



Chaplin on Chaplin: Writings on Film

Sidney Gottlieb

Chaplin quoted in Preface to *Movies for the Millions*.

from Gilbert Seldes, *Movies for the Millions: An Account of Motion Pictures, Principally in America*, London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1937, pp. v-vi.

I am flattered by the request of my friend, Gilbert Seldes, to write a preface to his new book about the moving pictures. However there is very little I can add to his knowledge. Personally, I am more interested in the future of motion pictures than I am in their past. But the word "future," when made the subject of such objects as the League of Nations, economic determinism and taxation, is somewhat stupefying to contemplate these days, and especially the future of motion pictures, built as they are upon the shifting sands of popular entertainment. Tomorrow may be television. Who knows? In the halcyon days of the so-called legitimate drama when the theatre was prosperously embarked, drifting on a sea of popularity, along came the storm of mechanical science (the movie and radio) and lo! the theatre found itself deposited upon the shores of neglect, an edifice of monumental dignity but considerably depleted from the wreck. To-day it serves as a hatchery from which plays and actors emerge for Hollywood consumption. Who would have thought that the theatre with all its tradition was destined to such a fate?

What is to be the fate of the motion-picture industry? At present, it is astride the world of success. From a Bowery nickelodeon it has passed through a metamorphosis to that of a Rockefeller music hall. Has it reached its zenith? Will it go farther? On the mechanical side it has made miraculous advances, but, artistically, it has yet many obstacles to overcome.

For instance, one of them is the matter of censorship. When the weekly periodicals, the daily Press, the novel and the theatre are free and unencumbered to comment frankly on current events, the film play is burdened with a specially imposed censorship which denies it the right to dwell on many of the issues of the day.

Under normal conditions of censorship, the film play with its fictional "boy meets girl" theme, has quite a task competing with the realism of the film news weekly with its assassination of a king, the tragic accident of a Zeppelin, its graphic accomplishments of a Lindbergh. But to-day, in this kaleidoscopic turmoil of fast and furious events, when cause and effect with increasing pace are bringing to light a more realistic view on human affairs, the film play must ignore the vital issues and deal only in such subject-matter as a child would read in a rhyming book.

This condition was brought about by a recent crusade in the Press for purer films, and resulted in the industry creating a self-imposed censorship other than that within the national and state censor boards, the cry being that the film play so affects the mind and morals of young people that a more rigid censorship was necessary. Yet, on almost every other street corner, the daily Press features in glaring headlines that any child might read, crimes of violence, strikes and revolutions.

The problem of film censorship is difficult, and perhaps will never be solved to the satisfaction of all concerned. Nevertheless, if the elements of aesthetic criticism were considered in censoring a film, it might result in a more adequate method of judging what is morally fit for the public. For many films that now pass the censors, if judged by their aesthetic standards, would be banned in their entirety because of their lack of good taste, their false standards of life and their vulgar treatment. On the other hand, many forbidden subjects, if judged by aesthetic standards, might be beneficial and constructive, if excelling in artistry, and treated with dignity and intelligence.

Chaplin quoted in *The Fool*, from *Rob Wagner's Script* 30, no. 690 (October 21, 1944), pp. 6-7.

He looked so old and feeble, and so out of place in the turbulent hustle of the city crowd, that my interest was immediately aroused. He was going in the direction of the Hudson River, crossing the road at Twenty-ninth Street and Madison Avenue. And although he had started with the change of the traffic signal, his progress was so painfully slow that I doubted whether he could make it in time.

His queer, stumbling gait was like one's impeded movements in a dream—his legs operating as though they were extricating themselves from entangled rope. And, as I had anticipated, before he was two thirds of the way across, the signal changed. However, the traffic was not as ruthless as I had for some reason expected, and with considerate slowness it allowed

him to pass.

On gaining the curb the old man chuckled and seemed amused by it all. He carried a stick, as well as an old cigar box which he held high in mock triumph. But no one paid any attention. In his exuberance he over-balanced and staggered, but quickly regained himself.

He was an anachronism—this ancient derelict—with clothes that hung on him as on an old scarecrow. His Christlike whiskers were thin and yellowish white. And beneath an old battered fedora hat, his gray locks furled inward around a sunken neck. His complexion was sickly—translucent, like the inside of an oyster shell. And the features were thin and pointed as though cast from a long illness.

