# Chaplin and Imitation

***By David Trotter***

The moments I want now to draw attention to, in Chaplin's films, are the moments when he chose to dwell on, and to make a performance of, imitation itself. The films which interest me most from this point of view are the films Chaplin made during and immediately after the First World War, at Essanay, Mutual, and First National, in which the figure of the tramp became something more than a costume and a set of mannerisms, something less than a 'character'. Various useful accounts have been offered of the tramp's emergence as an icon or univeral figure. John Kimber, for example, has distinguished between three successive but overlapping 'incarnations' or 'selves' in the films of this period: overbearing, creatively high-spirited, and 'fully human'. [1] Rather than identify a 'self' in the tramp's antics, I have sought to define a specific preoccupation which, because it provoked Chaplin to feats of film-making, can be said to constitute an attitude, a view of the world, a critique of modernity.

As the figure of the tramp took shape, in the Essanay films, so imitation became in the most pressing sense an issue for Chaplin. His rapidly escalating popularity encouraged a wide variety of imitators, from Stan Laurel, whose Chaplin imitation was overt, and thus flattering, to Billy West, a smalltime vaudevillian who copied Chaplin's costume and make-up in more than fifty one- and two-reel comedies. In 1916, Charles Amador, a Mexican actor, changed his name to Charlie Aplin, and copied Chaplin's most successful routines. Chaplin sued, and won, though not without difficulty. [2]

I want to concentrate on two scenes of imitation, in particular, which occur with some frequency in the films of this period. The first involves Charlie's imitation of and by another person, who thereby becomes a stooge or accomplice; following Chaplin himself, I shall refer to it as 'The Biter Bit'. The second involves Charlie's imitation of a mechanical apparatus of some kind (including persons in an unconscious state). It amounts to an exercise in camouflage.

The first scene, apparent in the earliest Essanay films, and no doubt deriving from vaudeville, is the product of a casual encounter, in a public or semi-public space,

between Charlie and another man. The other man has intentions upon Charlie, more often than not involving robbery. Charlie realises immediately what is going on, but decides not to resist. There is a happy recognition, first on the part of the victim, then on the part of the assailant, of the full extent of the indignities in progress. Both are willing to allow these indignities to continue after the original motive for the encounter has been exhausted. The two participants imitate each other madly, in complicitous resistance, or resistant complicity, in a *pas-de-deux* charged with an astonishing intensity of feeling on both sides: an intensity not at all incompatible, as we shall see, with a certain nonchalance.

We might compare the performance with that put on by literary Modernism's pseudo-couples: the pairs of mismatched and yet inseparable male protagonists, in Wyndham Lewis, in D.H. Lawrence, in Samuel Beckett. The term is Beckett's. [3] Frederic Jameson has argued that the pseudo-couple became in Modernist writing from Flaubert to Beckett a 'structural device for preserving narrative as such'. In his view, the modern plotless novel, with its antihero and its compensatory weight of 'abstract stylization', was a result of the extinction of the 'older' passions and interests by *ennui* and *anorexia*. The pseudo-couple is the 'unstable, acrobatic resolution' of the need to keep narrative going. [4] That the resolution is unstable and yet acrobatic would, of course, suit Chaplin perfectly. What I would take from Jameson's account is the sense of the pseudo-couple as a stimulus to new and in essence contrary formal energies. The *pas-de-deux* does not constitute an obstacle to narrative as such. It constitutes, rather, a counter-narrative, a story told about something else altogether. Modernist writers, from Flaubert to Beckett, found that they needed to tell that story. So, I think, did Chaplin.

My first example of a Chaplinesque pseudo-couple is from *In the Park* (1915), an Essanay quickie made in a week, and generally dismissed as a 'park' comedy in the Keystone mould. 'All I need to make a comedy,' Chaplin once told Mack Sennett, 'is a park, a policeman, and a pretty girl.' [5] On this occasion, he began with the pretty girl. A nursemaid (Edna Purviance) sits on a bench reading a book entitled *Why They Married*. She glances with open admiration at a genteel (or faux-genteel) couple seated on another bench, who fondle each other enthusiastically. The pattern of cuts leaves us in no doubt that she would like (and indeed expects to get) some of what her middle-class counterpart is having. However, this burgeoning heterosexual idyll is about to be rudely disturbed. An intertitle announces: 'The biter bit'. Elsewhere in the park, Charlie, at a loose end (Jameson's *ennui*, perhaps), stands twirling his cane, gazing down at the ground. A thief approaches him from behind, and staring ostentatiously in the opposite direction (or perhaps in no direction, since he would appear to be blind), reaches out a hand towards his jacket pocket. Charlie sees what is going on, but at first chooses not to

