

A Poet In Tramp's Clothing: Surrealist Writers And Charlie Chaplin (1918-1953)

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Introduction: "We are your servants"

In the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929), when André Breton evokes "a century of truly inflammatory philosophy and poetry"¹, one isn't surprised to find the names of Hegel, Marx, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Freud, and Trotsky included in his personal pantheon. Yet we find another name among these giants of literature and philosophy, inserted without further comment, as if its inclusion needed no justification—that of Charlie Chaplin. Nearly ten years earlier, Louis Aragon—whose first published poem, *Charlot sentimental*, was inspired by Chaplin—declared in his article *On Décor* (1918), that in order to fully appreciate *The Vagabond* (1916) it is "indispensable to know and love Pablo Picasso's 'Blue Period' paintings, [...] to have read Kant and Nietzsche, and to believe that one's heart is more valiant than all other men."²

Philippe Soupault, who would consecrate a number of poems, essays, and even an entire novel to Chaplin, confidently professed in 1924, the year the Surrealist movement was officially founded: "Charlie Chaplin genuinely 'discovered' the cinema. This was no doubt an easy task, because he is a poet."³ Three years later, in 1927, the Surrealists would take Chaplin's defense during his highly publicized divorce trial with Lita Grey by publishing the manifesto "Hands off Love". Its emphatic closing lines leave no doubt about the Surrealists' dedication to Chaplin: "We shout our thanks to you, we are your servants."⁴ While this fascination with Chaplin was by no means unique among the avant-gardes of the era, the Little Tramp held a privileged role for Surrealist writers. Their interest in Chaplin predated the official founding of the movement, and for over three decades they would develop alongside one another as historical contemporaries.

¹ André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Gallimard, 1985, p. 104

² Louis Aragon, "On Décor", *The Shadow & Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on The Cinema* (3rd edition), Edited and Translated by Paul Hammond, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2000, p. 52 [translation modified]

³ Philippe Soupault, "Cinéma U.S.A.", *Écrits de cinéma: 1918-1931*, Ed. Odette & Alain Virmaux, Plon, Paris, 1979, p. 43

⁴ The Surrealist Group, "Hands off Love", *La Révolution surréaliste*, #9-10, Oct. 1, 1927, Gallimard, Paris, p. 6

The Birth of 'Charlot'

Chaplin's Keystone films were first released in France in February and March of 1915⁵ and the success of Charlot was instantaneous. The titles were often changed to incorporate this nickname by joining it with the profession he takes on in the short: *Charlot musicien* [The Vagabond, 1915], *Charlot pompier* [The Fireman, 1916], or *Charlot soldat* [Shoulder Arms, 1918], to name just a few examples. It's important to point out that Chaplin's Gallic moniker is not a mere synonym of The Tramp. In fact, for writers of the time, "Charlot" seems to have held much more of a poetic thrust than the prosaic "Tramp". This chummy nickname transcended the mere character that Chaplin incarnated on screen and worked to significantly blur the boundaries between the man and his persona. Charlot is willingly evoked when speaking of Chaplin the filmmaker, something which significantly facilitates his poetic appropriation.