He stood a moment as one having accomplished only a part of his pilgrimage, and looked about him at the milling crowd. As they hurried by, he chuckled and laughed, and made inaudible remarks. There was something ironic in his laughter, I thought—a whimsical resignation of one who knew the torments of hope and its bitter betrayals. He seemed to be mocking them for their hurry, and to be bent on playing the fool. He raised his hat several times to people passing by, but they paid no attention. Nevertheless, his geniality never diminished. And he continued on his way along Twenty-ninth Street towards the Hudson river.

As to what Mecca he was bound, I had no idea. But I intended to find out. I was curious to know more about this old chap and what motivated his journey. So, on the opposite side of the street I followed.

As he hobbled along, hugging his cigar box as an author would his manuscript, he paused occasionally to rest. And while doing so, his legs occasionally buckled. But he would regain them quickly, ignoring the fact. There were no signs of the fool in him now. As he slowly limped along under the eaves of the tall buildings there were only pathos and weariness.

When he came forth into Madison Square, the Metropolitan Tower clock tolled four. The June day was warm and sunny, and a summer spirit pervaded the city square. Precariously he crossed the wide intersection that leads into the park, and entered it. I did not follow, but remained outside at a vantage point where I could see him.

Without hesitation he hobbled up the pathway to a bench. Methodically he placed his stick and cigar box on it, then felt in his coat pocket and produced a lump of bread. Behind the

bench numerous sparrows flitted about the green. With a perfunctory air and a dexterity, he nipped off pieces and threw them to the birds. His manner was that of "Milord Bountiful." And he threw with the abandon of abundance. Before his supply was exhausted, however, he was obliged to rest on the bench, throwing the remaining pieces over his left shoulder. When he had finished, he brushed off his hands, took out his handkerchief, wiped his face, wiped his beard, blew his nose, then sat quietly.

Was this the Mecca? the end of the pilgrimage? Surely, I thought, he has not come all this way just to feed sparrows. There must be other reasons. However, I was not kept in suspense very long, for a moment later he was all primed with renewed energy and was playing the fool again.

At the end of the bench was one other occupant—a lugubrious, old, fat man who, sphinx-like, sat staring ahead of him, his blue puffed hands overlapped on the handle of his walking stick.

"Penny for your thoughts," the old man chuckled. But the fat man paid no attention. A soldier and his girl were passing. Immediately he got to his feet and saluted them, bringing his stick straight up to his shoulder. But they paid no attention.

With a chuckle he picked up his cigar box and ambled off up the pathway. On one of the benches four middle-aged women sat chatting. As he passed them he bowed with embellishment and raised his hat. One of the women laughed and he laughed back, mocking her in a falsetto voice which only made her laugh all the more. With such encouragement he turned and went towards them, but not too close, and without further preliminaries he burst into song:

I love a lassie—a bonnie Highland lassie,
She's as pure as the lilies in the dell.
She's as sweet as the heather—the bonnie purple
heather,
For she's Mary—my Scotch bluebell.

When he had finished he opened his cigar box and gingerly held it out towards them. In it were shoelaces. They smiled, a little embarrassed, and shook their heads. He smiled and shook his head also, his geniality never diminishing, and closing the lid of his cigar box, he slowly ambled away.

It seemed that nothing could affect the amiability of this old dodger—he was so irresponsible, and I began to wonder whether his whimsical antics, his elfish laughter were as profound and as complex as I had thought or whether they were merely the imbecilities of a senile old man. Were I to accost him, I might find out.

Where the paths cross and the branches of the trees almost meet overhead, I caught up with him. “What have you in that box?” I asked. Tremulously he opened the lid.

“Give me a pair,” I said, laying a five-dollar bill on top of the laces. He looked at the bill, then at me inquiringly.

“You may keep the change,” I said brusquely.

Gone was his buffoonery now. In his sunken eyes was a look of bewilderment. He could vie whimsically with the cruelty of life—its loneliness and indifference—but this gift, as small as it was, perplexed him. He was saddened by it.

As I took the laces, he held on to one end of them by way of detaining me. He tried to speak but could not. I thanked him and went my way. Before leaving the park, I turned and glanced back. He was still standing where I had left him, in the center of the pathway. I waved to him, but he did not respond. He just stood gazing after me—a tragic old man with the shadows of the leaves dancing about him like gloom.

