave him the Special Award "for versatility and genius in writing, directing and producing *The Circus*." He received best actor, best picture and best original screenplay nominations for *The Great Dictator* 1940 and a best original screenplay nomination for *Monsieur Verdoux* 1947. Some of his other films are *A King in New York* 1957, *Limelight* 1952, *The Great Dictator* 1940 (as Adenoid Hynkel, Dictator of Tomania and A Jewish Barber), *Modern Times* 1936, *Camille* 1926, *The Gold Rush* 1925, *Nice and Friendly* 1922, *The Kid* 1921, *A Dog's Life* 1918, *The Immigrant* 1917, *The Cure* 1917, *Easy Street* 1917, *The Floorwalker* 1916, *The Champion* 1915, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* 1914, *The Face on the Bar Room Floor* 1914, *Mabel's Married Life* 1914, *Mabel's Busy Day* 1914.

VIRGINIA CHERRILL (12 April 1908, Carthage, Illinois—14 November 1996, Santa Barbara, California) appeared in 14 films. The first was *City Lights*, the last, *Trouble Waters* 1936. **FLORENCE LEE** (12 March 1888, Vermont—1 September 1962, Hollywood) acted in 99 films, the last of which was *City Lights*. The first was *Teaching Her Dad to Like Her* 1911. **HARRY MEYERS** (5 September 1882, New Haven—25 December 1938, Hollywood, pneumonia) appeared in 245 films. The first was *The Guerilla* (1908) Toward the end he was often uncredited. Until nearly the middle, his character never got a name. When he did get a name it was Arthur Weatherbee, Lt. Du Fresne, Listen Lester, Henri de Latour, Count Zappata, Amos P. Stitch, Drunk, Nervous Patient, Berwiskey, and, in *Zenobia*, his last film, released the year after his death, Party Guest Who Didn't Mind.

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CHAPLIN, Sir CHARLES (SPENCER) (April 16, 1889-December 25, 1977), Anglo-American clown, star, director, producer, writer, and composer, was born and raised in the working-class London districts of Walworth, Lambeth, and Kennington. His parents, both music-hall entertainers, had fallen on hard times. Chaplin's baritone father, also named Charles, had taken to the bottle and to beating

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 Charles Chaplin, *CITY LIGHTS* (1931) 87 minutes



his fragile soubrette wife, Hannah. Before Chaplin was three, his father deserted the family for another woman, leaving Hannah to sink into the insanity that marked the rest of her life. The young Chaplin and his older half-brother, Sydney, lived for a while with Chaplin senior and his mistress, and in 1898 Chaplin was briefly reunited with his mother, whom he adored. However, he spent his childhood mostly in public charity homes and on the streets, where he quickly learned the power of money and propriety, while

carefully observing the little jobs and stratagems that allowed the least fortunate members of society to survive.

According to Chaplin. He made his music hall debut at the age of five, taking his mother's place on stage one evening when she lost her voice. His career began in earnest in the summer of 1898. Though he was not from Lancashire, he became one of the Eight Lancashire Lads, a children's music troupe that toured England's provincial music halls. The featured role of Billy in *Sherlock Holmes*, first with H.A. Saintsbury in a 1903 tour of the provinces, then with its original American author and star, William Gillette, brought Chaplin to London's West End. In 1907 he joined Fred Karno's Pantomime Troupe, England's most accomplished company of physical farceurs (whose alumni also included Stan Laurel). By 1908 Chaplin had risen to be Karno's star attraction, specializing in his dexterous portrayal of a comic drunk—a routine he would recreate in films over the next forty years. Between 1909 and 1913 Chaplin accompanied the Karno troupe on tours to Paris and the United States. On his second tour he received an offer to join Mack Sennett's Keystone Company in Hollywood. Mabel Normand, Sennett's leading comedienne, Adam Kessel, co-owner of the Keystone Company, and Sennett himself all take credit for discovering Chaplin in the Karno act.

Chaplin arrived on the Sennett lot in December 1913 with a contract for a year's work at \$150 per week. He had been making only \$50 weekly as a star of the music hall stage. His first reaction to the movie business was a combination of shock and dismay. Accustomed to the temporal continuity of stage comedy, Chaplin couldn't understand how a scene or routine could be cut into non-chronological pieces. Compared with the careful comic craftsmanship of the Karno crew, he found Sennett's method careless, sloppy, and crude. Working frantically to produce at least two comic reels a week, Sennett never invested time in deepening the texture or complicating the structure of gags. The Sennett style showed less interest in comic observations of human behavior than in run, bash, smash, and crash. "Chaplin was used to a slower, subtler, and more individual pantomime," according to Theodore Huff, his first major biographer. Chaplin's first Keystone comedy, *Making a Living* (1914), dressed him in a stereotypic English music hall outfit, then kept him racing across the frame for an entire reel. But his second Keystone film, *Kid Auto Races at Venice*, was the comic revelation in which Chaplin assembled his trademark Tramp costume for the first time—bowler hat, reedy cane, baggy pants (borrowed from Fatty Arbuckle), floppy shoes (borrowed from Ford Sterling).

