



## **Movies, Director/Performers, and Cultural History: Conceptualizing Chaplin and American Culture**

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**Please note: This was written as a conference presentation, not a formal paper. I delivered it with a supplemental Powerpoint presentation. I've included one chart taken from that presentation below.**

First, let me say that it's a pleasure to be with you here at the Chaplin Conference. I'd like to thank the *bfi* and the conference organizers for planning this series of events that has allowed so many of us to gather in London and share our enthusiasm for the study of film in general and Chaplin and his films in particular. It's been especially fun for me to renew ties with old friends, to meet new ones, and to have face-to-face encounters with some people whom I've known only through their work. So thanks to the BFI and the organizers for giving us this opportunity.

I'd like to start with autobiography. One of the highlights of my graduate school years was the chance to see, in chronological order, 16mm prints of nearly all the Chaplin feature films, one per week, starting with *The Gold Rush* and ending with *A King in New York*. This happened during my first year of graduate school in 1972 — I started graduate school VERY young—and the occasion was the nation-wide re-release of Chaplin's films in the United States, arranged by Mo Rothman, a film distribution executive for Columbia Pictures. Although there was a similar but not so extensive re-release of Chaplin's films in New York City in 1963-4, this was the first time that American viewers could see nearly all of Chaplin's United Artists films—made between 1923 and 1952—as well as a few First National films, within a short time span. Since our session today concerns the reception of Chaplin and his films in different circumstances, I can say that my 'personal reception' of Chaplin's films was a distinctly memorable experience. Seeing nearly the entire body of Chaplin's features in such a compressed time made me understand and appreciate Andrew Sarris's 1968

observation about Chaplin in *The American Cinema*: "Viewed as a whole, Chaplin's career is a cinematic biography on the highest level of artistic expression."<sup>1</sup>

I was studying American history, film, and American literature in the Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan at the time—it was just before Robert Sklar [author of *Movie Made America*] moved from Michigan to NYU—and the reading I did about Chaplin in the considerable scholarship to that time made me more curious about both his widespread popularity in the United States and, indeed, worldwide in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the hostility he engendered among certain sectors of American culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Reading about Chaplin's films and career interested me in the dynamics of reception, in the history of how the reception of a filmmaker and films changes over time, and in the way that stardom functioned in the movies. The previous scholarship gave me a good idea of how Chaplin's popularity came about in the United States, but I had a little more difficult time pinning down what happened to deflate Chaplin's public reputation and even more trouble finding out precisely under what circumstances he left his country of residence for nearly 40 years in 1952. I became curious about how one might blend film analysis, film history, and broader cultural history as a way to try to understand the ebb and flow of Chaplin's public reputation in the United States.

About a decade after I saw those Chaplin films, after I'd finished my dissertation and done a monograph on Frank Capra's films, I decided to do a book about Chaplin and his relationship to American culture. At that point I knew it wasn't going to be a biography, but I wasn't quite sure precisely what the focus would be. The Freedom of Information Act had recently been passed in the United States, and it enabled me to request and receive around 1700 pages of government documents, principally FBI files, about Chaplin. That helped set me enthusiastically on the path toward writing the book, and during the summers for the next several years, I spent a lot of time in libraries reading about Chaplin and in archives looking at various documents trying to figure out the relationship between Chaplin and American Culture.

[As all of you know, Chaplin has been written about a lot. In fact, have you ever felt that almost everyone who met Chaplin and who wrote has felt compelled to mention his or her encounter(s) with Chaplin? A rare exception is James Agee: John Wranovics' new book,

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1928-1968* (NY: Dutton, 1968), p. 41.

*Chaplin and Agee: The Untold Story of the Tramp, the Writer, and the Lost Screenplay*, notes that although the two spent a lot of time together in Chaplin's last few years in the country, Agee refused to write publicly about his interactions with the man he considered a comic genius.]

