

BRECHT ON CHAPLIN (Order and Chaos)

In 1936, during a period of exile when Brecht took stock of his past theater work, he stated in an article that was published in an English version in the London Left Review: "The gestic mode of acting owes much to silent film, elements from it were re-introduced into the art of acting. Chaplin, the former clown, didn't have the tradition of the theater and approached afresh the presentation of human behavior." Brecht's fascination with Chaplin's movies and performance technique has, of course, become proverbial by now. There is hardly a book written on Brecht, which does not mention the impression that the little tramp made on him. From the entry in Brecht's diary on October 29, 1921,² where he wrote that the short film "The Face on the Barroom Floor" (which he knew as "Alkohol und Liebe") moved him more than anything he had seen in the cinema, to notes in his Arbeits journal in the forties and fifties, Chaplin has been the performer most often mentioned by Brecht of all actors he didn't personally work with. Brecht said that Chaplin's skill was so great that you could understand clearly every action and emotion of Chaplin's performance without the need to hear any dialogue.

Certainly he regarded him "perhaps [as] the greatest theatrical genius of [our] century," as Hanns Eisler pointed out, but beyond that Chaplin represented a performance tradition which Brecht also seems to have spotted in the work of Lilian Gish, for instance, of whom he wrote in 1929: "The type [of actress] which was represented by Duse and Bernhardt has been made obsolete by the-so far-last type of stage actress: the girl type. This girl type represented a considerable advance: It was more classical, so to speak, and showed instead of a mannered expression no expression at all, if you consider the expression of Lilian Gish, for instance, not quite as an expression but merely as an accidental side-effect of a pretty and weak personality that has nothing to do with the (real) expression of, for example, the beggar girl at Pont des Arts." The face of the actress Gish is described like an empty page on which a gestus can be inscribed, an aspect which Brecht had already become aware of when he saw the face of Chaplin's little tramp for the first time and described it in his diary: "Chaplin's face always is motionless, as if made of wax. One single mimetic flicker rips it apart, quite simple, powerful A pale clown's face with a thick mustache, the curls of an artist, the tricks of a clown." It obviously was the economy and precision of facial expression, the strictly non-psychological technique of these American actors to which Brecht was attracted. Marieluise Fleisser described the young Brecht's fascination with American Westerns and his observation "how economical all movements are, precisely aimed at their purpose. With us here, the actor is overdoing everything, that's insecurity; there you see skill."

No doubt, the style of acting Brecht discovered in American silent films had a strong and formative influence on the concept of gestus as he developed it in the twenties and early thirties. He kept naming Chaplin as the foremost model for the acting he desired for his Epic, and later Dialectic, theater. For instance, in 1931, commenting on his own production of *A Man's a Man*, he noted: "The spectator is invited to assume an attitude which equals the comparing way a reader turns the pages of a book. The actor of the

Epic theater needs an artistic economy totally different from that of the dramatic actor. In a manner, the actor Chaplin would serve better the demands of Epic than those of the dramatic theater."

And in his notes on the *Threepenny* Trial we find one of the reasons for his preference not only of Chaplin's acting mode but of the specific tradition he represents: "The great American humoresques [Brecht's term for slapstick comedy] present Man as an object and they would appeal to an audience of behaviorists."

Of course, Brecht recognized the limits a capitalist film industry, and behaviorist psychology, imposed on the esthetics of the medium: "Chaplin knows very well that he has to be 'human,' i.e. corny, to be allowed to do other things, and to this end he changes at times quite unscrupulously his style. (See the famous close-up of the dog like expression that concludes *City Lights*!)." Moreover, he pointed out that in American films "the reflexes are biological, only in some Chaplin films are they already social."

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The bowler started as a riding hat, and Americans called it a derby because of its popularity with the crowd at the Derby horse race at Epsom Downs, near London. But by some obscure process it soon acquired a popularity that spread upward into the aristocracy, across to the urban middle class, and down to the petite bourgeoisie. The top hat conferred the height and dignity of social standing to its wearer, but at considerable cost in comfort and convenience. The bowler was cheaper and more stable and snug; you could wear it on horseback, in trains, on buses; it was well designed for commuters as well as sportsmen. It conferred dignity but made the dignity seem casual. It brought a certain sobriety to leisure activities and a sportiness to more formal occasions. It expressed a gentility that had become active and energetic while remaining respectable. It became an emblem of modern life.

And it eventually migrated into the music hall, where it expressed the working class aspiration to artisan or genteel status. And from there directly into silent film comedy, with Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel. It was Mussolini's favorite hat, until he discovered in the 1930 that people were comparing him to Oliver Hardy. But Beckett loved Chaplin and Keaton and Laurel and Hardy. He cast Keaton in a film called *Film* (1965). And he modeled Didi and Gogo in part on Stan and Ollie. "Didi and Gogo in their bowler hats, one of them marvellously incompetent, the other an ineffective man of the world devoted (some of the time) to his friend's care, resemble nothing so much as they do the classic couple of 1930s cinema, Laurel and Hardy, whose troubles with such things as hats and boots were notorious, and whose dialogue was spoken very slowly on the assumption that the human understanding could not be relied on to work at lightning speed.... They journeyed, they undertook quests, they had adventures; their friendship, tested by bouts of exasperation, was never really vulnerable; they seemed not to become older, nor wiser, and in perpetual nervous agitation, Laurel's nerves occasionally protesting like a baby's, Hardy soliciting a philosophic calm he could never quite find leisure to settle into, they coped" (Hugh Kenner).