If Charlie Wished To Be An M.P! Would People Take Him Seriously?

Chaplin quoted in *The Weekly Record* (Glasgow), September 10, 1921.

Why have I come to Europe? For many reasons rather than for one. One of them, however, is that for a long time now I have been afflicted with home-sickness, with the hunger to see some of the scenes of my boyhood and, if possible, to renew my acquaintance with my boyhood companions.

In the last few years I have thought much of the unhappy life of the children of the very poor as I saw it in those early days and I would like to try to bring a little happiness into their lives, even if only for a day, or just an hour. The memory of my own boyhood has haunted me all through the years, and left on my memory impressions that will never fade.

I know that if in those days some one had thought of us and tried to introduce a little brightness into our drab lives it would have made a big difference, and perhaps my memories might not have been so tinged with bitterness.

I long to revisit the school in Sancroft Street where I attended and to see some of the scholars. If possible I want to get them a holiday, or, in some other way, to make them feel a bit happier for my coming.

Another reason I have is that I want to trace my mother's people. They came from Scotland when my mother was a little girl and settled in London in the very district where I was born. Lately I have got a clue to their whereabouts, and if it fails to bring me success in London I shall visit Scotland, where I may be more successful.

My earliest recollection is of my mother speaking to me of the beautiful hills and lilting auld Scotch songs [stet] to us, and even at that early age I used to contrast the beautiful hills and the free, pure air of which she sang, the healthy glow not yet faded from her cheeks, with the dull and dark streets in which we had to live.

Drifted Into My Career

I think it was this early rebellion against my surroundings that turned my thoughts towards making a career for myself. In the ordinary sense of the word I did not choose my own career. I just drifted into it. I did not set out in life with any carefully prepared plans, but was content to take opportunities as they arose, always feeling that if I did my best in the sphere in which I happened to find myself at the moment it would carry me to something better.

Had I been free to choose my occupation in the light of what I know now it would have been different. Not even the measure of success I have achieved, with its promise of being taken out of the squalid surroundings against which my whole being revolted, would have induced me to enter on the career into which Fate forced me.

Because I am convinced that being a buffoon for the edification of the public is not an ideal existence and I revolt against it. However, it does not seem to be of any use. The public have taken it into their heads that Charlie is funny, and so funny Charlie must be to the point of being ridiculous.

How then, did I come into my profession if it is one I loathe? It is simple enough. One day I was giving an exhibition of the ordinary street arab's contortions, the kind so common in the London streets, when I saw a man watching me intently. "That boy is a born actor!" I heard him say, and then to me "Would you like to be an actor?" I scarcely knew what an actor was in those days, though my mother and father had been connected with the music hall stage for years, but anything that promised work and the rewards of work as a means of getting out of the dull rut in which I found myself was welcome, and I listened to the tempter, with the result that a few days later I was making my appearances in London suburban music halls with the variety artistes known as the Lancashire Eight. [Robinson has: the Eight Lancashire Lads, p. 28]

I found the Lancashire dialect hard at first, but thanks to my powers of mimicry it came easier in the end and soon I was able to sing and dance in the satisfaction of my employer. The life was not as attractive as it might be, but I felt that I was getting on by degrees and kept to it in the hope that it might prove the step to something better.

Next came my turn with Fred Karno's troupe. It was that which first brought me into touch with the American public, and I found that the American public seemed to take more quickly to the London street urchin's ideas of entertainment than any other public I knew of.

Engagements in the States were easy to obtain and when the cinema craze came I found it was taken for granted that I should prove a hit on the screen.

I did not like the idea of it at first because I was more than ever determined to work any way out of this role which had been assigned to me by those who think it is where I am most likely to shine.

It was useless, however. I was caught up in this ruthless machine and turned into a clown or buffoon in spite of myself, and now to-day it is the hardest thing in the world to get away from the character the public have assigned me.

I cannot be serious even for an hour, or at least I cannot be taken seriously. I may talk with all the earnestness of which I am capable of a subject that is close to my heart, a subject that to me is sacred. My words are received with roars of laughter, as though it were merely the patter of a first-class "gag" artiste, and people whom I wanted to make weep with a sense of the wrongs and injustices of something I have seen in my daily rounds exclaim, "Oh, Charlie is so funny. He makes me laugh until the tears come." Whereas I want to make them cry without any thought of laughter.