At the same time I was visiting the archives, I was trying to develop a sharper focus on how to carry out the cultural history of a famous and talented performer/director. For the rest of my talk today, I'd like to discuss some of the most important conceptions that helped me sharpen my focus—that helped me organize my research and writing, and that have helped me since then as I've sought to pursue the cultural history of American film.

In one of the classic works of American Studies, F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*—a study of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman in the context of antebellum and Civil War America—Matthiessen wrote that “language is the most sensitive index to cultural history because a writer can only express what he is, and what he has been made by the culture of which he is a willing or unwilling part.”<sup>2</sup> I would argue that we might amend Matthiessen's formulation by saying that by sometime early in the twentieth century, edited moving images and sounds—the movies—became an equally sensitive index to cultural history, perhaps particularly so when that film is made by a filmmaker who came to assume as much creative control of his work as Chaplin did. In doing cultural history of films and a film director who also stars in his films, I came to believe that focusing on the idea of stars and how they function within the film industry and the broader culture was crucial. The subtitle of the book which eventually resulted from my work was “the evolution of a star image,” and indeed, the notion of “star image” **[SLIDE]** was central to my focus. By that term—star image—I mean the complex and shifting set of meanings, attitude, and mental pictures associated in the public mind with a recognized movie performer—both the real person and the persona he or she plays in the films. This summer, for example, Russell Crowe's star image evolved through his role as the boxer James Braddock in the depression era movie *Cinderella Man* (one American reviewer called this success-story film “*Seabiscuit* in a boxing ring”) but also through the highly publicized incident of his arrest on an assault charge for throwing a telephone receiver at a hotel employee around the time that the film was released in the U.S. Using this definition of “star image,” Chaplin's star image consists of the changing qualities and traits associated with Charles Spencer Chaplin and with the characters Chaplin played in his films, particularly the Charlie persona.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (NY: Oxford UP, 1941), xv.

With the notion of Chaplin's "star image" central to my inquiries, I tried to understand better how stardom has worked in the movie industry, and one film studies scholar who most helped me understand stardom was Richard Dyer, in his 1979 BFI monograph *Stars*. Dyer's book usefully surveys the scholarship on stardom up to the time he wrote the book, then seeks to provide a framework for analyzing stardom. In doing so, Dyer blends a textual or formalist approach to how stars are represented in movies with a contextual or ideological approach to how stars function as a symptomatic characteristic of modern societies. Dyer notes that the institution of stardom emerged in the U.S. movie industry in the second decade of the twentieth century, not surprisingly the decade that Chaplin began making movies. For the cultural historian interested in the evolution of Chaplin's star image, Dyer usefully suggested that the star image emerges from the interplay of four kinds of media texts that were already evident by the end of the decade of the 1910s, even if not so fully developed as they would be.<sup>3</sup> These four sets of media texts are:

- The **films** themselves, in which viewers can discern continuities and variations in costume, performance style (expressions, movements, and gestures), narrative concerns, and character development.
- Second, **studio promotional materials** concerning the stars and their films which are sent to fan magazines, journalists, and movie-theater owners (including, eventually, the press kits to owners that suggest strategies for marketing films), premieres, even endorsements
- Third, **publicity**—in Dyer's words, "what the press finds out" about the stars in such things as interviews in newspapers, magazines, or radio or TV interviews, as well as in gossip columns. . . Dyer notes that publicity generally seems more "authentic" than studio promotional materials, even if studio publicists try to manage it.
- Finally, **criticism and commentary** "refers to what was said or written about the stars in terms of appreciation or interpretation by critics and writers," (71), both contemporary and subsequent responses. Thus this group moves from daily newspapers through weekly news magazines and journals of politics and the arts through obituaries and critical biographies.

Exploring the evolution of Chaplin's star image requires us to examine all four kinds of texts: movies, promotion materials, publicity, and commentary.

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<sup>3</sup> See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979), pp. 69-72.