Like many Keystone films, *Kid Auto Races* was improvised around an actual event—the racing of homemade cars on a weekend afternoon. The Tramp arrives to watch the races but meets an unexpected challenge—a movie camera and crew recording the event, presumably for a newsreel. In an unstructured half-reel of improvised clowning, Chaplin plays two comic games with the supposed newsreel camera: he makes himself the star of the newsreel and he resists any attempt of the camera crew to boot him out of its frame.

Chaplin's remaining Keystone films of 1914 come directly from *Kid Auto Races*. They demonstrate the Tramp's plucky refusal to be pushed around by anyone: any kick you can give me I can give back harder. And they demonstrate the way Chaplin can convert an inanimate object, like a movie camera, into a living opponent. ...

Most of his Keystones stick with familiar Sennett material—aggressive physical objects; a kick in the butt and a romp

around the park, propelled by three states of inebriation: drunk, drunker, and drunkest. It was a period when, as Chaplin later observed, you made a movie by taking Mabel Normand, a bucket of whitewash, and a camera to a park and improvising. Chaplin began to direct his films. Among the most interesting, pointing toward later work, was *The New Janitor*. Charlie, the lowly janitor of an office building, saves a pretty secretary from attack by a thief. In a deliberate irony, the thief turns out to be a "respectable" employee of the firm, the handsome gent to whom the secretary was previously attracted. By protecting her from this apparent pillar of rectitude, Chaplin demonstrates that he is the worthier man and that society's conceptions of worth based on good looks and social graces are themselves askew. In many later films Chaplin's Tramp would demonstrate his moral worth by protecting a fragile, idealized woman against foes bigger, stronger, richer than himself.

By the end of his Keystone year, Chaplin had become so popular in America's nickelodeons that merely displaying the Tramp's wooden effigy with the words "I'm here today" would attract long lines of loyal fans. Sennett offered Chaplin five times his 1914 salary, \$750 per week, for another year at Keystone, but the Essanay Company of Chicago offered Chaplin \$1250 per week, plus a \$10,000 bonus upon signing. Chaplin left Hollywood for Chicago. After two films he transferred to the Essanay lot in California, where he could escape both the winter chill and a hostile management.

Chaplin's year at Essanay was a transitional period between the knockabout Sennett farces and the more subtle comedies of psychological observation and moral debate that mark the mature Chaplin....His sixth film at Essanay, *The Tramp*...was the first film in which Chaplin was fully conscious of both his Tramp persona and the relationship of that persona to the respectable social world. As in *The New Janitor*, Chaplin's Tramp protects a frail woman from physical harm—this time from fellow tramps, members of his own "class." (The actress, Edna Purviance, joined Chaplin's troupe early in his Essanay year. She was to play the idealized woman in every Chaplin film for the next eight years, and she remained on the Chaplin payroll until her death in 1958.)...

This ending—the Tramp's disappointment and return to the road—would dominate Chaplin films for two decades, a recognition that the Tramp's life was the road, that singularity meant solitude....In his Essanay films Chaplin defined the central conflict for the Tramp as between the world of the "straight" and his own personal system of morality and value. The Tramp could resist (and implicitly criticize) the "straight" obsession with property because his needs were more elemental—survival, shelter, food, and love. And the Tramp could either flout or poignantly refine upon the niceties that meant so much to the respectable world. Chaplin's cinema style also gradually abandoned Sennett's mechanical reliance on editing—building scenes quickly and cheaply from small snippets. Instead, Chaplin drew on the lesson of the musical soup in *His Trysting Places*, seeking the precise camera position to convey the essential view, tone, and meaning of an intricately choreographed routine: "With more experience I found that the placing of a camera was not only psychological but articulated a scene; in fact, it was the basis of cinematic style." Chaplin's technique would always depend on framing rather than cutting—the precise organization of persons, objects, and their movements within a stable, psychologically defined space. Chaplin met a key collaborator at Essanay, the cameraman Rollie Totheroh, who would shoot every Chaplin film—and only Chaplin films—until his death in 1946.

As Chaplin's comic theme and cinema style matured at Essanay, his popularity grew at an astonishing rate. Essanay offered \$500,000 for another year of two-reel films. It wasn't enough. In late 1915 he signed a contract with the Mutual Film Company for \$10,000 per week and a bonus of \$150,000 upon signing. In return, Chaplin was to supply a dozen two-reel films which he would write, direct, and perform as he pleased. The contract for only twelve films—one per month—allowed Chaplin to slow his pace of production so as to invest more time in comic detail, structure, and observation (compared to thirty-five Keystone films in 1914 and fourteen at Essanay in 1915). The twelve Mutual films actually required eighteen months of work. Chaplin had begun to exercise his mania for perfection in the conception and complication of comic routines—rehearsing, shooting, and reshooting them until the extended sequences were perfectly executed by camera, cast, and star. By 1917, Chaplin was exposing 50,000 feet of film for a two-reel (2000 feet) Mutual comedy, an astonishing shooting ratio of 25 to 1, which would later swell to 100 to 1. (In comparison, major feature films today expect a shooting ratio of, perhaps, 9 to 1, with the shooting ratio for television about half that.)