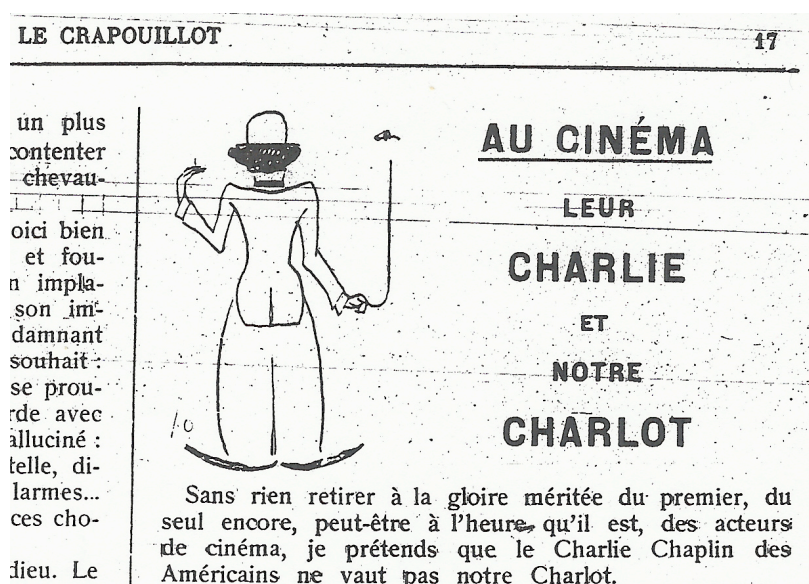


FIG. 1: "Their Charlie and Our Charlot", *Le Crapeauillot*, May 16th, 1922

Charlot dadaïste

The Surrealists' engagement with Chaplin would begin during their active participation in the Parisian incarnation of the Dada movement. Their ironically named journal *Littérature*, founded in 1919, would publish a number of texts on the cinema, notably by Soupault, including his pithy poem-reviews (known as "poésie critique" or "critique synthétique") inspired by such Charlot classics as *The Immigrant*, *A Dog's Life*, and *Sunnyside*. The poets would also publish a poster sent to them by one of the founders of Dada, Tristan Tzara, which enumerated the names of famous personalities who were either Dadaists or fellow travelers.

⁵ Richard Abel, "The Contribution of the French Literary Avant-Garde to Film Theory and Criticism (1907-1924)", *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 14, #3 (Spring, 1975), University of Texas Press, Austin, p. 23

Never one to pass up a practical joke, Tzara nonchalantly inserted the names of The Prince of Monaco, Georges Clemenceau, and Charlie Chaplin—among many others [*Fig. 2*—into this already illustrious roster.

Upon receiving the poster, Breton couldn't contain the impossible hope of having Charlot, the ultimate prankster, join their ranks. He wrote in a letter to Tzara: "This echo of Charlie Chaplin is a delicious surprise. But of course, it's not true?"⁶ But the hoax didn't stop there. After Tzara's arrival in Paris in 1920, he gave word to the newspapers that Chaplin would be among them for the Dada event at the *Salon des Indépendants* at the Grand Palais. Not picking up on the prank, the newspaper *Le Journal du Peuple* relayed the news that Chaplin would be publicly converted to Dadism.⁷ Chaplin never showed up, of course, but the Dadaists carried on without even bothering to address the elephant in the room with the increasingly hostile audience.

