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Charlot français: Charlie Chaplin, The First World War, and the Construction of a National Hero

In 1927, Henry Poulaille recalled the arrival of Charlie Chaplin's films in France during the First World War. Soldiers in the trenches and civilians at the home front "went wild for Charlot. [...] It was sheer madness. People shaved their moustaches like Charlot's, he was all anybody could talk about ..." (119).¹ For Louis Delluc, writing in 1921, Charlot had already earned a place in the pantheon of the most famous Frenchmen of all time. He was more famous than "Joan of Arc, Louis XIV and Clemenceau" and comparable only to "Jesus or Napoleon" (20). French film critics of the silent era would proudly cite Chaplin's acknowledged debt to French comic Max Linder (Delluc 66), his professed aspiration to become the "Molière of the cinema" (Baur 19) and his insistence that it was in France that his work had been understood the best (Sadoul 253). As late as the 1950s, the French communist cinema historian Georges Sadoul would still insist that no other country, except possibly Soviet Russia, had paid Chaplin quite the same homage as France had (253-254).

This tendency to insist upon a unique connection between Chaplin and the French people was particularly acute during the war years and in their immediate aftermath. As we will see, many wartime and postwar critics attempted to assimilate Charlot the character and Chaplin the filmmaker within a tenuously stable model of Frenchness. In the attempts by French critics to construct a *Charlot français* we can begin to discern the stakes and limitations of the national as a meaningful cultural category at the end of the First World War.

Charlot and the *Poilu*

One of the first efforts to nationalize Chaplin was performed by Western Import Co. representative Jacques Haïk. When he began to market and distribute Chaplin's comedies in France in 1915, Haïk changed the films' titles to follow the model set by the French comic shorts of Max Linder and Prince Rigadin. For Jean-Jacques Meusy, this particular way of naming comedies—Chaplin's *Caught in a Cabaret*, for example, became *Charlot, garçon de café*—was a key strategy for attracting French audiences (424). Such titles placed emphasis on the films' title characters—Max, Rigadin, Charlot, Fatty—who were immediately recognizable to French audiences as distinct character types (Meusy 256).

The character traits French critics celebrated in Charlot—resourcefulness, generosity, a refusal to take life too seriously—resonated strongly with those used to construct an idealized image of the French infantry soldier or *poilu* and, by extension, to characterize the French people as a whole. Charlot arrived in France at precisely the moment when the French were struggling to modernize and democratize military identity and to articulate a consensual model of national identity. A new cultural ethos was emerging—the picaresque—and replacing the traditional, heroic ethos of the Napoleonic legend or the colonial wars. Charlot embodied the same spirit of survival—as opposed to self-sacrifice—increasingly associated in popular and literary culture with the *poilu*.

A trend in Chaplin reception that began towards the end of the war and continued well into the 1920s situated Charlot within nationalistic discourses inspired by the war effort and the dominant *culture de guerre*—understood as the system of representations that both reflected and inflected ordinary people's understanding of the war. In its March 1920 special issue on cinema, for example, the trench newspaper turned arts and culture paper *Le Crapouillot* ran a three-page

article on Charlot by editor-in-chief and war veteran Jean Galtier-Boissière. Galtier-Boissière described Charlot as the descendent of two beloved literary types that had been used in wartime comparisons with the *poilu*. From Victor Hugo's cocky and resourceful Gavroche, Charlot had inherited the gritty realism, "the physical flexibility, the gift of the gab, the insolence, the audacity, and the couldn't-care-less attitude" ("Charlot" 12-13). From Don Quixote he had taken "his idealism, his touching naïveté, his crazy recklessness", and his "love of illusions" (13). Galtier-Boissière made the connection between Charlot and the *poilu* more explicit when he singled out *Charlot soldat* (*Shoulder Arms*) as the "only good film made about the war" (13). Echoing stock scenes from French Great War novels such as *Le Feu*, *Les Croix de bois*, or *Gaspard*, Galtier-Boissière wrote that Charlot made all the typical "blunders" of the "bleus" or new recruits and engaged in the "customary dé...brouillages" or resourcefulness "of the squad-family" (13). Charlot was, Galtier-Boissière concluded, invoking another popular trope in French Great War fiction, a "hero in spite of himself, like so many others!" (14).

Jean Cocteau provided a similarly contextualized reading of *Charlot soldat* when he described the film as an apt "fable of the war" (94). In particular, Cocteau singled out the scene in which Charlot, disguised as a tree, goes on a reconnaissance mission behind enemy lines. One by one a band of German soldiers are knocked senseless by a pirouetting Charlot who makes the most of his clever disguise. For Cocteau, this scene provided a perfect example of the victory of "nimbleness" or *légèreté* over "dull-wittedness" or *lourdeur* (94). Here Cocteau tacitly reproduced a common wartime opposition between French brains and German brawn and placed Charlot squarely on the side of Frenchness.

