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Charlie Chaplin's Screen Persona: "The Tramp" as Icon¹

Ceylan Özcan²

Abstract

Charlie Chaplin's Tramp figure is perhaps the most famous icon in cinema history. The universal power of this character lies in the fact that he represents the average man. Through a discussion of the Tramp's outfit and basic characteristics this article presents some of the reasons behind the universal appeal of Chaplin's screen persona.

Keywords: *Charlie Chaplin, The Tramp, Silent Cinema*

Özet

Charlie Chaplin'in Şarlo tiplmesi sinemanın en evrensel ikonlarındanındır. Bu makalenin amacı Şarlo'nun kıyafeti dahil, başlıca özelliklerini sunarak, bu tiplenemin evrenseliğinin nedenlerini ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Charlie Chaplin, Şarlo, Sessiz Sinema*

In 1972 Charlie Chaplin, the king of silent cinema, was honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for "the incalculable effect he has had in making motion pictures the art form of this century" (Phillips 23). Indeed, Chaplin's long and prolific film career covers much of the history of the art form itself. Between his first film, *Making a Living* (1914), and his last, *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1966), he made some eighty-one pictures—most of which were "shorts" (Gehring 11). Chaplin's artistic

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genius manifested itself both in front of and behind the camera, for he not only acted in, but wrote, directed and scored many of his films. What made Chaplin one of the world's most famous cinema artists, however, was his celebrated screen persona: Charlie, the Tramp.

Chaplin's film career began in 1913 when he signed a contract with Keystone Film Company; at this time the film industry was still in its years of infancy and was not considered a highly respected medium yet. However, within a few years, Chaplin's Tramp was to become one of the most universally recognized representations of a human being in the history of mankind. One of the most distinguishing features of this legendary cinema icon was his outfit. In his autobiography Chaplin explains the birth of the Tramp costume as follows:

I had no idea what make-up to put on. . . . However, on the way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large. I was undecided whether to look old or young, but remembering Sennett had expected me to be a much older man, I added a small mustache, which, I reasoned, would add age without hiding my expression.

I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up made me feel the person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked on stage he was fully born. (Chaplin 144)

This description, however, romanticizes and mythologizes the genesis of both the costume and the character of the Tramp. Although this costume may have been assembled almost spontaneously, the character was to take over a year or so to evolve into its full dimension and even then it would continue to evolve during the rest of Chaplin's career. Moreover, even though Chaplin appeared with the Tramp outfit in his second film *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914), it was modified over the next years.

Nevertheless, the basic costume did supply an instant trademark for Chaplin. Despite the fact that over the years he would occasionally appear as different characters such as a parson or a soldier, even the cut and fit of the costumes of the different characters would somehow remind the viewer of the Tramp's outfit (Smith 26).

Chaplin, however, was not the first person to use the tramp outfit nor, was he the first to use the tramp figure. Chaplin's Tramp comedian had roots in the theater and had become a standard act in vaudeville and music hall before Chaplin's career began. The theater-tramp was a type living from hand to mouth; he was king of the outdoors and a figure of fun (Bermel 175). Furthermore, David Robinson states "that it is easy to find precedents for [the Tramp's] costume in the English music halls" since "grotesquely ill-

fitting clothes, tiny hats, distasteful moustaches and wigger-wagger canes were the necessary impedimenta of the comedian" (114). One important source of influence for Chaplin was the famous "Dumb Show" or pantomime performer W.C. Fields. This American comedian's "tramp-juggler" was known as early as 1902, and Chaplin's Tramp figure owes something to it. Another source of influence was the English music hall comedian Dan Leno who established the tradition of the mime/ juggler/ tumbler/ conjurer capable of any trick (Frey 70-72). It is also possible to talk of the influence of a famous dwarf called Little Tich who worked for a pantomime troupe which was quite famous in England in the 1890s. Little Tich, who also dressed as a tramp, wore old and shabby pants, a tight coat and enormous shoes (Frey 74; Martin 30).

