

**Review: Claire Lebossé and José Moure (eds.),  
*Modernités de Charlie Chaplin: Un Cinéaste dans  
l'Œil des Avant-Gardes***

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***Modernités de Charlie Chaplin: Un Cinéaste dans l'Œil des Avant-Gardes***

Edited by Claire Lebossé and José Moure

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Reviewed by Wesley Kirkpatrick, University of St Andrews

In 1915, the American press spoke of a new disease spreading across the nation: a disease seemingly infecting working-class cinemagoers and the middle-class alike. ‘Chaplinitis’ was not a fatal condition, but rather one responsible for inciting violent outbursts of laughter and everlasting fascination for a fictional on-screen tramp wearing a bowler hat and swinging around a bamboo cane – features now forever etched into the history of cinema. Unlike the upcoming Influenza, and today’s more recent pandemic, Chaplinitis was proving indiscriminatory of social divides or class. As film scholar Rob King argues, Charlie Chaplin’s lumpenproletariat ‘Little Tramp’ persona “held different meanings for different viewers depending on their social position and their class identity.”<sup>1</sup> The ‘Chaplin craze’ was experienced far and wide – to varying intensities and logics.

By gathering the thoughts of various scholars and museum curators, the recent edited collection *Modernités de Charlie Chaplin: Un Cinéaste dans l'Œil des Avant-Gardes* promises to explore the manifold manifestations of Chaplinitis within a specific social milieu; namely, across avant-gardists culture(s). Originating as an ambitious exhibition project bringing together over two hundred pieces from museums and collections across the world at the Musée d’arts in Nantes in 2019-2020, the ensuing volume further employs Chaplin as a ‘guide’ towards the (re)discovery of avant-gardist figures and their works, who undeniably reflected upon, and gained inspiration from,

both Chaplin's character and body of work (6).

Housing a total of seventeen essays, *Modernités de Charlie Chaplin* boasts a far-reaching scope of study; vis-à-vis both its impressive array of subjects – from the French biographer of the fictional Charlot, Philippe Soupault, to Soviet artists such as Ilya Ehrenburg; and avant-gardist filmmakers, such as Sergei Eisenstein, and the Dadaist-turned-momentary-filmmaker, Fernand Léger – to its engagement with numerous national contexts; including France, Weimar Germany, and Soviet Russia, among others. This broad scope offers novel and transnational insights, thus complementing existing single-context studies of cinema's influence over avant-gardist cultures in early-twentieth-century France, and Weimar Germany.<sup>2</sup> As Paul Flaig has recently acknowledged, Chaplin features as a “recurring leitmotif” within such studies.<sup>3</sup> By retrieving Chaplin from the *fosse commune*, *Modernités de Charlie Chaplin* promises to elevate the recognised influence of his “modernist teachings” towards avant-gardist currents to its own heightened status of importance.<sup>4</sup>

As stated in the introduction, the broader project has revealed “an affinity between Chaplin's perspective over his epoch and the preoccupations of avant-gardists, themselves careful observers of their time” (6-7). Chaplin had enticed such artists and intellectuals partially for his capacity to convey the everyday experience, and hardships, of modernity to the masses. As Adolphe Nysenholc argues, “From *Shoulder Arms* [1918] to *The Great Dictator* [1940], Chaplin made himself the spokesman of his time, of modern times” (148).<sup>5</sup> Both Chaplin and avant-gardists simultaneously developed and shared artistic practices and preoccupations; evident, for instance, in their common re-imagining of everyday objects (one thinks of Marcel Duchamp's readymade artworks, alongside the kettle-turned-bib and dilapidated-duvet-turned-poncho in *The Kid* [1921]),

and their mutual disdain for modern language (115).

Having emerged on various European cinema screens at different times – to believe the Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars, Germany had lost the First World War for its delayed introduction to the Little Tramp – Chaplin’s image and notoriety had nonetheless infiltrated these territories prior to his own films; notably, through the intermediary of transnational avant-gardists networks, and their shared fascination with Charlot. Chaplin’s introduction would thus unfold in varying forms: arriving in Germany, for instance, through Yvan Goll’s illustrated *Kinodichtung* (cinematic poem) *Die Chaplinade* (1920). Indeed, Chaplin (and his image) was already firmly entrenched into international artistic circles. As Maximilien Theinhardt highlights, Chaplin’s cane had featured as a prop as part of Richard Huelsenbeck’s (screaming) recitals of Dadaist poetry in 1916 within Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire which, though short-lived, had served as a vibrant centre for international avant-gardist cultural dialogue (106).

In accordance with other relevant English-language film scholarship, the edited collection approaches the avant-garde as a hodgepodge of diverse cultures and movements, each possessing its own characteristics – as revealed by their varied interest in Chaplin.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Claire Lebossé highlights Soviet constructivists’ fascination with Chaplin’s machine-like movement – an appeal which, although not unique to this group, nonetheless appeared most pronounced here than elsewhere, with the Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov anointing Chaplin as “our first master” (10). Furthermore, Carole Aurouet is careful to distinguish between the likes of Robert Desnos and Raymond Queneau’s avid and continued interaction with Charlot, compared to Louis Aragon who – though still writing of Chaplin in the 1920s – was unlikely to have stayed up to date with his latest releases beyond the late 1910s (195). Whilst some initial enthusiasts may have jumped ship

in 1921 following the release of *The Kid*, a large number would stand in public support of Chaplin in 1927, when faced with public accusations of domestic abuse, by co-signing a tract titled *Hands Off Love* (1927).