Several years later Blaise Cendrars' characterization of Charlot's reception at the front was still firmly rooted in the logic of war culture. Cendrars recalled that in 1915 soldiers had

returned from leave “ruddy” with excitement about Charlot and his adventures (*Disque vert* 78). He remembered his impatience to see for himself “this new Poilu who had the front in stitches” (“La Naissance de Charlot” 126). The kinship and affection the soldiers felt for Charlot was, Cendrars insisted, profound. “If France won the war,” he wrote, it was “thanks to Père Pinard [wine] and Charlot” (*Disque vert* 78). For Cendrars, then, “Charlot was born at the front”, and he “was French” (“Naissance” 125-126). If the Germans lost the war, it was because “they didn’t meet Charlot in time” (“Naissance” 127).

Of course, by the time Cendrars wrote these words in the mid 1920s, Germany had met Charlot (Hake 88; Hanisch 25), as had the rest of the world. However adamantly the French might claim a monopoly on understanding Charlot, the fact remains that Chaplin’s success during and after the war was international. Chaplin was received with wild enthusiasm in wartime and post-war Britain, where he was identified with the British infantry soldier or Tommy (Markert 133; Hammond 229), in pre-civil war Spain (Morris 517), in Japan (Silverberg 267), and the Soviet Union (Golub 200). His onscreen persona of the Little Tramp appealed to different people for different reasons, a point Jean Cocteau famously made when he described Chaplin’s comedy as “le rire espéranto” or Esperanto laughter (94).

Critics might have attempted to nationalize Charlot, but they simultaneously recognized his international appeal. Charlot was a “universal figure” (Eliot 142) who crossed boundaries of gender, class, and nation. Indeed the condition of the Tramp was one of physical, if not existential, homelessness. Like the Infantryman, Charlot the Little Tramp was a modern *picaro*, a man of the people, a “little guy,” exiled to the margins of society, wandering city streets and open roads—spaces that, like the trench, were governed by the vicissitudes of chance. He

represented “the very figure of humanity” (Jacques de Baroncelli qtd. in Chevallier 71) not just in wartime, but in modern times.

In this respect Charlie Chaplin, the British filmmaker working in Hollywood, posed a serious problem for French self-imagining. To identify so strongly with Charlot while acknowledging his foreignness was to acknowledge on some level the fundamental irrelevance of the national as a category for making sense of modernity. It is perhaps in reaction to the corrosion of the national as a meaningful category that some critics continued to nationalize the Little Tramp well beyond the war years, even as the context for that nationalization became increasingly complex. In particular, French film critics would eventually have to acknowledge the relationship between Charlot and Chaplin. In coming to terms with the universal appeal of the Little Tramp, critics would have to come to terms with Chaplin the Hollywood filmmaker and with the uncertain status of French national culture in an increasingly globalized cultural economy.

After all, the French film industry had come to a grinding halt at the start of the war, and it was "through Charlot" that within a few short years American cinema had come to dominate an international film market once controlled by France (Brasillach 151). While specialized film and avant-garde reviews stressed the new possibilities for art opened by American cinema, more general arts and culture papers like *Comædia* and *Le Crapouillot* continued to frame their reviews of American cinema and of Chaplin in more narrowly nationalistic terms. Many contributors featured in these papers framed the French cinema industry as a site of national loss—a kind of cultural Alsace-Lorraine. Military victory had come at the cost of cultural defeat—this time by a new group of barbarian invaders rich in human and financial resources.

"Their Charlie and Our Charlot"

In a series of articles on Chaplin published between 1920 and 1921 in *Comœdia*, for example, reviewer J-L. Croze and other contributors framed their praise of Charlot and their analysis of American cinema in terms of the threat to French cultural autonomy and French cultural values posed by the American cinema industry and, by extension, the American way of life. Croze was careful to relativize and contextualize Chaplin's talent, praising homegrown French comics like Max and Rigadin and citing Léon Poirier's argument that part of Chaplin's success with French audiences was the simple result of the production imbalance between the American and French film industries. Croze tacitly associated Chaplin with the forces of internationalism and cosmopolitanism that, he argued, threatened the French cinema industry and French tastes.

In *Comœdia's* analysis, the "beautiful body" of the French film industry, "once full of force," was now "sick," "anemic," "convalescent," ("Propositions" 3) and "[mutilated] by the war" (Louis Forest qtd. in "Pour l'industrie française" 3). American filmmakers were war profiteers, taking advantage of a French film industry bled dry by unreasonable war debt repayment demands, unfair domestic taxation, and outright stealing of human resources (Roussell 3). Americans were global speculators who wouldn't hesitate to put hard-working French cinema workers—including "veterans of Verdun" (Thomas 3)—out on the streets with their cheaply made, big-studio productions. Croze framed the "revanche" or revenge and "regeneration" of the French film industry ("Équité" 3) in terms reminiscent of the war effort against Germany, making the French cinema industry itself a symbol of French national character—understood as resourcefulness and resilience. The French cinema industry would

survive, Croze suggested, because "[cinema] is French," and because "the genius of [the French] race possesses admirably the sense of adaptation and accommodation ..." ("Ciné de France" 3).