The twelve Mutual films in 1916-1917 represented the fruit of Chaplin's experience with the twenty-minute comedy: comic gems of social commentary and psychological observation, of balletic chases and transmutations of inanimate objects into almost sentient beings—all built on an exact understanding of who the Tramp was, how he saw the respectable social world, and how it saw him..... With the close of the Mutual cycle in mid-1917, both Chaplin's life and career reached a turning point. For four years he had done little but make films, steadily increasing his artistic control, confidence in his medium, understanding of his Tramp character, and popularity with his public. The new contract he signed in 1918 looked no different from previous ones but was to prove so: a \$1 million agreement with the First National Exhibitors Circuit. This alliance of theater owners, battling the growing power of film production companies, contracted directly with stars like Chaplin for films. Chaplin built his own film studio in 1918 at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and La Brea Avenue in Hollywood. Like his previous Mutual contract, the First National agreement called for a dozen two-reel comedies in a year. In point of fact, it took Chaplin five years, during which he made just eight films, only three of which were two-reelers....Three First Nationals were three-reelers...one was four...and one was six. Chaplin was both slowing the pace of his work and extending the length of his comic explorations.

The public notoriety that became as much a Chaplin trademark as his bowler hat also reached him in 1918. Chaplin both benefited and suffered from the avid public interest in movies and movie stars during the decade following 1910, as Hollywood grew into the world's most powerful producer of cultural messages and images. With the single exception of Mary Pickford, no movie star was as well known and well loved as Chaplin, the first twentieth-century "superstar" created by the century's global media. Even a Chaplin sneeze was news, and Chaplin did more than sneeze. In 1918 he toured the country with his friend Douglas Fairbanks, raising money for war bonds, a response to those who asked why Chaplin was not fighting for King and Country in the trenches. He was also married for the first time in 1918—to Mildred Harris, thirteen years his junior and "no intellectual heavyweight," in Chaplin's own words. The marriage established a new Chaplin pattern—the surprise marriage to a very young bride (rumored to be



pregnant), ending quickly in rancorous and highly publicized divorce—in this case in 1920.

In 1919 Chaplin and three other famous figures of the day, D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks, formed the United Artists Corporation to finance and distribute their own films—the first concerted exercise of Hollywood artists on their own commercial behalf. Chaplin took a trip abroad in 1921, visiting England for the first time in eight years. He was amazed at the enormous crowds who sought a glimpse of him at docks and railway stations. Even the most distinguished men of the age—Churchill, Gandhi, H.G. Wells, Bernard Shaw—wanted to meet him. For a rising younger generation of European artists and thinkers, no one combined the popular appeal and the artistic insight of Chaplin, the ultimate artist of the people in an increasingly democratic society. The cultural critic Robert Warshaw found it no hyperbole to call Chaplin “surely one of the few comic geniuses who have appeared so far in history.”

Between travels through America, Europe, the marriage bureau, and the divorce court Chaplin worked with both intensity and brilliance. *A Dog's Life*, which opened the First National series in 1918, was longer and richer than any film he had previously attempted. Demonstrating his ever-deepening understanding of the Tramp's moral values and social limits, Chaplin created his first tramp-surrogate, the mongrel Scraps—an outcast who must fight to survive in a world of tougher, bigger dogs. ...The film's extended comic sequences show Tramp and mongrel working either separately or together toward the same end—usually something to eat. *Shoulder Arms* moved from the metaphoric to the topical—transporting the Tramp to the battlefield trenches of Europe. As he had done in *Easy Street*, Chaplin converted the serious and sordid into hilarious comedy—the daily struggle to survive against not only bullets but fleas, rats, and mud. As in *The Bank*, the Tramp's

heroic triumph, capturing a German general, is followed by a rude awakening that reveals his heroism “over there” as mere dream.

After these two triumphs Chaplin suffered a major disappointment and his career seemed to mark time for two years. *Sunnyside* was the first Chaplin film not to find favor with his public, a sarcastic look at the Tramp in rural America. As he had done in *Easy Street* and *Shoulder Arms*, Chaplin exposed the uglier, dirtier side of life. *Sunnyside* is not at all sunny, a debunking of the rural idyll’s claims to moral purity and Christian charity. Despite its failure, several sequences rate among Chaplin’s most memorable: his dreaming himself into the role of an allegorical Pan, cavorting across meadows with classical nymphs; his comic failure to duplicate the style and manner of the handsome city slicker whom he sees as a rival for Edna’s affections.