That brings me back to the reason why I have come to Europe. I have come, among other reasons, because I think, or at least I hope, that the European public are a little more considerate than the American and that they will give me a chance to be the artiste I want to be, instead of being for ever the buffoon they like to think me.

I have long aspired to succeed in real histrionic art. I do not for a moment imagine I can rank with the great dramatists, but I am sure that I can succeed moderately well in interpreting on the stage some of the works of the great master of playwrights. During my stay in Europe I will see what can be done in that direction, and I have hopes of succeeding. If I do not, then I cannot tell you what I shall do.

All I know is that I am sick of the very sight of a studio, and a film camera makes me want to run away for good. I have before me a number of suggestions for suitable plays, and my hope is that some of my dreams in this direction will be realised quickly.

Beau Brummel is one character in which I am interested, and I think I would like to play the part if it can be arranged. I realise that the public are so wedded to the idea of Charlie that it will mean beginning the battle of life over again to get them used to me in any other role, but I am not afraid of a fight and I mean to put up the biggest fight I can in the hope of achieving my ambition in this direction.

Nothing would please me better than to play in drama bringing home the lessons of the tragedy of the poor, for I feel that in trying to portray the life of the people among whom I lived I should be doing something useful, and I hope I should be able to make the more fortunate realise of the misery of the less fortunate in the struggle for existence.

I have tried in my film plays to emphasise this great fact of our social system, but I am afraid that even here the moral is sometimes missed in the eagerness of the public to treat as a jest the lesson I would teach.

That lesson is emphasised in my latest photo play, "The Kid," and my first concern on getting to London will be to see for myself how the British public are taking to him, which I regard as coming nearer to my ideal than anything I have so far turned out.

"The Kid" is an attempt to portray the life of the street arab for whom nobody cares, and to [rouse?] the public conscience to the need for caring for the waifs and strays of our great cities. Many of these waifs have the seeds of great promise in them, and it is a crime that they should not be able to have a decent chance of showing what is in them. I look to the new film to do much in this way of rousing public interest in the street arab and his good

qualities.

To a sensitive man like myself much misery may arise from the exaggerated idea that I am so irresistibly funny that my slightest movement must be a subject for mirth. For example, what pleasure can there be in social life if every time I do such innocent acts as pass soup or vegetables, or any other article on the table, to a neighbor, or even reach out for my own plate or something else I want, there should come rounds of laughter, sometimes restrained to a titter, but always there to remind me of the fact that I am supposed to be a professional funny-man and that my slightest movement is a subject for mirth. It is very disconcerting, indeed.

For instance, when one wants to be a private citizen and not a notorious public character it is embarrassing on striking out with one's dancing partner to feel a titter go round the room and everybody staring as though they were watching a film comedy in which one was playing.

It may be that this is inseparable from being a film artiste with one single role in life, but it is very tiresome I can assure you, and I would give anything to be able to have the normal leisure and social life that most people enjoy.

I verily believe that were I to enter the pulpit and preach the most eloquent and serious sermon that had ever fallen from the lips of man it would be received with laughter as the funniest utterance ever heard from the music-hall stage!

It has been said, by the way, that I am going back to the music-hall stage, and it has even been hinted that I might return by way of Karno's troupe. That is not the case. I have no wish to return to the halls, and will confine myself in Europe to trying to realise the ambitions of which I spoke in the first place.

It has also been suggested that I might stand for Parliament in the hope of being able to do some useful work for the improvement of the lot of the poor. The idea is one that appeals to me, or, rather, would appeal if I could be certain of it being taken seriously, but that is just what I am not certain about.

The fatal belief that I am a buffoon would probably result in my candidature becoming a matter for mirth, and in the end the cause I have at heart might suffer.

I do not know yet for certain how long my European trip is to last. That depends just on

how long the European public are likely to treat me as a serious human being.

One and what some people might call the real reason for my trip is that it is something in the nature of a honeymoon tour, or, in fact, two honeymoon trips. When my first marriage took place I was too busy to take a honeymoon and it is usually the case I never seemed able to find time until [?] my second marriage came along and now there are two honeymoons due, so I shall have to make the most of them.