react. The thief removes a handkerchief from Charlie's pocket, which Charlie, observing the manoeuvre with interest, seizes, and uses to blow his nose, thanking his collaborator. Unabashed, the thief tries again, this time prospecting in Charlie's trouser-pocket. Charlie reciprocates by fishing a cigarette out of the thief's jacket pocket, and putting it to his lips. The look he now gives his assailant-turned-collaborator is a mixture of coyness and reproach. The pair swop places, feigning indifference, and Charlie strikes a match on the back of his partner's neck, before tipping his hat to him and waving goodbye. There is intimacy, in this encounter, and profound mutual understanding; but never for an instant the mutual regard which might become the basis of relationship, as opposed to durable co-presence. The biter bit is Chaplin's version of a pseudo-coupling. What holds the *ennui*-struck pair together is imitation. The biter gets bitten, that is, imitated; he bites again, imitating his imitator. Each knows what the other is up to. Neither wishes to bring the performance to a premature end.

This counter-narrative to heterosexual romance (*Why They Did Not Marry*) immediately produces another scene which, although comparably awkward, does not constitute a pseudo-coupling. Elsewhere in the park, a policeman stands, looking off to his right (our left), twirling his baton. Charlie backs cautiously into view from the right, until he comes to rest against the policeman's solid form, when without looking round he reaches out a hand to fondle first the policeman's hand, then his badge, then the buttons on his tunic, then, lightly, the baton. He is still locked in imitation of his original blindly fondling assailant. But, in another place at another time, the imitation misfires. Coming to, abruptly, Charlie twirls his cane in embarrassment, and then, oddly unabashed, resumes. This time he fondles the tip of the baton, which the policeman holds at an angle of 45 degrees across his groin, rather more deliberately. As the policeman looks down, Charlie wanders off, twirling his cane. The scene is set off from its predecessor by the striking disparity, in terms both of physical size and of power, between the two participants. Between such a pair, there is not the equivalence which permits imitation (as there is, for example, between Pullman and Satterthwaite, whose shared class history has already taken the edge off disparities in size and authority). For we have, here, in Charlie's pleasuring of phallic authority, a Rabelaisian Chaplin whose wild invention requires a different kind of analysis from the one I shall develop. [6]

The most nearly Rabelaisian of Charlie's pseudo-couplings occurs, to brilliant effect, in *Police* (1916), officially the last film Chaplin made for Essanay. The film's celebrated flophouse scene pales by comparison with the muscle-taking-root episode which follows it. Charlie has been thrown out of the flophouse because he has no money, and is mugged in a dark alley in a manner verging on the orgiastic. He and the mugger ransack each other's persons in what appears to be full mutual knowledge and consent. The

mugger rummages through Charlie's rear trouser-pockets a second time, even after he has discovered that they are empty, a manoeuvre which Charlie interprets as sexual. In this case, the mutual rummaging has re-united a pseudo-couple: the pair were cell-mates in prison; they go on to rob a house together.

Desire, however, is not the point of pseudo-coupling (it has no point). Chaplin wove a certain nonchalance into Charlie's participation in these bouts. Nowhere more so than in *The Floorwalker* (1916), his first film for Mutual, which redescribes the encounter between biter and bitten as a mirror-imaging. The encounter takes place in an outer office on the upper level of the shop. The manager and his assistant have conspired to empty the safe. The assistant, having disposed of his accomplice, emerges into the outer office, loot in hand, to be confronted by Charlie, who is coming the other way, with a store detective in hot pursuit, and who looks an awful lot like him. Both think that they have seen their own image in a mirror. Each imitates the other's actions, uncertain whether he is looking at himself, or at someone else. Each reaches out a hand to touch the surface of a non-existent mirror. Looking down simultaneously, they realize that Charlie has a cane in his hand, rather than a briefcase full of money. After a futile attempt to escape from each other's presence, they engage in close mutual inspection. The assistant manager knocks Chaplin's hat off, pinches his cheek, and gets a kiss in return. They swop clothes. Although thoroughly expedient, from both points of view, imitation is in this scene also an end in itself: a reason to come together, a profound pleasure. It is Charlie's nonchalance, an awareness preceding and not dependent upon full knowledge, although further extended by it, which reconfigures the episode as an investigation of the wish to conform to another's wishes.