More than eighteen months elapsed before *The Kid* appeared, his longest and most ambitious film, a response to his crumbling marriage and the death of a stillborn child that, according to Mildred Harris, ended it. *The Kid* combined the Victorian melodrama and pathos of *The Vagabond*, the tramp-surrogate of *A Dog’s Life*, the vicious urban struggle to survive of *Easy Street*, and the allegorical dream of *Sunnyside*. In the film’s opening sequence, Edna, an unwed mother, rejected by a callous artist-lover, gives birth to a child that she abandons, hoping it will find a legitimate, richer life with an adopted family. Although she considers suicide, Edna stays alive to become a successful actress and enjoy a reunion with the long-lost child. Chaplin makes explicit use of Christian symbolism, comparing the burden of the unwed mother to Christ’s carrying the heavy cross.

The child’s adoptive parent turns out to be the wandering Tramp, who finds the infant bundle in a garbage-filled alley....In the film’s final sequence, when a desolate Charlie fears that Jackie has gone forever, Chaplin offers a dream-allegory of the Fall of Man, a pastiche of *Paradise Lost* that contrasts human aspirations toward the Good with the overwhelming realities and temptations of mortal existence. The lascivious temptress in this dream was played by twelve-year-old Lita Grey, who would become Chaplin’s real-life temptress—both his second girl-wife (in 1924) and his second ex-wife (in 1926). The ending in *The Kid* was much more felicitous. Edna alleviates the Tramp’s despair, just as she had in *The Vagabond*, by returning for him and inviting him into her comfortable home for a joyous reunion with Jackie. The question that this ending avoids is whether the Tramp could in fact ever inhabit such a house.

The final film of the First National group, returns to this question....

Chaplin’s first United Artists production was another daring departure. *A Woman of Paris* (1923) was not a slapstick farce but a witty comedy of manners set in the demimonde of Paris. The Tramp does not exist in such a milieu, and Chaplin himself appears only briefly as a railway porter....The film was also Chaplin’s farewell gift to Edna Purviance, her final starring role in a Chaplin film. Growing both stouter and older than the Tramp’s fragile ideal, Edna once more plays a woman led astray by men. When Marie St. Clair (Edna) believes herself abandoned by her artist lover, she becomes the most famous courtesan of Paris, kept by its most elegant bachelor, Pierre Revel (Adolphe Menjou appearing for the first time in the role that was to become his specialty). Even without the Tramp, Chaplin’s cinematic style depended on the dextrous manipulation of physical objects to reveal the sly sexual intentions of their human handlers. This first elegantly stylish comedy of manners in the American cinema, reflecting Jazz Age interest in the rich and decadent, became a powerful influence on Ernst Lubitsch, the eventual grand master of the genre.

Chaplin’s next four features for United Artists, his entire artistic output for the next decade, return to the Tramp and his conflict with “normal” American social expectations. The four films—*The Gold Rush* (1925), *The Circus* (1927), *City Lights* (1931), and *Modern Times* (1936)—form a distinct unit, which might be called Chaplin’s “marriage group.” All four return to the question posed by the ending of *The Kid*: under what circumstances might the Tramp marry and settle down with a woman in ordinary bourgeois society? The films suggest four different answers under four different circumstances. Having struck it rich in *The Gold Rush*, the Tramp becomes an acceptable mate for Georgia (Hale), who has learned the worthlessness of good-looking suitors who exploit her sexually. But in *The Circus*, Charlie fails to fulfill Merna Kennedy’s vision of romance, embodied for her by the tightrope walker, Rex. After bringing the two lovers together, the Tramp takes his lonely leave, returning to the road once more. *City Lights* cannot supply an answer. Having fallen in love with a blind flower-seller (Virginia Cherrill) who loved him for his kindness but imagined him as handsome and rich, Charlie fears that he will disappoint her once she recovers her sight. Though Charlie was her social equal when she was blind, how can the two share a life when she is able to see him, a lowly tramp? The film’s poignant ending—“The greatest piece of acting and the highest moment in movies,” according to the critic James Agee—closes on this unanswered question. In *Modern Times*, however, Charlie finds his female equal in the Gamin (Paulette Goddard), a homeless child of nature who, like Charlie (and Scraps and Jackie) belongs nowhere in organized society. Charlie and Paulette flee to the road—traveling together, away from the camera, toward some place beyond the horizon.

Chaplin extended the length and complexity of his comic routines at the same time that he deepened the conflict between the ethereal Tramp and the material world.

...Between *The Circus* and *City Lights*, the arrival of synchronized sound overthrew silent film production in Hollywood. Silence was not something imposed on Chaplin; it was the medium in which the Tramp lived—he had never even mouthed words. Chaplin made what seemed a radical decision in 1931 and a sensible decision ever after: to make *City Lights* as a silent mimed comedy with musical scoring and sound effects. A skilled though self-taught musician on the violin and cello, Chaplin himself

composed the score for the film, as he did for all his sound films, as well as adding musical tracks to silent classics. Chaplin is the only film director to win an Oscar for composing, and one of two directors (Victor Schertzinger is the other) to write hit songs: “Smile,” the theme of *Modern Times*, and “Eternally,” that of *Limelight*.

