



## The Two Spanish Lives Of 'Charlot'

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### 1. Introduction

Between 1930 and 1931, two biographies were published in Spain on Charles Chaplin in the space of one year. At the end of 1930 Santiago Aguilar published *El genio del séptimo arte. Apología de Charlot* (Madrid, *Biblioteca popular del cinema, C.I.A.P.*), *The genius of the seventh art. Apología of "Charlot"*, and in the following year, César M. Arconada published his book *Tres cómicos de cine* (Madrid, Ediciones Ulises, 1931), *Three Film Comedians*, the first part of which is dedicated to Chaplin. By all accounts, the works of Aguilar and Arconada are more than likely the first biographies in book form published in Spain. By that time there was no doubt about Chaplin's popularity. Since the previous decade, his tramp persona had been known in Spain by the name of 'Charlot', a French name that had ousted the Spanish Speaking Latin American 'Carlitos'.

The biographies written by Aguilar and Arconada are very representative of the growing socio-cultural penetration of cinema in general and Chaplin in particular that had happened in Spain. Their respective appropriations of the life of the comedian will help us to achieve at least three objectives: to confirm the manner in which Chaplin and his work played a role in redefining the different stances on the Spanish culture of the period, with cinema and artistic avant-garde movements in the backdrop; to observe that the appropriation of the star was so *great* that it formed part of yet another instrument in the growing politicisation of Spain in the context of the international panorama, which was divided between communism and fascism, and finally, to gain a better understanding of what were the characteristics of Charles Chaplin as a cinema star by comparing and contrasting the two biographies under study.

## 2. The biography of a genius

As was pointed out earlier, the first of the two books to be published was *El genio del séptimo arte. Apología de 'Charlot'* by Santiago Aguilar. The edition was brought out by one of the largest publishing houses of the time, *Compañía Ibero-Americana de Publicaciones*, C.I.A.P. Santiago Aguilar (1899-1953) was thirty when he wrote this book, and was connected to the cultural panorama of the time in different ways: as a journalist, playwright, librettist, though especially as a member of the Spanish cinematographic community. Aguilar was a cinema critic, lyricist, and even on occasion, an actor but from 1917 to the 1940s he was mainly involved in script writing (Riambau, Torreiro, 1998: 126-127; Torreiro, in Borau [ed.], 1998: 33).

The subtitle of the biography, *Apología de 'Charlot'* is a literary response to the point of view that Aguilar adopts to deal with the life of Chaplin. Complimentary comparisons abound throughout the entire text: Sophocles (23), Napoleon (23) and even God (210) are personae with whom the British comedian is equalled. To this list of illustrious references we have to add the frequent repetition of the adjective that is already part of the title of the biography, 'genius' as well as phrases that could be summed up in the phrase 'the greatest man on earth' (59). The fact is that these comparisons and phrases are only the tip of the iceberg of the deep apologia expounded by Aguilar in his idealisation of the life of Chaplin. It varies between a clear sympathy for the actor in any of the living circumstances crossing his path, whether good or bad, to treating him almost as a mythological figure in certain episodes. With respect to the former, Aguilar gives account of the circumstances of Chaplin as a child, worthy of a Dickensian hero: the illness of his mother, the daily struggle to live of the boy Charlie, the happy gestures of the boy at his mother's bedside in hospital so as not to worry her, etc.

In relation to the mythological point of view, Aguilar often sees his subject in the Christian light. In the beginning of the book, one of the first arguments in the reflections of the author on the figure of Chaplin is the question of what public homage moves him most: 'the spontaneous admiration of children, poor children if possible', before whom, in the image of Chaplin is 'the Rabbi when he censures his disciples who try to separate him from the children' (21). But maybe the clearest reference is in the chapter he dedicates to Chaplin's mother. She is the mother of the chosen one, 'the creator of the genius' (59), to whom Aguilar devotes what could be a prayer: 'sublime Mother, modeller of the greatest man on earth, you are blessed among all mothers!' (59). On the other hand, the author regards Chaplin

first and foremost as a unique clown, a just but naive man, a sentimental man, who makes us laugh with his trials and tribulations, which in reality, are ours as well. Because at the end of the day, Charlot's great achievement is that 'he is so like us mortals that we can identify ourselves with his tragicomedy' (26).

