



## Chaplin and the body of modernity

*Tom Gunning*

James Agee opened his novel *A Death in the Family*, the chronicle of young Rufus' loss of his father, set in 1915 and published shortly after Agee's untimely death in 1955 with this exchange:

At supper that night, as many times before, his father said, "Well 'spose we go to the pictures show."

"Oh Jay!" his mother said. "That horrid little man!"

"What's wrong with him?" his father asked, not because he didn't know what she would say, but so she would say it.

"He's so *nasty!*" she said, as she always did. "*So vulgar!* With his nasty little cane; hooking up skirts and things, and that nasty little walk!"

This opening elegantly not only brings us into a family situation, a child posed somewhat precariously in the middle of a conversation between his parents, but also defamiliarizes a figure so recognizable he need not be named. Seen through the distortion of nostalgia (as opposed to Agee's sharply etched, unadorned memories) we are unlikely initially to recognize Charlie Chaplin in the horrid, nasty, vulgar little man. But indeed that was how Chaplin was received initially by guardians of culture, suspicious of vulgar slapstick, with its too-fast action, its love of speed and violence and its hatred of authority and propriety. Chaplin's behavior flaunted social inhibitions, provoking censure or laughter depending on your point of view. But, as Rufus' mother indicates, it wasn't simply what Chaplin did that made him nasty but his physical being – not just hooking up skirts, but "that nasty little walk!"

Agee, of course, was a novelist and a poet, and the author of a seminal modernist work combining photography and prose, an ethnography of Southern tenant farmers during the Depression, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, anticipating by generations current anthropological work in thick description and personal participant observation and whose style rivals Herman Melville. As you probably know, he was also a script writer (*The African Queen*, *The Night of the Hunter*), and a film critic, author of "Comedy's Golden Age", perhaps the seminal account of Silent Film Comedy, and in the 1950's one of the few to raise his voice publicly against the shameful treatment of Charles Chaplin by American right wing organizations and their Government sympathizers. By the 1950's some of the original disgust at Chaplin had resurfaced, albeit with an apparently new focus - not that he had ever been fully embraced by official culture (recall the Surrealist manifesto in defense of Chaplin in the face of his pending prosecution of alleged sexual crimes, entitled "Hands off Love"). I invoke Agee here, as I could many others modernist artists who appreciated Chaplin, not only for the clarity of his insight, but to stress our need to recover Chaplin, not as an enshrined genius, but in his original energy, as a controversial modern artist whose art not only delighted and entertained, but also helped transform the world he was born into. Chaplin's work offered something new; he laughed the world into a new physical realm, exploring the ambiguities - indeed the comedy - of the body of modernity.

Chaplin's cinematic body defies verbal description - and that's the point. His body transforms before our eyes; it even occasionally sprouts wings and flies. However, as the crumpled body of Chaplin's Icarus-like fallen angel in *The Kid* shows us, he never loses his physical nature; his grace defies, but cannot deny, gravity. In the face of propriety he asserts the body's less than genteel functions. But besides enacting the clown's traditional role of affirming the body's appetites against social convention, Chaplin's physical nature also exceeds his human identity and transforms itself into the mechanical, the animal and even the vegetable. His body seems at points to disaggregate itself, with limbs operating independently of each other, or to merge with other bodies and create new creatures. Chaplin slides up and down the great chain of being, achieving a plastic ontology in which inanimate objects become bodily appendages, and the body itself suddenly seems inert.

## **I The Natural Man: Bodily Functions, or What was Wrong with that Walk?**

Despite his mother's objections, Rufus and his parent do attend the picture show and watch a unnamed (and seemingly synthetic) Chaplin short supporting a William S. Hart Western. The walk was there: "everyone laughed the minute they saw him squattily walking with his toes out and his knees wide apart, as if he were chafed." Seen through Rufus's five-year-old eyes, Chaplin's walk has a direct physical significance, chafed thighs, an association less likely to be recalled by an adult. These childhood associations continue as Rufus watches the film and they become increasingly - well, nasty. Chaplin has stolen some eggs and hidden them in the seat of his pants. Later when Charlie gets shoved onto the sidewalk, "he sat down straight legged, hard enough to hurt" and of course the eggs smashed in his pants. Chaplin's miming and facial expression intensely convey the sensation to Rufus, as well as an embarrassing memory:

The way his face looked, with the lip wrinkled off the teeth and the sickly little smile, it made you feel just the way those broken eggs must feel against your seat, as queer and awful as that time in the white peaky suit when it ran down out of your pants-leg and showed all over your stockings and you had to walk home that way with people looking; and Rufus's father nearly tore his head off laughing and so did everyone else, and Rufus was sorry for Charlie having been so recently in a similar predicament, but the contagion of laughter was too much for him, and he laughed too.