In *City Lights*, Chaplin’s music established and emphasized the film’s variations in tone—the farcical adventures of the Tramp with a drunken millionaire, set to bouncy brass; the touching scenes of the Tramp with the blind flower-seller, set to sentimental strings. In the music contrast was the thematic contrast. The millionaire, who enjoyed every material advantage, was spiritually barren—a loveless, suicidal drunk. The flower-seller, enjoying no material advantages whatever, not even sight, was spiritually rich (flowers had been a consistent Chaplin symbol of spiritual beauty since the 1915 Essanay, *A Night Out*). The Tramp could travel between the two extremes because the drunk millionaire was as blind as the girl to external appearances. The Tramp’s journey between them represented the spirit of absolute selflessness, the Christ figure toward which this character’s entire development had tended. He undergoes baptism (with the suicidal millionaire in a river), raises the dead (convincing the millionaire not to take his life), cures the blind, is denied three times (whenever the millionaire is sober enough to see), suffers crucifixion (prison), and resurrection (when he finds that the girl can see). Perhaps the film cannot end with a marriage because the vow of chastity accompanies that of poverty.

Modern Times can end with a marriage because the Tramp returns from the spiritual realm to the physical world of human survival—in modern, urban, Depression America...He had also secretly married Paulette Goddard in 1936 after a four-year romance. Perhaps the ending of *Modern Times* announced Chaplin’s intention to resign the battle and retire to domestic comfort. He would not do so until after another marriage and another stormy decade.

Chaplin’s final three American films were conventional dialogue films with unconventional twists: *The Great Dictator* (1940), *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), and *Limelight* (1952). In *The Great Dictator* Chaplin played two contrasting social roles (as he did in *A Night in the Show* and *The Idle Class*): a Jewish barber in the ghetto, resembling the Tramp in manner and appearance; and Adenoid Hynkel, dictator of Tomania, a burlesque of Hitler whose toothbrush moustache infringed upon another Chaplin trademark. The film was made before the facts were known about the Nazi death camps, and Chaplin claims he never would have made it if he had known. His burlesque reflects general American opinion in 1940, treating Hitler as a maniacal clown. In its most memorable sequence, Hynkel becomes a cooch dancer, performing a hypnotic bubble dance with a globe of the earth, the ethereal balloon of his imperial desires. For two decades Chaplin had depicted the Tramp’s dreaming that collapses in the cold light of day. Here the Tramp’s illusion becomes a dictator’s delusion of grandeur, burst by a cathartic pin.

Monsieur Verdoux is another political fable.... Verdoux is a man with many lives and many wives, whose business is marrying and murdering for money. Having lost his job as a bank teller during the Depression, Verdoux marries rich, repellent, elderly ladies and kills them to support his beloved wife and child on an idyllic farm. The film draws explicit parallels between Verdoux’s murderous trade and more acceptable professions—munitions

manufacture, stock trading, banking—which have brought death and social chaos on a much grander scale....

Americans began to connect Chaplin’s savage political positions on screen with his perceived political stance offscreen. For Chaplin it was a decade of continuous legal and public turmoil. Having appeared at 1942 rallies supporting a Russian counterattack on Germany (the Second Front), Chaplin became the target of right-wing suspicion and FBI investigation. Most items in J. Edgar Hoover’s Chaplin file turned out to be morsels from the gossip columns of Louella Parsons in the right-wing Hearst press, many planted by Hoover himself. Conservative pressure groups asked why Chaplin should be permitted to make so many American dollars without becoming an American citizen. He even owed the Internal Revenue Service a significant amount in unpaid taxes on those profits. Chaplin was divorced from Paulette Goddard in 1942 and in 1943 married Oona O’Neill, the playwright’s youngest daughter—the fourth time Chaplin (now 54) had married a much younger woman (she was 18). The marriage was almost simultaneous with Chaplin’s most scandalously publicized legal battle: Joan Barry’s 1943 paternity suit naming Chaplin as her lover of two years and the father of her child. Although Chaplin denied her claims and genetic evidence refuted them, the court ruled for Barry. *Monsieur Verdoux* was Chaplin’s first box-office failure since *Sunnyside*.

Even amid public hostility in the 1952 America of Joseph McCarthy, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and Hollywood blacklisting, Chaplin made a final affectionate tribute to his art and its traditions. *Limelight* was another film in which Chaplin played multiple roles—or rather the same character at different times of his life. He is Calvero, now an old, drunken has-been, rejected by his audience (as Chaplin himself had suffered rejection), but, once, forty years earlier, a star music-hall comedian. The old man’s dream sequences evoke memories and recreate routines of Chaplin’s youth, classic music-hall sketches that suggest not only the Tramp but the entire tradition of comic mime from which the Tramp grew. Not accidentally, Chaplin’s final routine in the film is what Warshaw called an “unendurably funny” comic duet with Buster Keaton, another silent clown-star with roots in the same tradition....

