

Issue 12: Book Reviews

The Essential Chaplin: Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian

By Richard Schickel (ed.)

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A Review by Nicholas Guest-Jelley, University of Florida, USA

The Essential Chaplin collection is devoted to criticism of his films, studies of his life and an interweaving of the two. Taking a biographical approach, the book gathers together much important writing on Chaplin from both film reviewers and literary figures (Andrew Sarris, Graham Greene), political luminaries (Winston Churchill) and French theorists (Elie Faure, Andr  Bazin). Much of the appeal of including these famous critics and intellectuals (James Agee, Alistair Cooke, Theodor Adorno, Edmund Wilson are also included) stems from the fact that Chaplin was able to win over a mass audience and the intellectual elite, a feat reserved for the likes of Shakespeare and Dickens. Naming a collection *The Essential Chaplin* reinforces an attitude toward privileging the voices contained within as the be-all and end-all of criticism on the great filmmaker. As this book shows, however, both opinion regarding Chaplin's status as an icon, and that status itself, are always under revision. Chaplin's star image is hard to define partly because his own personality is often considered coterminous with his character on the screen. As his political conscience was being aroused by historical factors of the Great Depression, his personality seemed increasingly at odds with the innocent he played on the screen. Especially, as is repeatedly lamented in this collection as elsewhere, Chaplin begins to consider himself a philosopher, with his films becoming increasingly driven by philosophical ideas rather than gestural comedy. While not drawing any essential conclusions about Chaplin's iconic status, this collection implicitly considers his enormous impact and the influence of the journalistic culture that helps drive stardom.

Schickel divides the collection into six sections: 'Five Overviews,' 'In The Beginning,' 'The Early Features,' 'A Mid-Life Crisis,' 'The Late Features,' and a Conclusion by J. Hoberman (written for Chaplin's centennial). He does not impose on the writing after his initial lengthy introduction, providing only a short note on each author's importance and biography. While he lets the essays comment on each other, his biographical introduction provides a template with which to read the collection, suggesting that Chaplin's life followed a familiar pattern: tremendous rise to fame, increasing level of quality of work, life of celebrity leading to disillusionment with the type of work that led to fame (including feelings of over-importance), late work a sad ending to a great career. Schickel's stated aim is to "gather the most interesting writing about Charles Chaplin from commentators whose primary concern was not reviewing" (4). Unfortunately his definition of *interesting* seems have much in common with the compliment of "common sense" that he bestows

on the essays he commends. This leads to some redundancy, leaving it to the reader to comprehend how Chaplin must have been received outside of the literary establishment in New York and London.

By emphasizing the Tramp's 'transformation,' Schickel notes his lament at Chaplin's increasingly philosophical and political orientation, especially derisive of *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936), the end of *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940), *Monsieur Verdoux* (Charles Chaplin, 1947), and much of *Limelight* (Charles Chaplin, 1952). Trying to determine Chaplin's image as a genius of comedy but not of politics, Schickel instead underscores the impossibility of fixing what is necessarily a volatile category: a star image. As J. Hoberman writes, Chaplin's image of the Tramp will potentially be transformed yet again by the entertainment culture, and by literary efforts such as this, into something to be other than what is portrayed in his films. The star image has emerged as an *empty* signifier, such is the logic of stardom as we now know it. The section 'Five Overviews' solidifies this point, with the overviews ranging from David Thomson's scathing biographical sketch, in which he condemns Chaplin as monotonous and guilty of "delirious egotism" (59), to the abstract theorization of Chaplin's films by Elie Faure which is abashedly positive -- the gods flee from Chaplin's power to make us laugh at hunger itself. Sarris and Bazin both contribute to this section as well with pieces familiar to those who know their writing. Sarris's 'The Most Harmonious Comedian' and Bazin's 'Charlie Chaplin' reference Chaplin's biography to work up an auteurist account of his films as his personal expression.