Chaplin himself cited the French comedian Max Linder as a major influence. Chaplin had seen Linder in 1909 while he had gone to Paris with the Karno Company. Linder was famous for his characterization as a chic, suave but improvident boulevardier (Bermel 143-145; Gehring 9). Linder's character, however, who was refined and cultivated, never achieved the status of a universal icon (Martin 29).

As is seen, Chaplin was influenced by several artists and their characters, but despite the fact that the tramp figure was not Chaplin's invention, "Charlie" the Tramp was. The universal power and the appeal of his image were fresh and unique. As Albert Bermel states "Chaplin took the tramp but transformed him, made a new creation of him: the vagrant who is not necessarily more intelligent but decidedly more humane than his social betters" (Bermel 175).

One of the key points in Chaplin's account about the birth of the Tramp outfit is the idea that he was trying to create an *ensemble* of contrasts: small hat, huge shoes, tight jacket, baggy pants. The contradicting elements of the outfit not only reflect the contradicting elements in his personality, but they also serve to emphasize the fact that like his clothes the Tramp is an "ill-fitting member of society" (Bermel 169-170). Charlie is a misfit and an underdog; his peculiar appearance always makes him a target of aggression for policemen or an object of scorn for members of the upper class.

Chaplin says that in the creation of this ragged but upper class costume, he was inspired by the Englishmen which he had seen in the streets of London as a child. The Tramp's outfit was Chaplin's take on their tight fitting outfits, trimmed mustaches, and canes. The cane became Charlie's obvious trademark and provided Chaplin with endless possibilities for comic effect: sometimes it would function as a weapon to poke and trip Charlie's opponents, and sometimes this phallic instrument expressed his sexual desires by pulling women closer or lifting their skirts (Martin 173).

The cane and the derby also functioned to accent "class duality," that is, they implied that this "'little fellow' often would have an aristocratic manner despite a tramp's station

in life.” Wes D. Gehring, calling Charlie’s attempts to look dignified and dandy “mock dignity under duress,” explains that “the comic victim intensifies the humor by solemnly denying its existence” (7). Chaplin himself explains the significance of the outfit as follows:

These clothes help me to express my conception of the common man on the street. With this outfit I can represent anyone in general or myself in particular. The small derby is the effort to look sophisticated. It is a source of pride. The tight jacket, the cane and all the gestures are there to give an impression of gentility. This is a heroic rebellion against the world, it is a form of defiance, in a sense it is bluffing. And the man on the street knows this. He knows this so well that he is able to laugh at himself and to feel a bit sorry for himself because of his fate. (Martin 27, my translation)

Chaplin says that his films are always built around the idea of getting the Tramp in and out of trouble, and much of the comedy arises from Charlie’s serious attempt to appear as a “normal little gentleman” despite all the trials and tribulations he has to go through. Chaplin explains that “That is why no matter how desperate the predicament is, [Charlie] is very much in earnest about clutching [his] cane, straightening [his] derby hat and fixing [his] tie, even though [he] has just landed on [his] head (qtd. in Robinson 202-203).

The contradicting elements were not limited to the Tramp’s appearance. This is how Chaplin first introduced his Tramp to Mack Sennett on the set:

You know this fellow is many-sided, a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow, always hopeful of romance and adventure. He would have you believe he is a scientist, a musician, a duke, a polo player. However, he is not above picking up cigarette butts or robbing a baby of its candy. And, of course, if the occasion warrants it, he will kick a lady in the rear - but only in extreme anger! (Chaplin 144)

This was Chaplin’s first definition of the Tramp, and yet it captures much of the essence of the character who would become the champion of the underdogs. Although such a complex conception of Charlie’s character was not apparent during his first year on the screen, the key to understanding Charlie is there: the Tramp is *many-sided*. Not only is he an embodiment of contradictions with his outer look, but his character too is multidimensional, and often full of contradictions. Charlie is both kind and cruel, selfish and selfless, smart and stupid, cunning and naïve, hardworking and lazy, courageous and cowardly all in one (Kimber 24). Embodying both the good and the bad, Charlie is Everyman.