At the time I was doing the book, getting access to those kinds of texts required extensive work in my home library at the University of Tennessee plus visits to archives in a variety of places. The films were just becoming available on VHS, so I could study many of the **films** in Knoxville. However, getting access to the pre-First National films was sometimes tricky. I never was able to see all of the Keystones, but visits to the Library of Congress and to the British Film Institute enabled me to see nearly everything that was available at that time, even though some of the Keystones were available only in fragments.

The **studio promotional materials** could sometimes be gleaned from newspaper ads available on microfilm in my home library, but a trip to the University of Wisconsin, where the United Artists collection contained press kits on most of the Chaplin films, was especially useful. Also available there were some **[SLIDE]** corporate correspondence about marketing films—such as the discussion about redoing the *Monsieur Verdoux* press campaign—and some corporate financial records that don't neatly fit into any of Dyer's categories but which had some bearing on the evolution of Chaplin's star image.

It was daunting to try to track down as much **publicity** about Chaplin as I could, but I found it useful to go systematically through the *New York Times Index* and *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, looking up Chaplin's name for every year of each index. Fortunately, my home library had both the *New York Times* and all the of magazines indexed in *Reader's Guide* either on the library shelves or on microfilm, so I was able pretty easily to get to all the citations that I could find in these two sources. The same was true for the **criticism and commentary** on Chaplin. I used both of those indexes, looking up not only Chaplin but also the titles of each of his films under "Motion Pictures, reviews," in *Reader's Guide*—looking in those two places for both feature articles on Chaplin when he was making a film and on the reviews once the films came out. If you look systematically in those two sources, you learn that from the early 1920s on Chaplin was very skillful at using the press to publicize his films with feature articles while he was making a film. For much of his career to World War Two he and his publicity people were able to control "publicity," with the Joan Barry affair and Chaplin's Second Front Speeches, however, Chaplin lost control of publicity, and much more negative publicity began to appear, changing and hurting Chaplin's star image. One can also see from this commentary that Chaplin became a really important filmmaker in American culture: his films tended to get reviewed more widely than almost any other filmmaker, and he sometimes would get two reviews in the *New York Times*, one on a weekday and one on the following Sunday.

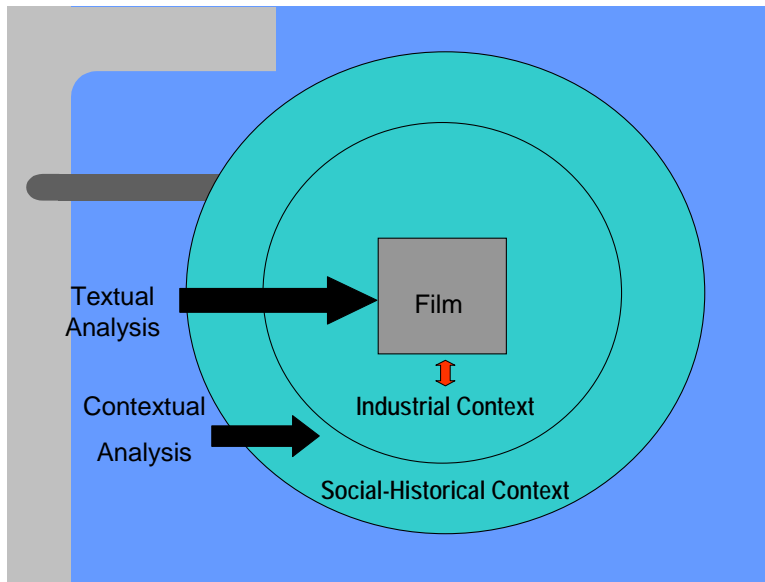
Also useful in trying to find the criticism and commentary were two bibliographies of writings by and about Chaplin: Timothy Lyons' *Charles Chaplin: A Guide to References and Resources* and Wes Gehring's *Charlie Chaplin: A Bio-Bibliography*.<sup>4</sup> These books caught some articles not indexed in other indexes I was using and also included books that dealt in one way or another with Chaplin. A trip to archives in New York also proved very useful to me. The newspaper branch of the New York Public Library was great to work in: it had on microfilm all the New York daily newspapers, and I went to those newspapers on the day that the Chaplin films had been reviewed in the *New York Times*. More times than not, other New York dailies had reviews on the same date, or nearly so, as the *Times* review. The Museum of Modern Art Film Department was helpful; they had some publicity and some commentary that I hadn't run across in other sources. And a real gem was the Robinson Locke collection at the Lincoln Center branch of the New York Public Library. They had an extensive clippings file on many 20<sup>th</sup> century performers and entertainers, including Chaplin. I was able to find in that collection articles about Chaplin in newspapers and magazines that weren't indexed, like the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and that I'd probably never have been able to run across.