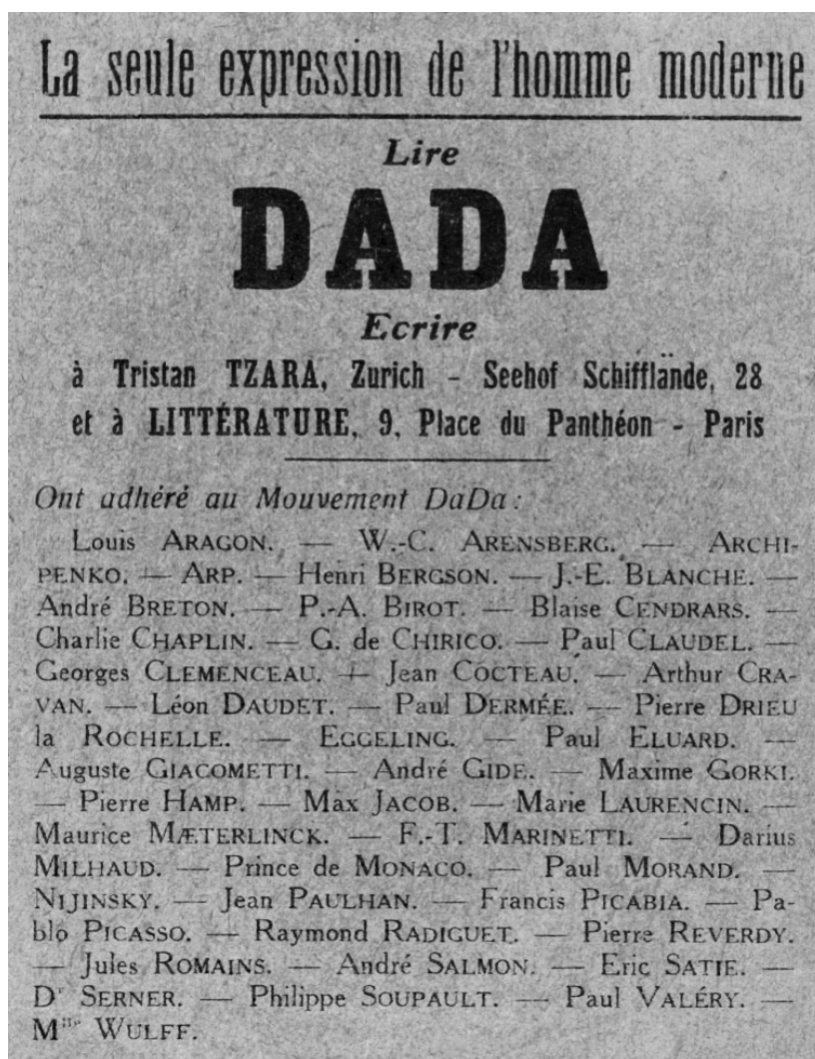


FIG. 2: "The Only Expression of Modern Man" (1919)

⁶ Quoted in Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris*, CNRS, Paris, 2004, p. 410

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131

As Dada scholar Michel Sanouillet has pointed out, the Surrealists were less flippant than the Dadaists when it came to Chaplin⁸. (If they hadn't been privy to the prank, one even wonders if they wouldn't have attended the event as mere fans.) In fact, their devotion to the comic couldn't have been more serious. The opening line of René Crevel's confessional poem *Bonjour Charlot*, clearly demonstrates that unlike the Dadaists, the Surrealists didn't simply use Charlot, they literally *needed* him: "With your birth, or rather, when we first became aware of your existence—which are one and the same thing—we had a genuine need for you"⁹.

The Surrealists Go To The Movies

It is impossible to disentangle the influence of Chaplin on French artists, writers, and poets of his day from their general enthusiasm for American films immediately following the war. Phillipe Soupault would claim in his seminal 1924 article "Cinéma U.S.A." that these movies had "deeply marked all of French poetry"¹⁰—a claim that the work of scholars such as Richard Abel has largely confirmed. In the case of Chaplin, Abel confidently asserts that his "early films [...] changed their ambitions as writers"¹¹. The Surrealists are well known for their taste in the commercial fare of their day—Fantômas, Les Vampires, Pearl White serials, William S. Hart, etc.—and they were profoundly skeptical of any type of filmmaking with pretensions to so-called art. In addition to this, they had a clear predilection for slapstick comedy. This is best expressed in the film journalism written by poet Robert Desnos, who would declare in his 1927 article "Mack Sennett: Liberator of Cinema" that "slapstick is simply the most disconcerting form of lyricism."¹² In another article, Desnos professes that it is "freedom that rouses these astounding comics: Picratt [Al St. John], Fatty, Malec [Buster Keaton], Zigoto [Larry Semon]. It's through love and freedom that they ascend to the heights of poetry, where the master of them all reigns—Charlie Chaplin, moralist and poet."¹³

Charlot poète

In the Surrealists' writing about Chaplin we consistently find a reoccurring vocabulary: love, poetry, liberty, morality, eroticism, revolution. These ideals also characterized the movement at large and it is clear that Chaplin was seen as a brother in arms. But above all, for the Surrealists, Chaplin was an exemplary poet. While comparing Chaplin to a poet is a common critical trope, both then and now, it was far from a convenient platitude for the Surrealists. There was no greater honor for these writers who would elevate poetry to a philosophy of

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56

⁹ René Crevel, "Bonjour Charlot", *Le Disque vert*, #4-5, 1924, p. 46

¹⁰ Philippe Soupault, "Cinéma U.S.A.", *op. cit.*, p. 45

¹¹ Richard Abel, "The Contribution of the French Literary Avant-Garde to Film Theory and Criticism (1907-1924)", *op.cit.*, p. 23

¹² Robert Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres, cinéma*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, p. 97

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 61

everyday experience. The Surrealists further blurred the boundaries between Charlie Chaplin and Charlot, and they consistently use the two as if they were interchangeable. In their writings on him, life, poetry, and film seem to merge into a heightened ideal, and they consistently suggest that his very being constitutes poetry.