During his first year in the movie industry, which was with Keystone Film Company, Chaplin made thirty five films, all of which were slapstick comedies. These rough-and-tumble comic shorts relied on physical comedy and were characterized by broad humor, absurd situations, and a lot of action. The slapstick comic—like an acrobat or stuntman—had to be a master of uninhibited action and perfect timing. In his Keystone year, although it was in a state of flux, Chaplin's comic persona was essentially vulgar, rough, aggressive and mischievous. Thus, in his early films, there is only a crude outline of what Chaplin's screen person would later become.

According to Robinson, however, even during his Keystone period Chaplin was doing something new:

Keystone comedy was created from without; anecdote and situations were *explained* in pantomime and gesture. Chaplin's comedy, on the other hand, was created from within. The crucial point of Chaplin's comedy was not the comic occurrence itself, but Charlie's relationship and attitude to it. A simple example helps to visualize this comparison: In the Keystone style, it was enough to bump into a tree to be funny. When Charlie bumped into a tree, it was not the collision that was so funny, but the fact that he raised his hat to the tree in a reflex gesture of apology. (113)

Thus, even from the beginning, although they were slapstick comedies, the effect of Chaplin's films were not dependent solely on physical action. In other words, it was not what happens in the story that interested the audience, but what happens in Charlie.

Critics refer to a scene in his first film, *Making a Living*, to point out another aspect of Chaplin's character that was novel. In this scene Charlie is in a newspaper office trying to get an assignment. As he tries to persuade the editor he keeps slapping the editor's knee for emphasis. When the editor is annoyed and shifts his knee to a less accessible position, Charlie automatically pulls the knee back so that he can continue to slap it. This might seem like an insignificant detail, but, in this short scene Charlie establishes what would become a continuous pattern: adjusting the rest of the universe to suit his convenience (Kerr 75).

Other examples of Charlie transforming the world to answer his own needs can be observed in his unique relationship to objects. André Bazin explains that objects have useful functions which make them an indispensable part of our lives, and although each object is specifically designed to perform a specific function, Charlie's relationship with objects is quite different (117). Charlie has the ability to transform a physical object into something other than itself. This technique, where any object could be substituted for a different object, and seem to become it, however temporarily, is called *comic transposition*. Chaplin developed a passion for this kind of visual metaphor and it has become one of the cornerstones of his comic art (Kerr 89).

Charlie would use a toothbrush to paste and shine his shoes, practice playing pool with a sword and onions; wipe his eyes on a man's beard, or "deal" plates as though they were a pack of cards. But perhaps his dissection of the clock in *The Pawnshop* is the best known example of transformation comedy. Charlie, who is working as an assistant at a pawnshop has the task of determining the worth of an alarm clock. As Charlie examines the clock he puts on a stethoscope and transforms into a doctor and the clock becomes the patient. He listens carefully to the clock ticking, checking to see if its heartbeat is normal. Momentarily, the clock becomes a piece of porcelain which Charlie rings with his fingertips. Then the clock transforms into a can of sardines, which Charlie opens up with a can-opener, smells to check if the contents are fresh. Next, Charlie unscrews the mouthpiece of the telephone and transforms it into a jeweler's eyeglass and examines the clock like a diamond. Charlie then transforms into a dentist and pulls out the content of the clock with a pair of forceps. When the content on the table starts to move around like insects Charlie turns an oil can into an insecticide and exterminates them by squirting them with oil. When he has officially destroyed the clock he gathers the pieces together and gives them back to the customer who is looking at him baffled at what he has just witnessed. Charlie, unsatisfied with the clock, however, shakes his head refusing to pawn the clock (Robinson 174-175).

In this scene, which is beautifully choreographed, we see how an object such as an alarm clock can metamorphose into several different things. These metaphorical gags, however, are more than just comic business: they are a form of rebellion. By transforming the objects, Charlie is challenging and defying their customary use, just as he defies social order and refuses to conform to conventional rules (Kimber 20). Charlie's ability to transform things demonstrates Chaplin's fascination with the possibility of change; objects, people and life are flexible and unstable, they can alter at any moment. With this capacity to "play" with objects, Charlie acts out a fantasy to reshape the world according to his desires. Fantasy or not, Charlie's resistance to conventional rules and the idea of living in defiance that make up one of the major sources of pleasure the viewer gets from watching him.