Agee's description of Rufus' experience watching Chaplin highlights the first point I would want to make about Chaplin's bodily humor, its connection to the body's biological functions, especially those whose control (and indeed concealment, if not denial) form the first line of defense in adult social behavior. Chaplin not only recalls the child who has not yet been thoroughly housebroken, but the "natural man," whose urges and bodily needs outweigh the demands of society and his own attempts at dignity.

Clowns traditionally represent the demands of the body against the strictures of civilization. Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the place of laughter in the culture of carnival, especially the demands of what he called the body's lower strata has been nicely applied to Chaplin by William Paul's in his essay, "The Annals of Anality." In the topsy-turvy logic of carnival, authority is inverted and the lower organs of both excretion and generation overturn the logic of the head. The carnivalesque body, according to Bakhtin is a body in process, growing, giving birth, eating, excreting. This body possesses orifices, is permeable, taking things into itself and pushing things out; as such it remains open to the world and merges with other bodies, both biologically and socially. This body, which Chaplin shares with the long tradition of carnival clowns, contrasts sharply with what, Julia Kristeva, one of Bakhtin's critical heirs, calls "the clean and proper body" - the body of bourgeois individualism, cosmetically enclosed and complete onto itself, never openly emitting noises, smells or embarrassment. Chaplin's bodily humor was the "nasty" Chaplin, rather than the sentimental Chaplin, that cliché that so many critics use to avoid dealing with Chaplin's actual complexity.

A sequence from one of Chaplin's Mutual films from 1916, *The Pawnshop*, exemplifies the triumph of bodily functions over sentimentality in Chaplin's comedy. Working in a pawnshop, Chaplin listens to the sad tale delivered by an old man who comes to pawn his wedding ring. The elderly gentleman uses broad theatrical gestures as he pantomimes his deep sorrow in being forced by dire circumstances to part with the ring. Chaplin at first reacts cynically to the old man's tale, but gradually he begins to give in to the dramatized emotions. This does not, however, prevent Chaplin from continuing to eat a cracker (appetites come first). As Chaplin becomes emotionally and physically affected by the tale of woe, he begins to blubber. Moved finally to sobs, Chaplin literally expresses his grief by spitting his mouthful of cracker crumbs across the room. In *A Dog's Life* from 1918 the copious tears shed during Edna Purviance's "sad song" likewise undercut the invoked sentimentality by becoming so excessively physical, they take on a urinary force, as the spray of tears drench the weepers and their neighbors. Chaplin avoids outright scatological jokes of the sort that appeared in the less regulated early comedies at Pathé (such as *Erreur De Port* from 1905), but the uncontrolled, explosive body nonetheless makes it itself both seen and heard. Lest we attribute such vulgarity only to the early Chaplin, recall Chaplin's use of bodily sounds in *Modern Times*. Although Chaplin avoids

having speech come out of people's mouths, he doesn't hesitate to let the stomach speak, creating extended gurglings and bubblings of digestion.

In our cultural tendency to equate the body (and children) with the primitive, this attention to the body's functions may seem to move in the opposite direction from the modern. And certainly, the celebration of the carnivalesque body has a long history. But relating Chaplin, as has often been done, to the Dionysian release of the ancient satyr play should not be done so quickly. Art historian Aby Warburg compared the caprices of the satyr play to a Kachina dance among the Pueblo Indians he witnessed in 1896. Directly following the solemn dance of the priests and chorus, three men appeared dressed as women and performed "a thoroughly vulgar and disrespectful parody of the chorus movements." But Warburg adds immediately, "And no one laughed," explaining, "The vulgar parody was regarded not as a comic mockery, but, rather, as a kind of peripheral contribution by the revelers in the effort to ensure a fruitful corn year." Although Chaplin's parody may derive from this lineage of fertility rituals, it also breaks with this tradition, remaining secular - and hilarious. Chaplin's natural "body in process" provokes laughter because of his violation of social taboo, breaching the codes of repression that had been imposed with the growth of middle class propriety in bourgeois culture. Thus even this "natural" body, this return to the clowns of carnival, has a modernist dimension, one closely related to the modern preoccupation with portraying the physical body in its grotesque, rather than idealized or eroticized, forms, an impulse evident in key modern works by Degas, Schiele and Picasso, among others.