Going through all that material took a lot of time: I sometimes thought I was going to develop tennis elbow from so much cranking of microfilm. But I'd also add that there was also a wonderful pleasure in trying to reconstruct, for example, what a range of publications thought about a Chaplin film when the movie was released.

As I went through all these kinds of material and tried to shape what I discovered into a coherent narrative on the evolution of Chaplin's star image, I tried to develop a coherent way to think about the relationship between Chaplin's films and the context within which they were made. This chart can give some sense of how I came to think about that relationship:

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<sup>4</sup> Lyons (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979) and Gehring (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983).



Of course, it was important to pay close attention to the films themselves—on [SLIDE] textual analysis. Richard Dyer would argue that star images are in part shaped by the performances that appeared in films, so it was of course important to do textual analysis of the Chaplin films. Sometimes with stars we focus especially on costume, performance style, and the traits of the characters played by the star, but with someone like Chaplin, who scripted and directed his films, too, the central concerns of the films, the meanings communicated and emotions evoked, and the general narrative structure are also important to consider. However, the cultural historian is also interested in linking the films and filmmakers to history,,so I also found it useful to think about films and filmmakers being surrounded by two concentric circles, each of which affect and limit the filmmaker. The first circle is the **Industrial Context**. This relates to the conditions within the film industry in which the filmmaker was working. A variety of factors within the industrial context are crucial in thinking about the evolution of Chaplin's star image. For example, part of the reason Chaplin was able to attain the wealth that allowed him the financial means to achieve creative independence was that he arrived in Hollywood just after stars were being features to help market movies. This led to increasing star salaries and to Chaplin's spiraling salaries as he went from Keystone to Essanay to Mutual and to United Artists in the 1910s, culminating in a fortune that enabled Chaplin to build his own movie studio and attain his unusual creative independence. Another factor in the industrial context, the emergence of vertical integration in the movie industry, by Paramount in 1919 and by various other studios over the next decade, shaped Chaplin's films: the founding of United Artists in 1919 was largely an response by prominent performers and directors—Pickford,

Fairbanks, Griffith, and Chaplin—to maintain some economic and creative independence from the concentrating powers of the studios. They worried that the increased power of companies that made and distributed films to the theater chains that they owned would reduce both the creative independence and the salaries of the creative directors and stars, and they responded by setting up a unique industrial structure that would distribute the films they produced independently.

Technological, aesthetic, regulatory, and marketing factors in the industrial context also help us understand the evolution of Chaplin's star image. For example a technological innovation, the introduction of sound, was crucial: Chaplin's reluctance to shift to sound and his slow and stylistically interesting use of recorded sound tracks—and eventually of dialogue—through *City Lights*, *Modern Times*, and *The Great Dictator*—had a significant impact on Chaplin's star image. Similarly, aesthetic convention widely practiced in the classical Hollywood film industry within which Chaplin works also invite the attention of the cultural historian. Think, for example, of how Chaplin's films might be linked to film genres and to narrative conventions of Classical Hollywood Cinema. More briefly, I might also mention that other factors within the industrial context to which the cultural historian can pay attention when trying to understand the evolution of a director/performer's career, including the emergence of the Production Code Administration Office in 1934 and issues of marketing and distributing films (not only in the United States but also abroad). All these help to make up the Industrial context within which a filmmaker works.