Could this be a possible explanation for the tendency in many of their poems to simply describe the action of his films, as if it required no translation, as if it was already poetry in itself? As Philippe Soupault suggested in 1924, poets were apt to pick up on this because no one else had apprehended “this sublime knack of Charlie Chaplin, which, for us poets, goes by the name of poetry.”¹⁴ Soupault’s 1931 novel *Charlot*, which recomposes scenes from Chaplin’s entire body of work into a sort of meta-narrative, represents in many ways the apotheosis of this. As he explains in his preface: “I simply recounted what I saw on screen by respecting as much as possible the marvelous poetry that puts Charlot into motion.”¹⁵

Charlot sentimental

The Surrealists’ writing on Chaplin consistently suggests that his films represent poetry in its purest state, as if they were made automatically, without mediation of the pen (or in this case, the camera). However, if Charlot was a poet, he was certainly not an artist. In this context, Chaplin’s growing artistic ambitions in the early 20s did not sit well with the Surrealists, and the release of *The Kid* would cause them to briefly temper their praise. Why make a superfluous attempt to create art when your very existence already represents poetry?

Robert Desnos would explicitly set up this opposition between art and poetry a few years later, in 1925, by asserting that as soon as Chaplin becomes aware of what he is doing, he loses his capacity for creation and “art proceeds to replace poetry”. Referencing his ambivalent review of Keaton’s *Our Hospitality* (1923), written the year earlier, Desnos compared the film to *The Kid* by stating: “In regard to Buster Keaton, I’ve spoken of how unpleasant it can be to see the acting of those who we were accustomed to watching live.”¹⁶ It would seem that the Surrealists projected onto these comics their ideal of automatism; it’s as if they didn’t create—they simply existed before the camera. In his review of *Our Hospitality*, Desnos argues that:

One feels the “artwork” here, which is to say, the patience. The actors are no longer capable of sweeping us away with them. They simply move before our eyes—it’s nothing but literature. The same phenomenon arose with Charlot when he chose the bland sentimentality of *The Kid* over custard pies and he left behind his poignant misadventures and comic romances. Art is gradually usurping all cinematic formulas.¹⁷

¹⁴ Philippe Soupault, “Cinéma U.S.A.”, *op. cit.*, p. 44

¹⁵ Philippe Soupault, *Charlot*, Gallimard, Paris, 2014, pp. 10

¹⁶ Robert Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres, cinéma, op. cit.*, p. 52

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42

As this 1924 article demonstrates, the release of *The Kid* would long resonate with the Surrealists. Soupault reviewed the film upon its release in France for *Littérature* in 1922, and it's interesting to note that his article now takes the form of a more conventional review instead of a poem. Soupault also denounces the film's sentimentality, and claims that after hearing the praises of "our most eminent journalists" who announced that the film was a "masterpiece of compassion, humor, gaiety, and humanity" that he was expecting "the most genuine piece of trash". He goes on to say that while "Chaplin has certainly made the mistake of taking himself seriously"¹⁸, that the film was not as bad as all this acclaim would suggest.

The Pilgrim (1923) wouldn't reach France until 1925, alongside *The Gold Rush* (1925), and the Surrealists were reassured that Chaplin hadn't definitively abandoned them. In his film column for the Communist newspaper *l'Humanité*, Benjamain Péret declared that these two films "reestablish Charlot's true physiognomy that *The Kid* caused us to lose sight of" and that "it's the real Charlot who's come back to us, just as we all like him."¹⁹ Desnos would echo this statement almost word for word, and both poets note with delight, to quote Desnos, that "this time Charlot has found a kid who really gives it to us straight—this dirty brat is a real achievement."²⁰

These comments about *The Kid* reveal a certain tension between Chaplin and the Surrealists, as if they feared that he was betraying not only them, but Charlot—something these constant references to "le vrai Charlot" (the real Charlot) seem to suggest. Tellingly, the Surrealists make no mention of *A Woman of Paris* (1923), as if Charlie Chaplin the filmmaker didn't exist for them, only Charlot. However, when the news of his divorce trial with Lita Grey would cross the Atlantic, the Surrealists could no longer ignore Chaplin the man.

Charlot moraliste

After their ambivalent reception of *The Kid*, the Surrealists now offered their unconditional support to Chaplin. He was nonetheless put to the service of their ideals, or rather, the Surrealists saw him as the living embodiment of them. For Charlot was not only a poet, he was also a moralist. Now Chaplin, the man—not just Charlot—would become the defender of an entire value system that held love, morality, and revolution as its most profound ideals. During this scandal the Surrealists published "Hands off Love" as the lead article in the October 1927 issue of their journal *La Révolution surréaliste*, accompanied by reproductions of paintings by Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico [Fig. 3].