So much for the biter bit. In the other characteristic scene I have in mind, Charlie engrossedly imitates an object, or mechanism, at first in order to elude pursuit, then for reasons harder to fathom. The piece of the world into which he sinks himself in these episodes takes the form of a contrivance, or contraption (a term evolved from 'contrive', with a strong implication of the makeshift, and just a hint of entrapment). In acting like a machine, Charlie does not cease to be himself. Indeed, he becomes rather more himself. He fulfils himself. The wish fulfilled, the wish to act like a machine, is a new and defining solitude. There may well be other persons present. But they will never know what he knows. They will never see the world as he sees it from within his contraption.

Chaplin's last and most popular film for Mutual, *The Adventurer* (1917), has two parts. The first part, in effect a reversion to Keystone methods, has convict Charlie chased up and down the Santa Monica hills by a posse of trigger-happy warders. In the second part, Charlie masquerades as a wealthy yachtsman at a party given in his honour by the

heroine, whose mother he has saved from drowning. Suspicions are soon aroused, and the warders arrive. Placing a lampshade on his head, Charlie stands stock still as the hot pursuit swirls around him, and away, at the motionless centre of motion. He removes the lampshade, in order to assault the villain, but then replaces it on his own head, as though he now cannot do without it, and walks out onto the veranda. He would like above all to extend the enchanted interval. But other perils await, and he cannot expect the trick to work again, in another place at another time. He tosses the lampshade aside. Now no-one will ever know what he knew (not even Edna Purviance, stood right next to Charlie-the-lampstand while the pursuit swirled by).

In Chaplin's first film for First National, *A Dog's Life* (1916), Charlie discovers the automaton he needs in another human being. He returns to the Green Lantern dance-hall to retrieve from a pair of pickpockets the contents of a wallet they had stolen and buried, which his dog had dug up, thus making it his. The pickpockets sit in an alcove curtained at each end. Charlie knocks one of them out through the curtain, and inserts his own arms on either side of the man's body, engaging in a vividly mimed conversation with the other pickpocket, in order to elicit the money due to him. His eyes visible through a slit in the curtain, Charlie converts his victim into an automaton. The mime utterly mesmerises its interlocutor, who appears not to have noticed that his previously loquacious colleague has been struck dumb. His fascination is our fascination.

Both kinds of scene enact imitation, as Charlie's body conforms itself to a machine, or to someone else's expectations; and both kinds of scene comment upon imitation, through sheer excess, and the pleasure taken in excess. Both kinds tell a story. Slapstick comedy reproduces in fantasy the insult the body suffers in the world. By contrast, Chaplin's tramp comedy insists, as Mark Winokur has pointed out, on the intelligence of the body in *avoiding* insult (or at least terminal insult) through self-transformation. [7] It seems to me, however, that the intelligence at work in tramp comedy amounts to something more than avoidance, something less than self-transformation. It is that something -- at once enactment and critique of imitation -- which will concern me in what remains of this chapter. What was it about the nature and circumstances of imitation that provoked Chaplin to feats of film-making?

## Notes

1. *The Art of Charlie Chaplin* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 66-72. See also Charles J. Maland's concise account of the 'further "refining"' of Charlie during the Mutual period: *Chaplin and American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 29-35.
2. John McCabe, *Charlie Chaplin* (London: Robson Books, 1992), 88-90.
3. 'Two shapes then, oblong like man, entered into collision before me,' reports the narrator of *The Unnamable*. 'They fell and I saw them no more. I naturally thought of the pseudocouple

Mercier-Camier.' *The Unnamable*, translated by the author, in *Three Novels* (London: Picador, 1979), 272. See *Mercier and Camier*, translated by the author (London: John Calder, 1974).
4. *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 59.
5. *My Autobiography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), 159.
6. The kind of analysis developed to illuminating effect by William Paul, in 'Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality', in Andrew Horton, ed., *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 109-29. Paul draws upon Freud and Bakhtin to describe Charlie's 'coquettish' behaviour towards his bigger and stronger antagonists, with reference primarily to *City Lights* (1931).
7. *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 104.