Chaplin, or The American Simpleton*

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The past week was all his. Five Chaplin films showing simultaneously. Chaplinmania appears to be spreading here as well, and one has to wonder what it is that makes this flat-footed American clown so magical. Is he truly more than a mere comic? Is he really a "very great" actor, as some serious critics insist? At first, despite an unprecedented amount of promotional advertising, he struck us Europeans as foreign. Now, little by little, he appears to be winning us over. How can we explain this?

Chaplin is a popular humorist. His antics are not psychologically complex. He portrays the simple comedy of ordinary experience. His enemies are things. He is always dealing with civilization's most ordinary features. To him, doors, stairs, chairs, plates—all our everyday conveniences—present difficult challenges. He addresses them as a backwoods schlemiel, quite unlike normal city-dwellers. Chaplin is impractical—and Americans find that funny. But today America is not only a corner of the world but a life force, one that is beginning to dominate European civilization. There is nothing more grotesque than the impractical person who deals with objects and contrivances in the wrong way.

The old fairy tales about the Schildbürger were expressions of peasant humor—stories of ignorant farmers who thought they could carry sunlight into their windowless church in sacks. Chaplin, as a pawnbroker, checks the clock brought in for pawn with a stethoscope, then opens it with a can opener. He is the modern, American Schildbürger. For the first time since that naive, agrarian peasant comedy, he brings the comedy of the Schildbürger to the industrialized metropolis.

Chaplin is impractical, to be sure—but he is by no means awkward. On the contrary; he is a phenomenally skilled acrobat. And for that reason his encounters with trappings of civilization unfamiliar to him become exciting, heroic duels in which he ultimately emerges victorious. In this there is a certain grotesque and ironic rebellion against our machine-driven culture. That is the profundity of Chaplin's art, which reveals itself in the touching melancholy of his pantomime as a naive

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humanity estranged from civilization and left to its own devices. Chaplin is indeed a great artist. And the IFA Palastkino was right to devote an entire evening to him. The film in which he has Fatty as a partner (*Between Showers*, 1914) was especially instructive. For it allowed us to see the difference between the two, the incomparably higher art of Chaplin. Arbuckle is also grotesque, also an acrobat, and also a good actor. But his persona is not bathed in this warm, sad aura of some deeper significance. There is something calculating and jarring about his timing. His grotesquerie is merely decorative and hollow, not lyrical like Chaplin’s. In Chaplin, this shrewd and impudent schlemiel of the modern metropolis, one always has the sense that somehow, even when engaged in the most ridiculous nonsense, he is right.