¹⁸ Philippe Soupault, "The Kid", *Écrits de cinéma: 1918-1931*, *Op. cit.*, p. 54

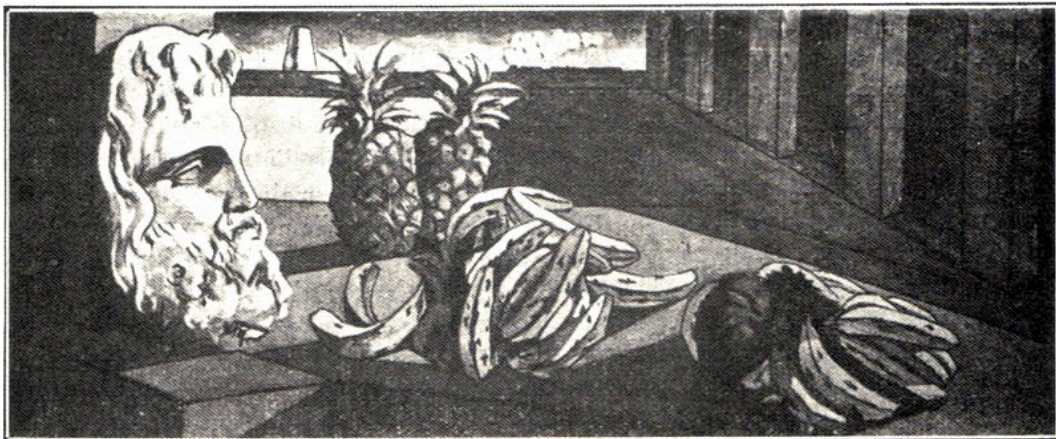
¹⁹ Benjamin Péret, *Œuvres complètes*, Tome 6, José Corti, 1992, p. 239

²⁰ Robert Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres, cinéma*, *op. cit.*, p. 62

The Surrealists saw the statements attributed to Chaplin during his divorce trail as putting into a new light “the morality of these films which have brought us more than mere pleasure, and to which we have devoted an almost unrivaled interest to.”²¹ From Chaplin’s statements they conclude that “throughout this entire affair, it’s Charlot who’s been the true champion of love, its unique and purest defender.”²² They consistently suggest that Chaplin’s life *and* films place him as an enemy of hypocritical bourgeois morality. The Surrealists still can’t completely let go of Charlot and in the last paragraph of their manifesto, they continue to willingly blur the man with his creation. Referring to Chaplin’s real-life divorce as another one of Charlot’s adventures, they go on to claim that “Charlot’s adventure today reveals his destiny, the destiny of a genius.”²³

dont le prix est plus haut que celui de toute la terre. La terre à vos pieds s’enfonce. Merci à vous par delà la victime. Nous vous crions merci, nous sommes vos serviteurs.

Maxime ALEXANDRE, Louis ARAGON, ARP, Jacques BARON, Jacques-André BOIFFARD, André BRETON, Jean CARRIVE, Robert DESNOS, Marcel DUHAMEL, Paul ELUARD, Max ERNST, Jean GENBACH, Camille GOEMANS, Paul HOOREMAN, Eugène JOLAS, Michel LEIRIS, Georges LIMBOUR, Georges MALKINE, André MASSON, Max MORISE, Pierre NAVILLE, Marcel NOLL, Paul NOUGÉ, Elliot PAUL, Benjamin PÉRET, Jacques PRÉVERT, Raymond QUENEAU, Man RAY, Georges SADOUL, Yves TANGUY, Roland TUAL, Pierre UNIK.



LE REVE TRANSFORMÉ

Chirico

FIG. 3: The Signatories of “Hands Off Love”

While this manifesto is rightly famous, several months preceding its publication, Robert Desnos would write a little-known article in the newspaper *Le Soir* which introduced many of the ideas that would be relayed in “Hands off Love”. His article is titled “Charlot before the Puritans” and he puts Chaplin on the same plane as the Marquis de Sade and compares him to

²¹ The Surrealist Group, “Hands off Love”, *La Révolution surréaliste*, op. cit., p. 3

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5 [citation modified from Paul Hammond’s translation of “Hands off Love” in *The Shadow & Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on The Cinema*, Op. cit., pp. 173-180]

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 6 [modified from Paul Hammond’s translation]

Baudelaire, “who was another moralist in love and a poet condemned by the law.” For Desnos, it came down to this essential question: “The choice between morality and art, between love and decency, between the forces of life and of revolution and the reactionary forces of death.”²⁴