After completing *Limelight* Chaplin and Oona took the usual trip abroad for the film’s European release. Not being a citizen, Chaplin needed advance permission to return to the United States. After a series of interrogations about his political beliefs, the State Department finally issued a reentry permit—only to revoke it



as soon as the *Queen Elizabeth* left the dock in New York. Chaplin received a shipboard cable informing him that he would be required “to answer charges of a political nature and moral turpitude.” While politely pretending to answer those charges in London, Chaplin quietly sent Oona back to America to liquidate his assets—from the Beverly Hills mansion to the United Artists company to the Sunset Boulevard studio. The Chaplin family moved to Switzerland, where they lived comfortably for twenty-five years. The family eventually included eight children, the oldest—Geraldine—now an actress.

Chaplin refused to return to America for two decades—long after the State Department had relented—but in 1972 the Motion Picture Academy awarded him a conciliatory Oscar, and he made a triumphal visit to receive it. His feature films, which had also been withdrawn from American circulation for two decades (an exception was a brief New York retrospective in 1963), were released to a generation that had never seen them. In 1975 Chaplin, the former London street urchin and eternal Tramp, was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

Chaplin made two last films in exile, *A King in New York* (1957), a bitterly clumsy satire of contemporary American culture, and *A Countess From Hong Kong* (1967), a sweetly clumsy return to *A Woman of Paris*, in color and Cinemascope, with Sophia Loren and Marlon Brando. Inhibited by low budgets, tight schedules, and a production team of strangers, both films unintentionally revealed Chaplin’s dependence on the unique way he had made films for forty years—in his own studio, at his own pace, as his own boss, with his own family of players and technicians.

Chaplin’s ultimate accomplishment was not merely a long list of masterful comic films over a career of four decades but the creation of a cultural archetype who embodied the contradictions within twentieth-century industrial society—the battle between the material and the spiritual, the individual and the community, the natural and the artificial, the institutional and the spontaneous, the respectable and the moral. It is no small irony that the Tramp, this archetype of vital chaos, the elemental foe of social machinery and institutions, has been used in the 1980s to advertise the wares of an immense industrial corporation. That the Tramp would become a salesman for IBM computers was simply inconceivable in the 1916 of *Easy Street*, the 1936 of *Modern Times*, or the 1952 of his virtual deportation. Reflecting on Chaplin’s achievement, James Agee observed that “of all comedians, he worked most deeply and most shrewdly within a realization of what a human being is, and is up against. The Tramp is as centrally representative of humanity, as manysided and as mysterious, as Hamlet, and it seems unlikely that any dancer or actor can ever have excelled him in eloquence, variety or poignancy of motion.”

Great Film Directors A Critical Anthology. Edited by Leo Braudy and Morris Dickstein. New York, Oxford University Press, 1978.

As he achieved worldwide success he also improved as an artist. The French film historian Georges Sadoul calls him “the greatest genius the cinema has ever produced.”

“Chaplin: Charles and Charlie” Michael Roemer

Most people are emotionally destroyed by a childhood like Chaplin’s, even if they survive it physically. They are permanently robbed of a whole range of feelings, and their existence seems to depend on locking their early experience into a walled-off chamber of the heart. Providentially for Chaplin and for us, he had early

access to the theatre, which thrives on extremes and in which the excesses of his childhood could find expression. By virtue of his extraordinary gifts and the happy circumstance that brought him to the silent cinema, his childhood—instead of being forever buried—became instead the source material of his work.

Chaplin has said, “All my pictures depend on the idea of getting me into trouble.”...The wellspring of his farce is violence, hunger, fear, greed, need, desolation, mistrust, despair, suicide, and drugs. A catastrophic imagination is at work. “Almost everyone frightens me,” Chaplin once told Lita Grey. Everyone and everything—for Charlie lives in perpetual jeopardy of being beaten, imprisoned, wiped out. Nothing less than his survival is at stake...

Chaplin steers much closer to the dark and dangerous edge of existence than most comedians. There are people who respond so strongly to the tension and danger in his work that they can’t laugh. But though his comedies are fed by dark waters, Charlie’s survival is assured from the start; his annihilation is constantly threatened but never—in the silent films—carried out. Survival is guaranteed by his very continuity as a character from one picture to the next. He is as indestructible as the heroic creatures of our animated cartoons, who reconstitute themselves miraculously after orgies of destruction. Charlie may not get the girl at the end and the last shot often finds him walking alone into the horizon. But he *is* walking or running—and not so much into the horizon as into the next film. In Charlie’s world, to survive is to win...

With notable critical consistency, Charlie has been called a representative of the common man. Chaplin himself described him as the Little Fellow, beset by misfortunes and dreaming of some simple happiness that is forever out of reach. But as we watch these films—or, rather, live through them—something more is at work than our identification with Charlie as a universal underdog. The secret of his appeal and power is that he draws, in a most direct way, on our deep and universal experience of childhood. For this little fellow is just that—a child—and what we so continually recognize in his films are the feelings and experiences we had as children...

In Chaplin’s work we never feel the absence of speech, as we so often do in silent films. Charlie’s silence is not imposed on him by a limited technology; it is his natural state. Unlike the pantomime of most silent screen actors, who were forced to render complex adult responses in gestures that were often reductive and oversimplified, Charlie’s mime is perfectly suited to express his true nature and experience. It constitutes an original, preverbal language...