Charlie's powers of creative transformation are not limited to individual bits of comic business; they can apply, for example, to the whole range of activities necessitated by any given occupation. Although Charlie is a Tramp, and our conception of him is a homeless and jobless vagabond, in more than half of his movies he is either employed or the film revolves around the issue of work (Martin 91). Work provides Charlie with endless opportunities to demonstrate his powers of transformation and to playfully violate rules. Since Charlie is not interested in work for the money, under his "capable" hands any given job can turn into a creative activity (Kimber 20).

Kerr states that the secret of Charlie “is that he could be anyone” (84-85). Efficiently or not, he can do anything and pose as anyone. If he wishes he can be a banker, a count, a farmer, a married man, or a fireman. He can deliver sermons, box, lay bricks and outwit bullies. Yet no matter what Charlie is playing at being, no matter what he is wearing—be it an apron or fireman’s uniform—in each instance the viewer sees only one Charlie.

Critics suggest that Charlie reflects the life of the immigrant who has newly arrived to America and is always ready to do any given job (Martin 91). Kerr explains that Charlie is a “man of all attitudes, skilled at all roles,” and yet that he “found it is so easy to adopt to any of them that he could give complete credence to none.” In short, he was a Jack-of-all-trades, master of none. He can come out of nowhere, open his bag of tricks on demand, pretend to be what is asked of him for a while, and go away again down the road (93, 85). Charlie’s adaptable and nomadic nature gives him freedom from the restraints and conventions of society. Since Charlie is characterized by his disregard and disdain for legal and social norms, the Tramp gives Chaplin an opportunity to ridicule and challenge society by stepping outside of it.

What needs to be pointed out is that none of the different jobs which Charlie acquires promise a brilliant future or fortune. They are generally manual jobs which pay poorly. Moreover, Charlie is usually exploited or harassed by his employer. Thus the context of the films always presents the fight of the oppressed against the oppressors. Charlie is never in a position of power or great wealth—he is always the weak, little one (Hanisch 26). Chaplin’s films present a world that is defined by a concept of social class. The Tramp enables Chaplin to penetrate into two worlds: that of the lower class and that of the “elite.” Penetration into the former allows Chaplin to show social realities such as poverty, hunger, the problem of unemployment, exploitation and humiliation of labor, alienation and street life. By having Charlie impersonate a count or a rich man, Chaplin is also able to expose the idleness of the rich, and satirize their mannerisms, pretensions, and prejudices. Thus, the genius of Chaplin’s art is that he could turn film “clowning” into a criticism of social order. He could show the predicament of modern man and still make people laugh. Thus, Chaplin was able to demonstrate that although “humor may provide an escape from unsatisfactory social reality, it is also one of the most effective ways of revealing the evils of society” (Courbin 125).

But perhaps one of Chaplin’s greatest achievements was his mixing of the tragic and the comic. Had Charlie remained in his initially vulgar and aggressive form he might have been an object of fascination and a source of laughter, but he would not have been an object of sympathy. Slapstick alone was becoming limited, and so Chaplin began to embellish his films with touches of sentiment. Over the course of time Chaplin

sophisticated and refined Charlie's character and added an emotional quality to Charlie's personality (Kimber 37). In his autobiography Chaplin writes as follows:

I can trace the first prompting of desire to add another dimension to my films besides that of comedy. I was playing in . . . *The New Janitor*, in a scene in which the manager of the office fires me. In pleading with him to take pity on me and let me retain my job, I started to pantomime appealing that I had a large family of little children. While I was enacting mock sentiment, Dorothy Davenport, an old actress, was on the sidelines watching the scene, and during rehearsal I looked up and to my surprise found her in tears. "I know it's supposed to be funny," she said, "but you just make me weep." She confirmed something I already felt: I had the ability to evoke tears as well as laughter. (153)