Charlot révolutionnaire

It’s plain to see that Desnos placed Charlot on the side of revolution, and never was this more evident than in a text written in 1928 entitled simply “Charlot”, which clearly expresses his will to define the comic. In this polemical article, he lays out his vision of “the real Charlot”. He defends the comic by calling out his “false” and “illegitimate admirers”—the “literary practitioners” and “snobs” who “discovered Chaplin 10 years to late”: “They claim that Charlot fights for pity, that his multiple and marvelous adventures teach us about charity, that his work is Christian, that he has a peace-loving spirit.” But Desnos flatly retorts: “This is not true.”²⁵ Instead of teaching us pity, Charlot shows us that we shouldn’t “confuse wretched pity with revolutionary brotherhood”. “His work is not about the social importance of pity. His work is that of justice.” For Charlot “comes from the same mold that has given us the Marats, the Babeufs, and the Trotskys of this world.”²⁶ The poet even goes so far as to close his article with a cryptic parable that seems to posit Chaplin as the harbinger of the coming revolution.

Later in 1928, Desnos furnished proof of his suspicions to his readers by offering them a long passage from Chaplin’s book *My Trip Abroad* (1922), which had just been translated into French, six years after its initial publication, as *Mes voyages*. The excerpt deals with Chaplin’s encounter with George Andreytchine, identified simply as George, an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World.²⁷ In this passage, Chaplin recounts his night of intense friendship with a man whom he calls “a dreamer and a poet”²⁸, which is tinged with the melancholy of knowing that he is to soon return to prison. In his brief presentation of the excerpt, Desnos comments on the political commitments of “Charlot”. The fact that the book recounts an event in the private life of Chaplin doesn’t stop Desnos from speaking of Charlot here, which he uses 7 times compared to 1 reference to Charlie Chaplin:

I find it to be of urgent necessity to highlight Charlot’s opinions. In an era where the intellectual shift to the right is more alarming than ever, Charlot has picked sides. And what a side it is: that of those who are weak, of the oppressed. By becoming a writer, Charlie Chaplin stays true to the Charlot that we love.²⁹

²⁴ Robert Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres, cinema, op. cit.*, pp. 78-79

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122

²⁷ Cf. Franklin Rosemont, *Joe Hill: The IWW & The Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counterculture*, Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, Chicago, 2003, p. 456

²⁸ Charlie Chaplin, *My Trip Abroad*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1922, p. 15

²⁹ Robert Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres, cinema, op. cit.*, p. 129

The “real Charlot” comes back here, and in his everyday life, Chaplin doesn’t betray the character he represents on screen. Desnos reassures his readers—and himself—by closing his introduction with the following declaration: “This book fully confirms the confidence that we have placed in Charlot.”³⁰

This belief that the Surrealists entrusted in Chaplin—a heady mix of fact, fantasy, and most of all of poetry—was bound to go sour at some point. With the entirety of the movement’s ideals on his shoulders, it was virtually inevitable. We hear little about Charlot from the Surrealists during the 1930s and 40s. The next major statement about Chaplin dates from 1952, and it’s characteristically uncompromising.

Charlot policeman

In the regular column accorded to the Surrealists in the Anarchist newspaper *Le Libertaire* from 1951-1953, we find an angry missive signed by Jean-Louis Bédouin, a member of the younger generation of Surrealists. Punning on the French title of *Easy Street* (1917) the article is simply called *Charlot policeman*. Bédouin lashes out at Chaplin’s decision to visit the prefect of police to thank him for his department’s “protection” during the promotion of *Limelight* (1952) in Paris. For Bédouin, this constitutes the ultimate act of betrayal and he declares that Chaplin is now “tarnished by infamy in the eyes of all those who had believed in the sense of revolt expressed by his work, all those who had devoted their affection to him as they had with no other great artist.”