Chaplin observed that his mixture of “raw slapstick and sentiment...was something of an innovation”—an innovation that works only when sentiment is contradicted by laughter. Whenever pure feelings appear in the films, they threaten the very reality and texture of farce.

Most comedy denies the reality of feeling, for feelings open us to empathy and suffering. Comedy is often unfeeling to the point of derision and cruelty. It holds nothing sacred and takes an unempathetic, alienated view of the world. Nietzsche says: “A joke is an epigram on the death of a feeling.” And Parker Tyler quotes Chaplin’s comment that “comedy is life viewed from a distance.” For distance—in time or space—has a distinctly cooling effect: the closer we are to an event, the more it involves us; the further we are away, the less we feel it. Significantly, there are few closeups in Chaplin’s films—and surely the most memorable is the last shot of *City Lights*, in which the mask of Charlie’s face is broken apart by deep and uncontradicted feeling.



In Charlie's world, pure feeling is focused almost entirely on women. In the shorts, women had been part of the comic scene and occupied no special elevated position; they could even be villains, a monstrous wife stalks Charlie throughout *Pay Day*, and in the alternate end to *The Vagabond* he is saved from drowning by a woman so ugly, he takes one look at her and jumps right back into the water. But starting with *The Kid*, Chaplin's heroines are no longer part of the comedy. Once they become the object of Charlie's feelings, they stop being funny.

The women he worships don't often take Charlie seriously, for he is childlike, naive, and far too romantic. They feel protective about him at best and naturally reject him for men who are more adult. Their rejection crushes Charlie; it is the one experience he can't seem to handle, for he opens his heart to them as he does to no one else. When his best friend, the millionaire in *City Lights*, refuses to recognize him and throws him out of the house, Charlie bounces right back into action. Men have no power to wound him, but women can sap his energy and reduce him to helpless hurt....

All the great comedians of the American screen—Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Fields, Laurel and Hardy, Lloyd, and even Keaton—worked in a flagrantly theatrical style. Their films seem to thrive on the very stylization, excess, and exaggeration that we tend to think of as uncinematic.

In a persuasively "real" medium like film, comedy may well have to stress its own unreality more emphatically than it does on stage. For once we *believe* in something, we're apt to lend it our feelings; if we were to believe in the aggression and cruelty of American comedy, they would horrify us instead of making us laugh. Since film, with its persuasive reality, has immediate access to our feelings, comedy may well have to disrupt our emotional involvement by insisting on its own unreality.

But Chaplin's work, unlike most screen comedies, confronts us with an apparent contradiction. For though his style is patently theatrical, he continually uses the persuasive reality of the medium to anchor his stories firmly in the physical world. Indeed, much of the comedy *depends* on the physical credibility of his scenes....He is in constant motion and expresses himself wholly in physical terms. Moreover, his films are a mosaic of precisely observed detail that the camera reports with stunning fidelity....

Perhaps Charlie's world seems real to us in spite of its theatricality because childhood authenticates even the most extreme moments. To a child, life is intensely theatrical, full of surprises, excesses, and dramatic confrontations. Moreover, Chaplin used the

imaginative freedom of the theater to render the *subjective* component of our experience—which the naturalistic cinema has so largely had to neglect and ignore....

Proust said: "We must never be afraid to go too far, for truth lies beyond." Perhaps even the camera must find an essential part of its truth "beyond"—in the subjective experience of reality that has ever been the source and province of art. This poses a serious problem for a medium so committed to the visible and material world. But surely no esthetic reality is long viable that cannot accommodate the invisible and subjective along with the visible and objective world. Carl Dreyer spoke regretfully of the fence with which naturalism has surrounded the medium." It isn't a fence that ever contained Chaplin, for he drew his work from the reality of childhood, which is far too inclusive to be rendered by a narrow naturalism.

Childhood authenticates his films from within and validates the broad range of his style. Perhaps his use of the medium is ultimately so rich and effective because he could give—as only childhood can—to the invisible and subjective the concrete imminence of fact. In childhood, as in Charlie's world, there is no hard, defining line between inner and outer experience; to children and Charlie, both are equally real—the imagined and the actual, the tangible and the fantastic, the visible and invisible, "fiction" and "fact."

from *Cinema I The Movement-Image*. Gilles Deleuze. University Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986.

Chaplin knew how to select gestures which were close to each other and corresponding situations which were far apart, so as to make their relationship produce a particularly intense emotion at the same time as laughter, and to redouble the laughter through this emotion.... Because Chaplin knows how to invent the minimum difference between two well-chosen actions, he is able to create the maximum distance between the corresponding situations, the one achieving emotion, the other reaching pure comedy. It is a laughter-emotion circuit, in which the one refers to the slight difference, the other to the great distance, without the one obliterating or diminishing the other, but both interchanging with one another, triggering each other off again. No case can be made for a tragic Chaplin. There is certainly no case for saying that we laugh, whereas we should cry. Chaplin's genius lies in doing both together, making us laugh as much as moving us. In *City Lights* the blind girl and Charlie do not divide up the roles between them. In the unravelling scene—between the unseeing action which tends to eradicate any difference between one thread and another, and the visible situation, which is completely transformed depending on whether a Charlie, assumed to be rich, is holding the skein, or a poverty-stricken Charlie is losing his rag of clothing—the two characters are on the same circuit, both of them comic and moving.

from *Charlie Chaplin Intimate Close-Ups*. Georgia Hale. Edited Heather Kiernan. Scarecrow Press Inc. Lanham Md & London, 1999.

