

# CHAPLIN, THE LITTLE TRAMP AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA



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## Literature

- Maland, Charles J.: *Chaplin and American Culture* (Princeton University Press, 1989)
- Bláhová, Jindřiška: No Place for Peace-Mongers: Charlie Chaplin and Czechoslovak Communist Cold War Propaganda (In *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 29, no. 3, September 2009, 271–292)
- Szczepanik, Petr and Anděl, Jaroslav (eds.): *Stále kinema. Antologie českého myšlení o filmu 1904–1950* (Národní filmový archiv, 2008)

# Chaplin's star image in Czechoslovakia

- consistent popularity regardless of the regime and socio-political climate
- popular both during the First Republic (1918–1938) and the communist regime (1948–1989)
- this paper shows how the Little Tramp (and the star image of Charles Chaplin in general) was appropriated in Czechoslovakia 1) in the 1920s and 1930s and 2) after the WWII during the communist era



# Chaplin and the avant-garde movement

- Chaplin was extremely popular with the avant-garde movement *Devětsil* (est. 1920)
- members: Karel Teige, Jaroslav Seifert, Jiří Voskovec, Vladislav Vančura, Jindřich Honzl etc.
- poetism („poetismus“) – specific literary movement in Czechoslovakia of the mid-1920s
- lyricism, playfulness, creativity
- fascination with cinema and especially popular genres such as slapstick comedy and adventure film
- Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks became honorary members of *Devětsil*



## Chaplin and the avant-garde movement (cont.)



- cinema = universal language, amalgam of reality and artificiality, utilitarianism and fantasy, constructivism and poetism
- photogénie (borrowed from French impressionists), suprareality
- critique of cinema based on traditions of theater and literature
- Chaplin = pure cinema; first genius of cinema who understood its essence and expressive possibilities

## Chaplin and the avant-garde movement (cont.)

Karel Teige: essay „Foto Kino Film“ (1922)

- „oftentimes we find more photogenic and dramatic beauty in a cowboy serial than in film'd'art“
- against sentimentalism and academism
- cinema – closer to circus, musichall, cabaret and sport
- Chaplin = „omnipresent artist of cinema“; „Molière and Aristophanes of our times“
- „He's more than just an actor. He's a clown. He's a poet. He's an inventor of new, radically modern expressions of humor and irony filled with subtle and paradoxical sentimentality.“
- „Close theaters, exhibition halls and churches... and only a handful will mourn them. Close movie theaters and perhaps the world will stop turning.“



## Chaplin and the avant-garde movement (cont.)

Karel Teige: foreword to the Czech translation of *My Trip Abroad* (1929)

- the poetry of slapstick is created out of light and movement
- Chaplin = the greatest poet and the only genius of cinema (because he understood that cinema can not copy literature and theater)
- peak of Chaplin's career – his Mutual films: „synthesis of French esprit and skeptical irony, odd and bizarre lyricism and energetic and hyperbolic Angloamerican comedy known from Mark Twain's stories“
- *The Kid*, *Woman of Paris* etc. – Teige suggests that Chaplin went astray; „the pure, absolute, clownlike comedy (...) is blurred and disrupted by the inclusion of tragic elements“



## Chaplin and the avant-garde movement (cont.)

Other authors celebrating Chaplin and his films:

- Jiří Voskovec (essay „Fotogenie a suprarealita“, 1925)
  - Chaplin liberated cinema from the oppression of literature and theater
- Josef and Karel Čapek
- Jaroslav Seifert, Vítězslav Nezval – poems celebrating Chaplin (and Fairbanks)

1930s, more serious attempts to understand Chaplin's work, formalist and structural analyses, discussions of Chaplin and the coming of sound:

- Jan Mukařovský
- Petr Bogatyrev (1921–1939 in Czechoslovakia)





# Chaplin and the World War II

- Chaplin's films were banned during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939–1945)
- Chaplin was portrayed as a warmonger by the Nazi-controlled press
- for example *Kinorevue* (vol. 8, no. 31) claims that Chaplin (as well as Samuel Goldwyn and Warner Baxter) used his seditious and aggressive films to make money; in other words Chaplin took advantage of the tragedy of war and people's misfortune to make himself a wealthy man