But the story of Aguilar's appropriation would be incomplete if we did not refer to two last related characteristics. The first is the fact that throughout the book Chaplin is called Carlos or Carlitos, when the name of Charlot had been clearly imposed on attempts to make it Spanish. No doubt the definitive test of how this rendering responds to a deep appropriation or, if you will, an interiorisation of Charlot is found in chapter ten of the first section of the book. This chapter is a digression by Aguilar on how Charlot's earlier films were received in Madrid, in other words, a story about what the first 'Charlots' meant to Aguilar's as a teenager. As of this moment, he relates how around 1916, the moustached persona became a symbol of their idol that many children would paint on their faces, or how at his school one day, to the astonishment of their teachers, the pupils came to class dressed up as Charlot. But the highpoint of the author's appropriation of Charlot comes when one of Aguilar's class mates tells them in the school yard that in fact Charlot is Spanish and moreover from the very heart of Madrid (95-106).

### **3. The biography of a man**

The biography of Charles Chaplin written by César M. Arconada (1898-1964) is part of the book '*Tres cómicos del cine. Biografías de sombras*', in which the account of the British comedian is followed by two other accounts of Clara Bow and Harold Lloyd. The book was published in 1931 by Ulises, a small, short-lived publishing house, of which the author was one of its driving forces. From the early nineteen twenties, Arconada (1898-1964) was a journalist, writer and music critic. Towards the end of the decade, he joined the group involved in the Spanish journal *La Gaceta Literaria*, that was essential in the development of the cultural group of the 'Generation of 1927'. Historians regard him as one of the writers of that group, and until 1930 his stories and poems reflected the avant-garde aesthetic of Ultraism. As we will see, the publication in 1931 of '*Tres cómicos del cine*' marks the beginning of Arconada's departure from this aesthetic to realism (Borau, en Borau [ed.], 1998: 78; Arconada, 1974: 5-20; Guerrero Villalba, 1990.).

César Arconada's biography of Charlot has a different literary style. This is the child of Ultraism, where admiration for modernity represented by new machinery and its products are combined with a predilection for the creation of fleeting images that

establish unlikely relationships. But what gives the text its unique style is its contribution to the informative aspect, but at a distance from the facts that point to the fragments dedicated to Chaplin's childhood and the development of his film career. Certain comments that deal with various aspects of the producer's work from the point of view of a film critic end up by giving the text a literary personality different from that of Santiago Aguilar's book.

What in Aguilar's book was an apologia, here is admiration. To Arconada, Charlot is not 'the greatest man on earth', but rather the most popular (84-86). The only comparison of Chaplin with other great persons that merits mention is that with Christ, used by Arconada when he concludes that Charlot, like Jesus, would give his life to mankind (81). And the only consistency to be found by placing Charlot in mythology is the association between Hollywood and a heaven that has, to some degree, made saints of spectators by bathing them in its light (12). Likewise, the author divides the history of cinema into before and after Charlot's film debut. To give an example of what cinema was before the British comedian arrived, the author recreates his own experience of going to the cinema one night. Aguilar does likewise for partially similar reasons, but in Arconada's case this experience does not lead to the climax of making Charlot Spanish, in the same way that Charlot is never referred to by any name other than his English and French names.

Arconada is interested in emphasising what Charlot's function is in cinema and what his real nature is. According to Arconada, before Charlot, cinema was 'shadows of cut-out, cardboard figures moved by an electric crank' (49); a human man was needed 'with his torment, his weaknesses, his ambiguities, his psychology (...) And this is why Charlot make his debut in cinema' (50) This last sentence is repeated like a litany throughout the chapter in which the writer relates how Chaplin came to cinema to make up for the failures of society, to alleviate our misfortunes, to cheer up those abandoned by fortune, to console the girls who have been left alone in life and to encourage the humble to make the effort (50-54). Charlot is a man of humour and sentimentality; he is a poet full of goodness who has chosen the social class of the man of the street; he is a man who knows how to be what we all are, who struggles against the adversity of destiny, who sacrifices himself for others (68-84).