A similar strain of anti-Americanism can be detected in the pages of *Le Crapouillot*. Two years after Jean Galtier-Boissière's three-page article on Charlot, for example, the paper ran a new article by the critic Drésa who again took pains to situate Chaplin's figure of the Little Tramp within a French cultural context, this time defining "Our Charlot" in opposition to the "Charlie Chaplin of the Americans," or "Their Charlie" (17). "The Charlie Chaplin of the Americans," Drésa wrote, "doesn't equal our Charlot" (17). "It is naturally the same man who appears in the same films on both sides of the Ocean," he explained, "but we see him with French eyes and, if we like him so much, it is because we personify in him the very type of the jovial *bricoleur*, the idle vagabond for whom poverty is the small price to be paid for exquisite laziness and above all divine freedom." Idleness, Drésa explains, is not a virtue that can be appreciated in the fast-paced, industrious United States. And so, the 'jovial bricoleur' type celebrated by the French in the figure of Charlot, simply "doesn't exist in the United States" (17).

Drésa goes on to suggest that the Americans see in the Little Tramp the figure of the Italian immigrant, whom they find slightly ridiculous. The French, on the other hand, see him as the embodiment of the French national spirit. In Charlot's misadventures French audiences read a "conscious will not to give in to any form of work, a deliberate generosity as well as a premeditation in his whims" (17). French reception of Chaplin's comedies is, Drésa thus suggests, a creative act of cultural appropriation—even resistance. The French had "made out of Charlie a national Charlot," a character type "much more interesting and refined than the buffoon who makes his compatriots laugh ..." (17). The Charlot that Chaplin dreamed up is, thus, far inferior to the Charlot that French audiences recognized on the screen.

Drésa concludes his comparison of "Their Charlie" and "Our Charlot" by asking if the "great actor himself has ever fully understood the real reason for his extreme popularity" in France. That success lies, not in the genius of Charlie Chaplin, but in the "[superior intelligence]" of the French (18). In Drésa's analysis, the Americans might be hardworking and ambitious, but the French were smart. They knew how to preserve a sense of style—poetry, joviality, insouciance—and a sense of self—irreverence, individualism—in a modern world swept up in the ruthless logic of global industrial capitalism. In an idle loser imagined as scorned by chasers of the American dream, the freedom-loving French saw a national hero.

Writers at *Le Crapouillot* used a rhetoric of degeneration similar to that used at *Comœdia* to call for a revival of the French cinema industry, but they argued that such a revival would come about, not by eliminating American influences, but by emulating them and adapting them to French values. *Le Crapouillot* chose to explain the success of Chaplin's films and American films more generally by appealing to the more sophisticated tastes and higher standards that French film critics expected of their native art form. While *Comœdia* associated Chaplin with the Hollywood star system and the American commercial film industry, *Le Crapouillot* called him a "poet", (Braga 13) a "sculptor" (Galtier-Boissière "L'Art cinégraphique" 4), and the "greatest artist of modern times" (Kerdyk 19), who had elevated cinema from a mere "pastime" to "an art" (Baur 19).

Le Crapouillot called for the arrival of a "Shakespeare of the cinema" (Blanchard 14), an artist who would make of French cinema an autonomous art form, no longer burdened by the legacy of the theater or of literature, but conceived and executed in purely plastic or cinematographic terms. In its editorial policy, *Le Crapouillot* thus echoed the theories being advanced at the time by guest contributors Louis Delluc and Léon Moussinac, "proponents" of

what Richard Abel calls the "earliest version of what would later become familiar as the *auteur* theory" ("Booming" 120).

If Charlot the character was a 'jovial bricoleur,' who, like the French, would not adapt to a "society of businessmen" (Galtier-Boissière "Art cinégraphique" 3) or conform to the American way of life, Chaplin the filmmaker was a "créateur complet" or total artist (Delluc 8). The genius of an artist like Chaplin, it was implied in one *Crapouillot* article, was becoming an anomaly in an American commercial film industry that had reached its "stopping point", having complacently settled into a logic of "mass production" (Jean Galtier-Boissière "Les films de la quinzaine" 12). With his particular working style—writing his own scenarios, directing, acting, and producing his films—Chaplin the filmmaker corresponded more closely than any other filmmaker at the time to the "Romantic concept of the individually unique artist", expressing through the new medium of cinema a "subjective vision" of the modern world (Abel *French Cinema* 284; Abel "The Contribution" 28). If Louis Delluc wrote the first book length study of Charlot in 1921, it is perhaps because he saw in Chaplin the kind of artist who could inspire an "alternate *French* cinema" that could coexist with but distinguish itself from American cinema (Abel *French Cinema* 243).

In situating Chaplin—at the level of reception—within French systems of signification and sensibility, early film critics ultimately showed how the national could function, not as a denial of the global character of modernity, but as a form of resistance to its potentially homogenizing and alienating forces. Whether or not Chaplinitis was actually more acute in France than in other countries is impossible to determine and ultimately irrelevant. What is clear is that French critics had an investment in arguing that the French understood Chaplin in a way that no other national group did. France's love affair with Charlot was ultimately a love affair

with a certain conception of Frenchness—a conception of national character and of cultural relevance that the First World War both ratified and radically called into question.

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Endnotes

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