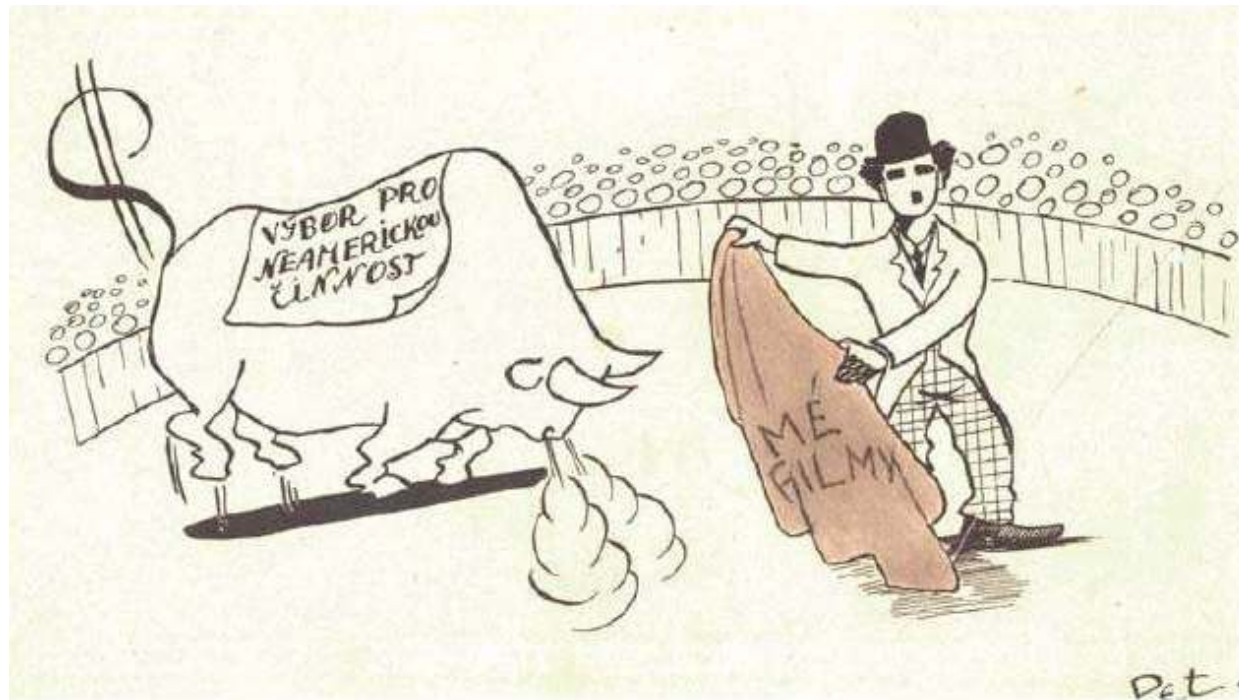


## **Chaplin and the communist regime**

- Hollywood stars commonly viewed as Wall Street puppets and symbols of cultural imperialism
- the only exception – Charles Chaplin; darling of the communists, consistently popular with the regime from the 1940s to the 1980s
- used by the communists in their campaign against the U.S. and Hollywood
- viewed as a victim of imperialism and capitalism
- one of the tools used to criticize American politics, Wall Street and Hollywood



## Chaplin and the communist regime (cont.)



Chaplin fighting the HUAC

## Chaplin and the communist regime (cont.)

Jindřiška Bláhová: „Czechoslovak communists engaged with Chaplin’s films, his private life and his multifaceted public image to reconstruct his star persona for propagandistic purposes. Charlie Chaplin was presented to the Czechoslovak public as an outcast and a progressive artist.“

- construction of anti-American narratives; superiority of socialism
- USA = warmongers, capitalism, reactionism, depersonalized factory system, oppression
- USSR and Czechoslovakia = „peacemongers“, communism, progressivism, defenders of freedom



## Chaplin and the communist regime (cont.)

- this tendency encouraged by the events of 1952



## Chaplin and the communist regime (cont.)

Jaroslav Brož – *Věčný tulák Charlie* (1961)

- another effort to appropriate Chaplin, his films and public persona
- Brož emphasizes Chaplin's conflict with the American bourgeoisie; he became inconvenient because he openly criticized the American way of life and sympathized with the Soviet Union
- his most progressive films: *Modern Times* and the *Great Dictator* (the latter supposedly being the only Hollywood antifascist film produced during WWII)
- USA portrayed as Hitler's ally and Chaplin as the only advocate of peace and freedom



## Chaplin and the communist regime (cont.)

- according to Brož, Chaplin became a victim of a mean and vicious campaign led by Hollywood businessmen, Wall Street bankers and reactionary politicians from Washington
- departure from the U.S. portrayed as a voluntary decision: „Chaplin could no longer live in a country where free-thinking individuals are deprived of basic rights and are persecuted.“
- he was awarded the International Peace Prize but denied the Oscar



## Chaplin and the communist regime (cont.)

Ondřej Suchý: „Chaplin was a friend of Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovakia was one of the greatest friends of this international artist.“

More books on Chaplin:

- Czech translation of Sadoul's book (1954)
- Czech translation of Chaplin's autobiography (1967)
- Ondřej Suchý – *Exkurze do království grotesky* (1981)
- Ondřej Suchý – *Charles Chaplin* (1989)
- Boris Jachnin – *Charles Chaplin* (1989)







Thank you!