## **II The Modern Machine Body of Component Parts and Nervous Energy**

Ferdinand Leger performed perhaps the most memorable tribute of a modernist artist to Chaplin in his avant-garde film *Ballet Mecanique*, introducing his film with a title: "Charlot present La Ballet Mecanique" as a puppet of Chaplin emerges on the screen, an image fractures Chaplin's body in a typically cubistic manner. The puppet returns at the film's end, manipulated in such a way that his limbs seem to be in the process of falling apart.

While Chaplin's bodily vulgarity place him in along tradition (a tradition that plays a lesser role in such other American silent comedians as Keaton and Lloyd), many viewers, especially the intelligentsia and avant-garde artists, celebrated Chaplin peculiarly modern body, with its series of grotesque motions (that walk again) that recalled for them both the staccato rhythms of a machine, and the uncontrollable physical spasms of nervous energy and physiological reflexes. Like Leger's puppet, Chaplin's body could seem at points to behave like a machinic assembly, rather than an organic whole. For modernist artists and critics like Brecht, Kracauer, Benjamin and Epstein, as well as Leger, Chaplin offered perhaps first mechanical ballet; a synthesis in which the hard-edged rhythms of the machine had become part of the human sensorium. The term was intended as an oxymoron, the replacement of the grace of Les Syphides with the clamor and jerkiness of the flywheels, interlocking gears and pistons captured in both Georges Antheil's musical composition and the imagery and montage of Leger's film. Chaplin was the first performer, many believed (although in honesty I would have to nominate French comedian Jean Durand as precursor in this regard) who transferred the mechanical rhythm inherent in the cinema machine, both camera and projector, into a performance style for film.

The image most of us have of Chaplin as a machine man comes from his late masterpiece, *Modern Times*: the sequences of Chaplin on the assembly line and afterwards, involuntarily repeating the abrupt jerky gesture of tightening a bolt he has been limited to; Chaplin caught in the innards of a vast machine he was trying to repair; and, most unforgettably, Chaplin forced by a machine to eat lunch with the same mechanical rhythms by which the production process has been programmed, culminating in Charlie being forced to consume a bolt. These scenes so vividly stage the interaction of the human body and the machine, that I need not cite them in detail. However, made in the depth of the depression, *Modern Times* stresses the dark side of the equation. Rather than exclusively the sign of oppression, Chaplin's machine-like gestures, their repetition, their strange rhythms, their odd combination of stiff limbs and sudden agility violated a certain understanding of the human body and thereby seemed to some viewers in the teens and twenties to open up new realms of acrobatic expression and even physical liberation. Although never without some penumbra of misgiving, in the early twentieth century the machine supplied the model for the new technological body that promised to be the final step in achieving a modern utopia. The regulation of the body in the industrial production

process introduced by Taylor and his disciples, initially seemed to offer exciting modes of physical behavior for actors (Meyerhold's biomechanics) and even dancers (the choreography of Valentin de.). This new machine body attuned to the rhythms of work, efficiency and speed would sweep away of centuries of stultifying bodily propriety, the studied achievement in ballet of a grace that had absolutely no relevance to the everyday life of modern people. Rather than simply summoning up images of the body subject to the demands of production, the idea of taking performance rhythms from the modern realm of work, the factory, or the everyday encounters of the urban crowd – shoving onto subways, crossing busy streets - inspired modernist artists, and Chaplin seemed to supply one of the first examples, available on film to avant-gardists around the world.

It is conceivably a fruitful misunderstanding. In many ways both Keaton and Lloyd seems more in tune with the machine age, exemplified by the central role controlling imposing modern machines plays in their films. Keaton and Lloyd master locomotives, motorcycles, tin lizzies, street cars, steam boats and even ocean liners. Chaplin's encounters with the mechanism of daily life tend to be more small scale: he interact, usually disastrously, with escalators, revolving doors, elevators, roller skates, fold-away beds and, not infrequently, movie cameras. But these items precisely allow Chaplin to react to their mechanic possibilities with balletic improvisations that teeter between triumph and disaster. A fundamental difference seems to be to appear here between Chaplin and Keaton and Lloyd, whose implications are worth pursuing. Although initially encounter their share of failures, ultimately, at least in the features, Lloyd and Keaton gain control of the their mechanical complexes and use them to resolve their films, to solve their problems - if not exactly pragmatically at least spectacularly. Chaplin's plots are rarely resolved in this manner. Instead, Chaplin balletic - acrobatic-mechanical physical process seem to remain divorced from achieving anything (not that he doesn't try...) Thus Chaplin's modern body remains unchanneled, oddly purposeless, filled with a nervous energy that discharges itself without effect (or rather, often with counter effect). Another Mutual Film from 1916, reproducing Chaplin music hall act, *One AM* captures Chaplin's body as a crazy machine whose main production seems to be failure, sketching the farthest distance between two points. Although Chaplin's apartment set hardly reproduces a modern industrial environment (in the way, say,

that Keaton's *The Electric House* does), Chaplin's actions turns it into a modern machine of frustration ruled over by the constantly swinging pendulum.