Both the functions for which Arconada believes Charlot exists and the characteristics of his nature coincide with an ideological philosophy. We refer to the association that the author establishes between Chaplin and the humble as opposed

to the powerful of this world. Throughout the description of the origins and the first years of 'Charlie', the hardship and the injustice that characterise his life as a member of the working class is brought out by constantly comparing such a life with the lives of the rich. Poverty is what forges his personality which overflows with goodness, and it is this personality that finally endows the figure with what converts him into what Arconada interprets as a maximum quality: a common man, with his ups and downs. Even when Chaplin is rich, he is not a rich man like other rich people, says the author who adds that Charlot 'is an unhappy rich man, a poor rich man, a sentimental rich man, a communist' (68).

Here we have the star, who is a star because the public has identified a hero in this 'humble man' (86) who is also a great artist, but who according to Arconada, is not at all a genius. Although the author admits that in the despair of the aftermath of the First World War, Charlot became a symbol for a European public that could only re-encounter itself with human dignity before the movements of a simple clown, he is not prepared to give way to the qualification of genius (73-75). The reason lies precisely in the fact that Charlot is a universal artist, in other words, an artist for everybody especially for children, as Aguilar also pointed out. 'Genius' is too complex a word, too intellectual for a comedian whose great success lies in representing all men that are neither exceptional nor extraordinary, men that are nothing (73-75).

#### **4. The two biographies, in the light of their contexts**

Statements such as these are what lead us to believe that, to a certain extent, Arconada's text might be a response to Aguilar's book. Aguilar insists on referring to Charlot as a symbol owing to his costume, whilst the label of genius prevails in his book right from the title. Arconada's biography was brought out only months after the publication of *El genio del séptimo arte* and not only does he put forward the 'bad' reasons that led to Charlot becoming a symbol, but he also dedicates several pages to refuting the label of 'genius'. But what is clear is that both texts respond to different cultural backgrounds.

While Aguilar's book was published by a large publishing group that was visibly active in the major newspapers of the time, Arconada's book was handled by a small short-lived publishing house that was owed much to the author's personal efforts. Both authors belonged to the cultural world of those years, but to different branches. Among many of his activities, Santiago Aguilar was a member of the

Spanish cinematographic community, while this world was alien to César Arconada, who belonged to the latest Spanish cultural elite. On the popular cultural front, the data places Charlot in the centre of film magazines, cinema critiques, and the society pages arising out of his sentimental problems. Aguilar was involved in two of the largest Spanish cinematographic magazines of the time, *El cine* and *Cinegramas*, both aimed at the general public and in which Chaplin was a recurring theme as his different films were produced. On the contrary, from 1927 to 1930, Arconada was a key member of *La Gaceta Literaria*. The 'wild young men' of the Students' Residence, with Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí at the helm, found their natural space in this magazine. *La Gaceta Literaria* included Charlot in its themes, because his persona was the incarnation of the modern world on the part of the most Europeanising and modernising sector of Spanish culture at the time (Gubern, 1999: 58-60; 103-106; 304-309; Morris, 1980).

Aguilar's literary style, with his tendency to over indulge in his positive view of Charlot, and his Christian references often associated with a melodramatic tone is not too far from the style of a great deal of the popular culture prevalent in Spain at the time, both in narrative and theatrical literature as well as in numerous films. On the contrary, the avant-garde elements in Arconada's style together with the neutral, informative journalistic tone, and on occasion the style of a rigorous literary critic, bear witness to the fact that the author was one of those who actively took part in the regeneration of Spanish culture we have already mentioned.