The second concentric circle that helps guide the cultural historian, a circle which surrounds (and perhaps even envelops) the industrial context is the **Social-Historical Context**. Together, the industrial and social/historical context lead us to **contextual analysis**—linking the films and filmmakers to the contexts within which they work. Filmmakers, like elected political officials, attempt to appeal to audiences at particular moments in history, and as the social-political climate of opinion in a country and the world evolves, filmmakers and audiences also find themselves responding to new and different conditions. Because popular narrative film is such a public art, it can be particularly affected by changes in the social-historical context—just ask Chaplin, who had just begun to shoot *The Great Dictator* when World War Two broke out on September 1, 1939. Chaplin seems to me an especially interesting director/performer to study within the framework of the social-historical context because of the significant shifts that took place between 1913, when he arrived at



Keystone, and 1952, when he left the country at the height or perhaps I should say nadir of the anti-Communist McCarthy era.

Chaplin's relationship to the social-historical context in the U.S. is a fascinating and complicated one, and I can't hope to exhaust that subject here.<sup>5</sup> However, when one surveys his career, at least four shifts in American cultural and political history had a direct bearing on the filmmaker and his work—World War One, the outbreak of the Great Depression after the 1929 Stock Market Crash, World War Two, and the emergence of the Cold War. World War One led to the commentary about Chaplin as a "slacker," uninterested in serving in the British military to help his country of citizenship. The depression eventually led to a changed cultural climate that pressured artists to engage with the social and political realities of the day in their work: it led Chaplin to a more overtly topical and political art, both in *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*, which in turn led to a politicizing of Chaplin's star image. World War Two hastened that shift: President Franklin Roosevelt invited Chaplin to read the final speech of *The Great Dictator* at one of his inaugural balls in early 1941, and Chaplin himself took the initiative to make a variety of speeches in favor of encouraging the opening of a Second Front (on the Western front) in 1942 after the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union. I believe Chaplin saw himself as a loyal British citizen and a supporter of America's best foreign policy interests when he made the speeches, but when the war ended and the Cold War began, Chaplin's celebration of the bravery of our "Russian comrades" during World War II began to look dangerous, even treasonous, to political conservatives who forgot (or were unwilling to take into account) the circumstances in which he made those speeches. That, in turn, helped hasten the tarnishing of Chaplin's star image in the late 1940s that helped lead to his permanent departure from U.S. residence after the Attorney General revoked Chaplin's reentry permit when he left the country for the London premiere of *Limelight* in 1952. I might add yet another social-historical factor, the shifting political climate in the United States in the 1960s, which helped to make Chaplin seem more like a victim of the Cold War than a villainous political leftist. It also, I'm sure, shaped my own positive reception of the films when I was able to see them in 1972.

So several conceptions were useful to me as a cultural historian in trying to think about the relationship between Chaplin and American culture: the notion of a **star image**, made up both of the real person and the accumulated roles played by that actor, is a useful one. The

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed treatment of this topic, see Charles J. Maland, Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

notion that a cultural historian can begin to reconstruct this star image by looking at **four types of materials**—films, promotional material, publicity, and criticism/commentary—is useful. Finally, for me, it's intellectually useful to suggest that the evolution of the star image is affected both by the **industrial context** and the **broader social-historical context** in which the filmmaker works. Even though it's very difficult to try to pin down precisely how an individual audience member received a film, I do think these conceptions and frameworks can help us to sort out how star images of director/performers like that of Chaplin, Orson Welles, Woody Allen, and Clint Eastwood evolve over time.

I might just conclude by saying that I was frequently curious to know how Chaplin's star image evolved in other countries in ways similar or different to the way it evolved in the United States. I often wondered about the Russian, French, Italian, and British star images of Chaplin were like, as well as how Chaplin was received in Asia, Africa, and South America. I welcome scholars who love film and who know those cultures well to pursue those questions, and I'm pleased to be on a panel in which two scholars have already begun exploring the reception of Chaplin in Germany. Thanks for your attention, and I'm already looking forward to hearing the other talks.