Chaplin's relation to the machine, then, frequently short-circuits its apparent purposes. After all Chaplin was a Tramp, or as Keaton described him, "a bum" in contrast to his own honest workingman or Lloyd's social climbing go-getter. Tramps (the antagonist of one of Lloyd's first features *Grandma's Boy*) roamed around the edges of society, avoiding the modern regimes of work and social responsibility. In the modern era these vagabonds were analyzed by social scientist and doctors of this era as victims of a form of hysteria. The modern body that Chaplin embodied may well be closer to the pathological body that Rae Beth Gordon describes in her essay provocatively titled "From Charcot to Charlot" than to the Taylorized being the Russian Constructivist especially saw in him. This pathological diagnosis corresponds almost precisely to the way at least one modernist saw him: Jean Epstein spoke of Chaplin's "photogenic neurasthenia" and described his mechanical gestures as "the reflex actions of a nervous tired person." Epstein seems to predict Chaplin's hysterical satyr ballet from *Modern Times* in which Chaplin makes it clear that the modern body is one subject to nervous breakdown when the efficiency demanded of it fails.

When Chaplin does explicitly imitate the machine, he resembles less the industrial and mechanical devices that attempt first to force-feed him, and then to swallow him whole in *Modern Times*, than the mechanical toys and automata of earlier centuries, when machines were designed primarily to delight rather than to produce goods. Thus Chaplin's most perfect imitation of a mechanical body comes in *The Circus*, appropriately, a carnival automaton outside a fun house. Chaplin imitates perfectly the stiff motions of this machine, its jerk of inertia between jolts of movement, its sense of endless repetition and, perhaps most hilariously, the grotesque expression the machine makes when it tries to imitate human laughter. This Chaplin-machine becomes uncannily effective, allowing the Tramp to hide in plain sight and clobber his opponent, the pickpocket, with impunity, even under the gaze of the law. As his ruse begins to crumble, we watch with amazement as the inert machine-Chaplin gives way to the fleeing tramp. Chaplin's art does not consist simply in a new physical language that speaks to modern experience, or in a power to imitate and



redefine the rhythms of that new life, but in an astonishing ability to transform, to metamorphosize from one physical identity into another.

### **III Dissolving Views: the Devolution of the Modern Body**

Even before Darwin, the “natural man” was often represented as a monkey, his affinity with the human not as the origin of the species, but in his playful imitative nature. If Chaplin’s relation to the machine ultimately reads as a satirical parody expressing an essential antipathy to mechanical control, he shows a very different affinity with animals. Chaplin’s grotesque body language as frequently references the animal as the machine, his reflexes often more like Pavlov’s dogs than like automatic gears meshing. Agee, through Rufus describes Chaplin’s final reaction to the smashed eggs after removing them from his pants:

[He] shrugged his shoulders and turned his back and scraped backward with his big shoes at the broken shells and the slimy bag, just like a dog, and looked back at the mess (everyone laughed at that) and started to walk away, bending his cane deep with every shuffle, and squatting deeper, with his knees wider apart, than ever before, constantly picking at the seat of his pants with his left hand, and shaking one foot, then the other, and once gouging deep into his seat and then pausing and shaking his whole body, like a wet dog, and then walking on.

Chaplin’s body language, his lack of propriety, related directly to animal behavior. His winged angels in *The Kid* flex their feathered wings with animal awkwardness, rather than spiritual grace, and shed their feathers like dogs in August, looking more like composite beings than messengers of the Lord. In this realm of composite beings, even a dog can sprout wings, while Charlie, a recent arrival getting used to his new wings, finds they itch. When he scratches them, his leg jerks reflexively, as a dog’s does when it scratches itself. It is the way Chaplin so thoroughly merges with this animal behavior, retaining always his identity as Charlie even as he convincingly joins another species, that marks the modernity of this aspect of Chaplin’s body, the effect of a montage between human and animal rather than a simple metamorphosis. Thus even when thoroughly concealed by a man-sized

chicken suit, and giving a totally convincing pantomime of a chicken's walk and drinking habits, the chicken that Big Jim McKay hallucinates in *The Gold Rush* remains unmistakable Charlie – Charlie as a Chicken. The image of Chaplin drawn by Marc Chagall that Yuri Tsivian introduced me to insightfully shows Chaplin with Chicken feet and wings behind him, capturing the composite superimposed montage effect that Chaplin's animal nature allowed him to project and its uncanny modernist style of representation.