Bédouin is clearly speaking of the Surrealists here, and, as their early writings already suggest, he squarely places their devotion to Chaplin within the realm of “belief”. His bitter final paragraph is nothing short of ruthless:

It goes without saying that Chaplin’s work itself is to be reconsidered from the moment that its creator’s actions start to constitute its total negation. When a drawing made by Chaplin in the visitors’ book of the police has been photocopied and given as an homage to each and every one of the men who bludgeon strikers for a living, the international image of Charlot ceases to be one of protest to become that of a jester which capitalism serves to us at our own expense.³¹

This violent reaction shows that the Surrealists were not willing to let go of their vision of Charlot without one last cry of revolt. Yet they were not the only ones among the avant-gardes to express outrage. Nearly a month before, Guy Debord and his co-conspirators of the Lettrist International wrote an even more vicious tract targeting Chaplin, entitled “*Finis les pieds*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130

³¹ Jean Louis Bédouin, “Charlot policeman”, *Surréalisme et Anarchie: Les “Billets Surrealistes” du Libertaire (1951-1953)*, José Pierre/Plasma, Paris, 1983, p. 336

*plats*³², that they attempted to distribute by breaking into the his press conference held at the Ritz, which led to Debord's arrest. Other Lettrists such as Isidore Isou and Maurice Lemaître, both long-time admirers of Chaplin, would publish a text disavowing these actions, further adding to the tensions that would lead to the eventual creation of the Situationist International³³. We can see that, even as late as the 1950s, the French avant-gardes could not remain indifferent to Chaplin—far from it, he would continue to be a source of controversies and tensions. Guy Debord, in declaring that Chaplin was no longer relevant, only served to prove just how relevant his legacy still was.

Chaplin, Surrealism, and *le cinéma burlesque*

We shouldn't take *Charlot policeman* as the Surrealists' last word on Chaplin. It would seem that, like a lovers quarrel, they would move on from this betrayal. In his landmark book *Le Surréalisme au cinéma*, first published in 1953, active Surrealist Ado Kyrrou has nothing but praise for Chaplin's entire body of work, whose films he deems to be "truly revolutionary"³⁴. While Kyrrou does hint at a newfound nuance that would admit a certain disconnect between Chaplin and his persona, he nonetheless persists in laying claim to Charlot—an integral component to the Surrealists' discourse in regard to the comic: "Like all men that are scandalously honest, Chaplin has been spared of nothing, but the world belongs to him just as much as Charlot belongs to us."³⁵

The figure of Charlot easily facilitated appropriation from avant-garde movements, as Henri Michaux wryly commented in a poem from 1924: "The Unanimists claim him as one of their own. He is also a Dadaist, a reaction against the romantic sensibility, a subject of psychoanalysis, a classicist, a primitive."³⁶ But did the Surrealists truly appropriate Chaplin, or are we faced with a more complex phenomenon here? While one could critique their doggedly partisan, uncompromising vision of Charlot, that same vision also produced some of the most poetic evocations of Chaplin's creation, which are far from the banal commonplaces we are so used to hearing. Beyond all the conciliatory platitudes, perhaps it is this sense of revolt translated by Chaplin's films, so lyrically evoked by the Surrealists, that explains their continued popularity, the real nature of The Tramp's universality.

The Surrealists' writing on Chaplin, and more broadly, on slapstick, continues to make its influence felt to this day. An entire "school" of French writing about American comics is profoundly marked by the heritage of their lyrical style. The poet Petr Král, a one-time

³² Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, Gil J. Wolman, "Finis les pieds plats", *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale situationniste*, ed. Gérard Berreby, Éditions Allia, Paris, 1985, p. 262

³³ Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaître, Gabriel Pomerand, "Les lettristes désavouent les insulteurs de Chaplin", *Ibid.*, p. 147

³⁴ Ado Kyrrou, *Le surréalisme au cinéma* (updated edition), Ramsay, Paris, 1985, p. 153

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164

³⁶ Henri Michaux, "Notre frère Charlie", *Le Disque vert*, #4-5, 1924, p. 17

member of the Czech Surrealist group before migrating to France, would publish two volumes on slapstick in the 1980s—unfortunately never translated—that constitute some of the most lucid, not to mention brilliantly written attempts to come to terms with slapstick comedy, or *le cinéma burlesque* as it is called in French. Not surprisingly, Král would consecrate dozens of pages to Chaplin, most notably in regard to his multi-faceted affinities with Surrealist poetics. While my goal here has been to zero in on the Surrealists' historical engagement with Chaplin-Charlot, there remains much to be said about the way in which his work further embodies the spirit and ideals of the movement. Such an endeavor not only calls for an attentive reading of the Surrealists' writing about Chaplin, but also of the films themselves, which still have much to reveal in their Surrealist implications.

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