Michelle Clayton and Ono Hiroyuki's chapters devoted to Chaplin's re-appropriation, and transposition, into foreign cultures – whether appearing as a Mexican piñata in 1926, or as part of a Japanese kabuki remake of *City Lights* (1932) – offer further evidence of the wide reach of Chaplin's influence over global artistic trends. However, exemplary of the collection at large, this section suffers from a lack of engagement with specifically *film scholarship* – one thinks, for instance, of Miriam Hansen's notion of “vernacular modernism” in this particular context.<sup>7</sup> Despite the numerous citations of Walter Benjamin's essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, and Morgane Jourden's brief pitch for an imaginary filmed ‘ballet’ (167), film – and its various usages as a tool of artistic reappropriation and reinterpretation - is largely outcast to the volume's peripheral vision.

Furthermore, the volume largely omits to reflect on the impact of such artistic (mis)appropriation and (mis)interpretation of Chaplin's work on the artist himself. For instance, in 1920 the Dadaist Tristan Tzara publicly proclaimed Chaplin's adherence to Dadaism, exploiting the actor's stardom as a means of generating valuable advertisement for the movement (18). Through such a false claim, Chaplin could seemingly serve a utilitarian – if not an ideological – purpose.<sup>8</sup> But, as Jennifer Wild has argued, Tzara's actions were driven by more than a simple desire to generate advertisement, but rather as a means of re-appropriating – and, in fact, *negating* – Hollywood's star system.” By exposing, and turning Hollywood's capitalist methods on itself, “Tzara pulled off one of the greatest modernist gags of the twentieth century.”<sup>9</sup>

How might such a practice compare to, say, those typified by the avant-gardist British film critics as *Close-Up* whose “vanguard modernism”, to quote Anne Friedberg, was “less directly allied with political action than with experimentation in aesthetic form.”<sup>10</sup> The volume’s primary overturn then, can perhaps be best explained as an overtly political one as these avant-gardists’ politics remain largely unexplored throughout. As publicly stated at the Berlin Dada exhibition in 1920: ‘Dada ist politisch’ (Dada is political). What then, for instance, can be inferred from Erwin Blumenfeld’s collage *President-Dada-Chaplinist* which, as Lebossé argues, possesses “the power of a manifesto” – proclaiming that “Chaplin is Dada: even more [...] Dada is Chaplin” (19).

Cementing one of the collection’s central tenets – namely, that Chaplin was considered a peer by various contemporaneous avant-gardists – *Modernités de Charlie Chaplin* concludes with Francis Bordat’s reflection on Chaplin’s own re-consideration of his past image and work when preparing the re-issue of *The Gold Rush* (1925) – re-released with an audio soundtrack. Whilst Laurent Veray views Charlot’s many imitators as having increased Chaplin’s authenticity (or ‘aura’ to borrow from Walter Benjamin), Bordat judges Chaplin’s own wartime efforts through a harsher lens. He simultaneously denounces the re-issue’s lack of authenticity and condemns Chaplin’s “unforgivable” attempt at deleting all traces of the original cut (306). As Lebossé highlights at the end of her introduction, by the Parisian premiere of *Limelight* (1952), Chaplin was publicly shamed for being a supposed capitalist agent and a ‘covert fascist’ in the eyes of young radical-left-leaning members of the Letterist Internationale – ironic given his simultaneous exclusion from America for harbouring pro-Bolshevik sentiments (24). Those days of ‘humble servitude’ amongst his fellow avant-gardists now belonged to a bygone era.

Nevertheless, as *Modernités de Charlie Chaplin* successfully highlights, the supposedly “sinister

and compromised old man” remains, to this day, in fact, far from such – at the very least, as a source of academic study.<sup>11</sup> The collection incites us all to revisit Chaplin’s films through a modern, and critical lens. Through Chaplin, one can evidently tell a vivid history – of interest to film, social, political, and art historians alike. Chaplin’s shadow looms large – not only over the history of cinema, but over that of the broader twentieth century.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> For a French context, see: Richard Abel, "American Film and the French Literary Avant-Garde (1914-1924)," *Contemporary Literature*, 17(1) (1976): 84-109; Rae Beth Gordon, "From Charcot to Charlot: Unconscious Imitation and Spectatorship in French Cabaret and Early Cinema," *Critical Inquiry*, 27(3) (2001): 515-549; Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). For a German context, see: Sabine Hake, "Chaplin Reception in Weimar Germany," *New German Critique*, 51 (1990): 87-111; Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer and Michael Cowan (eds.), *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907-1933* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Paul Flaig, "A Functionalist Cinema: 'Twilight of Film' by Raoul Hausmann," *Frames Cinema Journal*, 20 (2022): 229-243.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Flaig, "The Promise of Chaplin," *The Promise of Cinema*. 18-05-2017. <https://www.thepromiseofcinema.com/index.php/the-promise-of-chaplin/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Wild, "The Chaplin Files, 1952," *October*, 160 (2017): 55.

<sup>5</sup> This and all further translations are my own. Alongside the collected edition, a catalogue was produced in conjunction with the original exhibition: *Charlie Chaplin dans l'Œil des Avant-Gardes* (Paris: Schoeck, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity*, 6(2) (1999): 59-77.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Wild, "The Chaplin Files, 1952," 55.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde*, p. [?]; Jennifer Wild, "The Chaplin Files, 1952," 55.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Friedberg, "Introduction: Reading *Close-Up*, 1927-1933," in: *Close-Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, edited by James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (London: Cassel, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Wild, "The Chaplin Files, 1952," 60.