This ability became one of the most distinguishing features of Chaplin's art. Chaplin would show that comedy is never too removed from tragedy. He achieved this by mingling comedy with moments of pathos. Thus he not only made the viewers laugh, but he also appealed to their emotions, their compassion and pity. Chaplin transformed Charlie into a fully recognizable human figure. He gave Charlie a gentle quality, and made his heart open to the vulnerable feelings of love, embarrassment, grief and fear (Kimber 39). Charles J. Maland explains the significance of Chaplin's injection of romance into his films:

The quest for romantic love in Chaplin's films . . . cannot be minimized if we are to understand their immense and lasting popularity. Had he stayed within the framework of Keystone slapstick, he would never have survived in Hollywood as long as he did. . . . But by adding to comedy the element of romantic love, whether required or not, Chaplin tapped into one source of what has made narrative art popular for centuries (31).

Indeed, one of the situations when Charlie elicits the affection most is when he is the romantic lover whose girl is often beyond his reach. For, the girl Charlie loves is more often than not, in love with someone who is better looking, physically larger, or of a higher social class than Charlie. This romantic plot usually ends with Charlie's hopes of attaining the girl being shattered which in turn evokes pathos in the audience. Although Chaplin was often charged by critics with self-indulgence and sentimentalism by placing Charlie in situations which arouse the audience's pity, most often Chaplin's sentiment is saved from "mawkishness by comedy and the belligerence that always underlies his despair." For example, if he is watching the girl he loves dance with another man, his jealousy will not be entirely impotent because he will throw something at the man or drop something on his shoe. Or Chaplin will use the trick of deflating

Charlie's dramatic despair with farce by eclipsing the anguish Charlie feels for being rejected with physical pain by having him accidentally sit on a stove (Robinson 172).

The sympathy Chaplin's films elicit is not only due to the fact that they have a love interest. It is also about who Charlie is: watching him sit in a field and clean his nails before he eats his tiny snack is enough to evoke compassion. Charlie's effort to maintain a sense of social decorum and dignity whether he is flirting with a woman or being tossed out of a restaurant make him both a comic and a tragic figure. The incongruity between his pretentious attitude and the reality of the world around him is what makes him so hilarious and pathetic at the same time. He reveals the sadness and disappointment that underlies the comic. The fact that he always maintains faith in the possibility of love, and displays courage against all odds are what make him so endearing.

Chaplin believed that a comic artist was lost if he did not reflect the public mind and appeal to the masses. Thus he created a character with which the majority of the audience could sympathize and identify. The secret behind the success of the Tramp was that he appealed to the interests and sensibilities of the "average man," and as Chaplin states, he functioned somewhat as their "unofficial representative" (qtd. in Gehring 111). Chaplin explains the bond between the "average man" and the Tramp as follows:

[The average man] spots [Charlie] shuffling along in [his] baffled and aimless manner, and a spark of hope rekindles in him. He begins to straighten up and take heart. Here is a man like himself, only more pathetic and miserable, with ludicrously impossible clothes, in every sense a social misfit and failure, at whom it is hard to look without laughter and pity. And yet this impossible person, without . . . any of the usual equipment of the hero, seems through sheer blunder and circumstance to get on very well indeed. . . . he finds life full of interest and adventure. He circumvents policemen, gets entangled in strange happenings, blunders into brilliant social gatherings . . . in short, enters portals which the average man had always imagined were closed to him. . . . It is the successful rebellion—the long-delayed triumphs of the mediocre and ordinary person. . . . It is a gratifying picture of the average man coming at last into his own. (qtd. in Gehring 112)

Charlie—the embodiment of both the tragic and the comic—came to represent the basic human condition. With this character, Chaplin was able to challenge the boundaries of conformity, and present the basic needs and vulnerabilities of humanity at the same time. Thus, Charlie's world-wide appeal came not only from the fact that he had no nationality and spoke the universal language of pantomime, but also from the fact that he was able to bring onto the screen the hopes, desires, angers and frustrations shared by all of mankind.

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