Dr. Albert Einstein and his wife arrived in Hollywood just a few days before the opening of Mr. Chaplin's picture. [Chaplin mistakenly remembered being first introduced to Einstein in 1926. Before leaving Germany permanently to take up residence in the United States, Einstein had made three visits to the U.S. During the second one, from December 1930 to March 1931, he came to

Hollywood to accompany Chaplin to the premiere on 30 January, of *City Lights*. Einstein was in California at the invitation of the California Institute of Technology, and had an opportunity of working at the newly built telescope on Mt. Wilson which promised physical confirmation of his own theoretical work.]

The premiere of *City Lights* was at hand. The gala opening was to take place at the gorgeous new Los Angeles Theatre. Dr. Einstein, his wife, and Charlie and I had dinner at his home before the opening. In a way it was a study in contrasts.

Mr Chaplin sat there filled with fear and uncertainty about the reception of his picture. Dr. Einstein was the embodiment of calmness and child-like humility. He appeared so far above all mortal strife, so great, so dignified and yet so approachable. Every pore of his being exuded spirituality. It was like being in the presence of one ...who could heal. His wife was far more animated and did most of the talking, since his English at this time was limited.

Not only did Mr. Chaplin feel the warmth of these gracious ones, I felt it too. They included me in their remarks and made me feel completely at home with them. There was a kindred spirit between Dr. Einstein and Mr. Chaplin. The conversation even turned to religion—a topic rarely ever brought up. He asked Dr. Einstein, “Do you believe there is a God?” Dr. Einstein waited a moment and then answered thoughtfully, “Yes, I think there is a Supreme Intelligence.”

His broad high forehead and soft keen eyes seemed to reflect the infinite universe, which were such a part of his being. He spoke with conviction, as is he had experienced and proven this a thousand times. Mr. Chaplin gave this deep thought and then nodded approvingly. “Yes, yes that’s what I think also,” he said soberly....

Dr. Einstein was unstinting in his praise of Charlie’s genius, his comedy and pathos....

During the drive home, Dr. Einstein and Charlie discussed many subjects. Dr. Einstein said, “United States is great because of

its composite of people from all over the world. They come here all seeking freedom—a new way of life.” This brought up the subject of nationality. He added, “Because of the persecution of the Jews I always say I am Jewish. I gladly admit it. But I really think of myself as a citizen of the world.”

One could readily feel with his vision so wide and high, he could only belong to the universe. When I asked Charlie, “And what is your nationality?” he answered, “British, of course. But I’m a gypsy...that’s what I am, a gypsy.” This was true too, for his art belonged to all people and he roamed the earth in his thoughts and interests. He was just interested in everyone and studied and appreciated their talents.

from Alexander Woolcott’s review of *City Lights*. *The Essential Chaplin. Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian*. Edited and with an introduction by Richard Schickel. Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 2006.

It has often been said of Dickens (not quite accurately, by the way) that, though he created scores of immortal characters, there was not a gentleman in the lot. It must be said of Charles Chaplin that he has created only one character, but that one, in his matchless courtesy, in his unfailing gallantry—his preposterous innocent gallantry, in a world of gross Goliaths—that character is, I think, the finest gentleman of our time.

from *Woody Allen A Life in Film*. Richard Schickel. Ivan R. Dee Chicago, 2003

And when I saw *City Lights* I realized what a deep filmmaker he was, ‘cause I felt that film, you know, said more about love than so many purportedly serious investigations of the subject in either books or films.

FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Sept 4 Jean Vigo **L’Atalante** 1934

Sept 11 William Wyler, **The Letter** 1940

Sept 18 Preston Sturges, **The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek** 1944

Sept 25 Misoguchi, **Sansho the Baliff/Sanshō Dayū** 1954

Oct 2 Jean-Pierre Melville, **Army of Shadows/L’Armée des ombres** 1969

Oct 9 Akira Kurosawa **Ikiru** 1952

Oct 16 Jiří Menzel **Closely Watched Trains** 1966

Oct 23 Bunuel **That Obscure Object of Desire** 1977

Oct 30 Werner Herzog, **Aguirre: the Wrath of God** 1972

Nov 6 Charles Burnett **Killer of Sheep** 1977

Nov 13 Stanley Kubrick **Full Metal Jacket** 1987

Nov 20 Woody Allen **Crimes and Misdemeanors** 1989

Nov 27 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention/Yadon Ilaheyya** 2002

Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 1992

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

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