Chaplin's most thorough exploration of his affinity to animals comes in *A Dog's Life* from 1918. The film expresses the Tramp's affinity with the stray dog, their common struggle for survival and shelter against larger and more powerful beings, often expressed through the similarity of their physical behavior. But most unforgettably in one scene they merge into a single composite body. Chaplin enters a cabaret that does not allow dogs by concealing the pup in the voluminous seat of his pants, making the dog, in effect, a new part of his costume. Chaplin's pants, as we have seen, form the true seat of the natural man and are capable of receiving extensive borrowings from the outside world. Just as Chaplin's original character-defining costume consists of a montage of disparate items that somehow form a new, albeit grotesque, being, the addition of a dog to his pant seat generates a new composite character. Through a hole in the seat of his pants, Charlie sprouts a doggie tail, wagging in delirious reflex. The range of associations that this emergence from Chaplin's pants provokes would be as obvious to Rufus (and the rest of the audience) as to the most sophisticated Freudian critic in pursuit of displacements. While the embarrassment of having something extrude from one's pants may be a universal experience (or at least a universal fear), ultimately the doggie tail becomes part of Chaplin, his link to his animal nature, and the clear sign of his new composite body. The rhythm of the wag becomes auditory, as Charlie bends to tie his shoe near a large drum and the tail beats a constant tattoo, whose source baffles the drummer, until Charlie reveals the dog and lifts him lovingly from his pants. (In *The Gold Rush* The tramp again finds himself joined to a dog at the pants, as an attempt to save his dignity and keep his pants from falling down, because instead a disastrous choreography of man being lead on a leash by dog).

A body in process, in transformation, an incomplete body able to merge with other body – or other things – and create new bodies, grotesques apart human part

something else, exceeding our categories of knowledge and extending our experience. And yet – and this is the clue to Chaplin’s popularity (although a clue cannot explain the mystery itself) - this new body, for all its composite weirdness, strikes us as immediately recognizable rather than entirely alien, an insight into our own bodily experience, whether remembered from childhood, or glimpsed in dreams. And this unexpected recognition makes us laugh, partly because we see the transformation happening before our eyes. Chaplin’s fluid inter-species identity goes beyond, not only the human, but the animate. In *Shoulder Arms* from 1918 Chaplin, undertakes a spying mission behind enemy lines, disguised as a tree. The conceit and the costume in itself make us laugh, but again, it is Chaplin’s pantomime that makes this vegetable-human composite body so hilarious. Once again, even as he transforms into a tree, the tree remains identifiable as Charlie, his extensive arm/branch becoming the arboreal doppelganger of his cane (as his cane from film to film increasing seems a prosthetic extension of his arms). Indeed, Chaplin can become a tree without costumes, as Jennifer Bean reminded me, in the exquisite pantomime he performs for Claire Bloom in *Limelight* of the Japanese tree that grows crooked

Chaplin’s pantomime, gestures, facial expressions, the entirety of his body art, delivers to us a renewed sense of corporeal experience. His performance remains profoundly rooted in our bodily experience, undermining years of socialization and bodily control, gaining an atavistic intensity by reversing the upward arc of man’s evolution and reminding of our affinities with animals and even plants. But ultimately I want to stress again the fact that Chaplin performs these metamorphoses before our eyes. As in Chaplin’s mis-matched tramp costume, we recognize the separate elements, but the absurdly appropriate effect of their union overwhelms us. As Sergei Eisenstein recognized, in spite of his limited use of editing, Chaplin’s performance, costume and character embodied the logic of montage. We could translate this insight to say that, Chaplin, through his body language, taught the principle syntax of modernity to the world at large.

Grasping this montage principle allows us, I think, to return anew (though it is Chaplin’s art that always renews our experience of his films, not any analysis) to one of the signature scenes of Chaplin’s art: the dance of the Oceana rolls in *The Gold Rush* that the Tramp performs in place of making the speech demanded of him.

Again, the disparate elements are evident: Chaplin's face, some forks, two rolls and between the highly illuminated face and the rolls an expanse of relative darkness. But through the interaction of head position, facial expression, the strutting of the forks, and the posing of the rolls, a composite body emerges before us. The silverware and dinner rolls cavort with humor and acrobatic precision, with a physical style that is immediately identified as Charlie's. We see this seeming giant head fuse with the implements and bread through the vital motion, Chaplin enacts the rhythm of a comic dance. In the film, this all takes place, of course, in a dream that ends with a unanimous expression of love and delight for the little man who can so enthrall us with the image of a body conjured out of nothingness.