'In the Beginning' consists of four essays. Two are by contemporary reviewers of Chaplin, Minnie Maddern Fiske and Gilbert Seldes; one is an excerpt from Gilbert Adair's *Flickers* (Faber and Faber, 1995), and the last is Alistair Cooke's memoir of his relationship with Chaplin. Mostly this section continues with the biographical approach -- hardly an essay goes by without mention of Chaplin's childhood poverty -- as both Fiske and Seldes laud Chaplin's ability to create humour from such a dire background. Alistair Cooke's biographical sketch, however, retains its original poignancy as a memoir of Cooke's friendship and working relationship with Chaplin. Having met in the early '30s on a report that turned into a vacation, Cooke befriends Chaplin and becomes one of the chief screenwriters of Chaplin's failed production of a film of Napoleon. Because Cooke doesn't consider Chaplin's personality relevant to the meaning in his films, this essay gives a fairly unclouded look at Chaplin's working style. Cooke's account of Chaplin's consideration of the Napoleon project makes it possible to imagine what such a film -- resplendently odd -- would have looked like.

'The Early Features' presents many short reviews, often by contemporary reviewers (Francis Hackett, Penelope Gelliatt, Stark Young, George Jean Nathan, Alexander Woolcott, Edmund Wilson), that pepper the book with insight into how the movies were received. They both acknowledge Chaplin's genius, but as early as *The Kid* (Charlie Chaplin, 1921) suggest that the Tramp as a character had run its course. Also included in this section are reviews of the early films upon their re-release. These reviews offer a re-evaluation of not only these great films, but the addition that Chaplin made to them on their re-release. Including work by G. Cabrera Infante and Stanley Kauffmann, these retrospectives privilege a look at the films in terms of the evolution of Chaplin's career. This section includes some surprising moments including the continual comparison of Chaplin with Dickens by invoking their similarity of biographical circumstance and Victorian morality. But what is more surprising is one comparison between Chaplin and Lewis Carroll not through

biographical or thematic similarity, or even the proclivity for young girls. Rather Alexander Woolcott praises Chaplin's and Carroll's ability to bring "to a sore and anxious world a gift of healing laughter and quickening, cleansing, inexplicable tears" (193).

Many of the writers foresaw and tried to influence Chaplin's transformation, especially those considerations in the section 'Mid-life Crisis.' Both a shift in cinematic character and style and in the seriousness of his artwork were called for. Stark Young, his earliest admonisher implores Chaplin to move to a real art form -- tragedy. Winston Churchill also has advice for Chaplin on the direction his career could, if not should, take -- using his experience of an absent father as its touchstone -- and considers what could be behind Chaplin's hesitation to explore new roles. In his review of *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), Wilson is more reserved, considering where Chaplin might take his career, giving the perspective that Chaplin's gifts are "primarily the actor's, not the director's or artist's" (173). Max Eastman also enters the debate as to whether Chaplin was primarily a clown or something more -- by considering Chaplin not merely a humorist but a poet of humour. And Brooks Atkinson testifies to the inability to remain critically objective in the face of the love of Chaplin, but also derides Chaplin's attempt to infuse politics into his comedy, commenting that "*Modern Times* as social philosophyÉhas hardly passed [its] entrance examinations" (221).

The section 'The Late Features' offers a picture of the declining esteem of Chaplin in the intellectual community throughout this phase of his career, focusing on the films *Modern Times*, *The Great Dictator*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, and *Limelight*. Most of the section either tries to defend Chaplin's late films as mis-understood masterpieces (Agee, Sarris, Warshow) or allows for what moments of joy can be found in what are seen as failed but courageous attempts at expanding his repertoire (Otis Ferguson, Dwight Macdonald, Walter Kerr). Ferguson's criticism is most remarkable for the spryness of its style and the fact, as Schickel remarks, that most people have never heard of him. Agee's overvaluation of *Monsieur Verdoux* benefits from being paired with Sarris's response, which is equally as appreciative that Chaplin made the film, if somewhat less reverential. Warshow is always a pleasure to read, and his theory of Chaplin's presence and his invocation to his audience -- "Love Me" -- is contrasted with Kerr's disapproval of Chaplin's ceaseless wordiness in *Limelight*.

Chaplin's transformation from entertainer to thinker -- how he gained traction within the intellectual community and how this image of the serious Chaplin influenced his later films -- has already been treated brilliantly by Charles Maland in *Chaplin and American Culture* (Princeton University Press, 1989). In this collection, we receive the same narrative but also get a full treatment of this process from a variety of sources. The inclusion of such figures as Graham Greene and Churchill, Wilson and Adorno work to show just how seriously some of the great thinkers and writers of the twentieth century took Chaplin, and chronicles how a transformation of the star image began to take place. The book is complete with biographical accounts of his youth, extending his star persona into his "real" life. This book, taken as a whole, makes the argument that Chaplin's iconic status had as much to do with who held him in esteem as anything he produced.

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