But just as important as this interest was the fact that Charlot was an instrument with which to take sides within this cultural panorama. Because when César Arconada published *Tres cómicos del cine*, 1931, Chaplin no longer attracted the unanimous admiration he once did from the 'Generation of 27' or like-minded groups. From about 1928 onwards, it was perceived that Buster Keaton and Harry Langdon were gaining preference over Charlot, especially among the surrealist group headed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. For them, the Chaplin of the end of the twenties was no longer the poetic artist that he had been as a result of having made his film more overtly sentimental. In the light of this situation, the biography included in *Tres cómicos del cine* placed Arconada among those who continued to defend Charlot and even to admire him over the other film comedians. But there was more to it than that. This favouring of Charlot could also be seen as a refusal by Arconada and other writers to immerse themselves, with all its consequences, in the waters of the surrealist avant-garde movement, like Dalí and Buñuel had done;

and even as a rejection of a full immersion in any avant-garde movement, they having already been there before, to a greater or lesser degree.

In fact, as I have already pointed out, *Tres cómicos del cine* marks the departure of Arconada from the Ultraist style and the commencement of a realist aesthetic. And the figure of Charlot again plays a central role in this change because by adopting literary realism, Arconada responded to the progressive politicisation of the young creators of the 'Generation of 27'. The evolution of the Spanish dictatorship under General Primo de Rivera and the Monarchy at the end of the twenties, as well as the progressive incidents of international events — especially in post-revolutionary Russia and Italian fascism — began to pervade the opinion and even the practice of many member of the new generation. And such was the case with Arconada, who embraced the communist ideology to the point where he subordinated his cultural and intellectual work to that ideology. When Arconada wrote his biography on Charlot, the personality of *La Gaceta Literaria* had become distorted by the progressive political radicalisation of Spanish life. Shortly after, Arconada wrote a text on Chaplin in which the comedian forms part of a vision of the world dominated by the unjust division between the rich and the poor. The latter, according to the author, is the group that sustains society and to which Chaplin belongs by birth and by heart, even when he becomes a millionaire. But, rich or poor, Charlot who lives in this world where the weak suffer severe inequality in living conditions, behaves like a good man, who wants to represent the common man.

## **5. Conclusion: Charlot, a film star**

All in all, the two forms of appropriating the figure of Charles Chaplin reveal both the dimensions and the characteristics of what was then called a film star. In the Spain of 1930, Charles Chaplin was Charlot, a film comedian capable of fascinating different cultural sectors, from the most popular to those linked to the European cultural panorama. The price he had to pay for his ability to permeate different sectors of society was the different use each sector made of him. While, on one hand he was used to tell a melodramatic story of the triumph of a brilliant man in the face of terrible living circumstances, on the other, he was depicted as a victim of social injustice who ended up knowing how to represent the most human aspect of anonymous people. The fact is that these two different interpretations have to form part of Chaplin as a mass phenomenon.

Basically, however, the texts of Aguilar and Arconada have more in common than what has been said thus far might lead us to believe. An example would be the use

by both of mythological material to refer to the film star. Although more mythological references are used in *El genio del séptimo arte* than in *Tres cómicos del cine*, both books make use of Christian references, which is coherent with Spanish catholic tradition, and deeply rooted in Spanish society. But this might only be the Spanish way of interpreting several habitual characteristics in the character, one of which is discovered by both authors: the goodness of the persona. And next to goodness, the sentimental side. This characteristic has a lot to do with the Charlot contemporary to the writing of the two books because even though it had been present from the very early days of the comedian's film career, it grew over the twenties. The third feature shared by the two writers is hidden under a discussion that would appear to separate it most. The matter of whether or not Charlot was a genius reveals what for both writers is the great secret of the comedian: his universality. Whether this makes him a genius or not represents our deepest yearning for the man who is nothing, what lies beneath all this is Chaplin's ability, as discovered by Aguilar and Arconada to represent what is human, human being understood as the most common man.

Finally, if we stop to think about the dates of birth of the authors, we will see that they were about thirty years old when they wrote the biographies in 1930. Through their respective books, they tell of the impact that Charlot had caused on them since their teens. There is a certain logic in the fact that they were written by two men at the age of thirty. Since they had belonged to the first generation that was born with the cinema, as Rafael Alberti says in a famous line from one of his poems. The cinema was part and parcel of the authors' lives, as was Charlot from their teens. And when it came to writing books about the world of film, Santiago Aguilar and César Arconada wrote about what for them was synonymous with cinema: Charles Chaplin, Charlot.

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