

Charlie's Figure as an Inspiration for Artists

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Abstract

The article introduces Charles Chaplin as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. Both Chaplin, and his film figure Charlie the Tramp influenced writers, poets, directors and even philosophers in many countries of the world. His unquestionable genius inspired people to come up with new ideas and to change their previous ways of perceiving the surrounding reality. Chaplin as personification of an American Dream, poor English boy, who thanks to his own hard work gained popularity and wealth, during his career in America, won admiration and hatred. First being accused of immoral behavior, he ended up as an enemy of the American general values and expelled from the country as an alleged communist, Chaplin welcomed a lot of support from American and European artists. His achievements made him and his Charlie character immortal and present until today in works of fine artists from all over the world.

Charlie Chaplin was, and still is, one of the most beloved characters by American, English and Polish writers, artists and filmmakers. Since the 1910s, the character of Charlie created by Charles Chaplin has been and still is a cultural phenomenon, the significance of which goes beyond the framework of a specific actor or a film hero. The interest in the film Charlie and the film acting and directing of Charles Chaplin has been reflected in a surprisingly large number of references to Chaplin, both in English and Polish literary and cultural texts. This “clown with the most human mask in the

history of film” – as Bronisław Zieliński, the translator of his autobiography (*My Autobiography*) into Polish, described the comedian – he inspired, made us think and reflect on the phenomenon of Charlie and comment on his popularity among filmgoers and readers from all over the world for over a hundred years, from the 1910s to the present day. Literary writers, theoreticians and critics who draw attention to the power of Chaplin’s art in the world culture of the last century are seduced by his sense of emotions and the needs of the mass cinema audience, his specific humour, thanks to which the film Charlie still reaches millions of human hearts. An interesting analysis of the place of laughter in Chaplin’s work (in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival culture) was presented by, among others, William Paul (*The Annals of Anality*¹) and John Bruns (*Loopholes: Reading Comically*²). Paul considered the comedy of Chaplin’s films as a way of thinking with a cognitive function that immediately reaches the viewer. Humour, satire, irony, characteristic of Chaplin’s comedies, are of great importance for the viewer in acquiring knowledge about the world, while not being vulgar or trivial, like most farces and entertaining films created at that time. Bruns notes that laughter is a domain of human understanding, a domain much more disturbing and accessible than the entire content of the plot, which the recipient of the work recognizes naturally and easily in the tone of laughter. Understanding the artist’s message is, according to Bruns, a comic “reception” of his work, accepting the concerns presented in it, which is the most neglected premise of comedy. Chaplin was aware that the humor of the story encourages thinking and facilitates reception in accordance with the creator’s intentions much more than intellectually deepened and for many inaccessible or too difficult high literature.

Charles Spencer Chaplin was born on April 16, 1889 in a poor district of London, England. His mother, Hannah Hill Chaplin, a singer and vaudeville actress, spent most of her life in psychiatric hospitals; his father, Charles Spencer Chaplin Sr. was a singer, but alcohol addiction destroyed both his health and his promising career. After their parents separated, Charlie and his half-brother, Sidney, spent most of their childhood in orphanages. Due to lack of funds for support, the young Chaplin, who could barely read and write, dropped out of school to go on tour with a group of comedians. At the age of nineteen, he became one of the popular musical performers in England. In 1910, Chaplin went to the United States to star in a film. He was chosen by filmmaker Mack Sennett to star in the silent Keystone comedy series. In his early films, Chaplin played vulgar ragtag characters, but in time he

¹ P. William, *Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality*, Berkeley, 2020.

² J. Bruns, *Loopholes: Reading Comically*, Milton Park, 2009.

became more delicate and precise in his movements, which led to the creation of the role of the Little Tramp. However, the pace and frenzy of Sennett's productions inhibited Chaplin's personal talents, imposing on him a style of acting he did not approve of. He moved to Essanay Studios. In 1918, Chaplin built his own studio and signed a million-dollar contract with National Films, which produced such silent-screen classics as *A Dog's Life*, comparing the life of a dog with that of a tramp; *Charlie the Soldier*, a poignant satirical take on World War I horrors (1914-18); and *The Kid*, a moving tale of slum life. These and Chaplin's other works are distinguished by the physical grace, emotional expression, and intellectual vision possessed by the best artists³.

However, the admiration that Chaplin enjoyed in his early years was tempered by the anger directed at him in the 1940s and 1950s. The American public was outraged by his outspoken politics, his personal problems, and the often bitter elements expressed in his art. A socialist (believing that all people should have an equal share in the production of goods and services) and an atheist (denying the existence of God), Chaplin expressed hatred of dictatorship. This made America suspicious of him in an era of pervasive fear of communism. Chaplin's image was further damaged by a highly publicized lawsuit brought against him by his former lover Joan Barry, who claimed he was the father of her child. Although Chaplin proved that he was not the father of the child, the reaction to the allegations turned many people against him. While on vacation in Europe in 1952, Chaplin was notified by the U.S. Attorney General that his re-entry to the United States would be challenged. He was charged with immoral conduct and political suspicion. Chaplin, who never became a U.S. citizen, sold all his American possessions and settled in Geneva, Switzerland, with his fourth wife and their children. In 1957, Chaplin visited England to direct *The King in New York*, which was never shown in the United States. His autobiography was published in 1964.

In the 1970s, times changed, and Chaplin was once again appreciated for his rich contribution to the development of film. In 1972, he returned to the United States, where he was honored in New York and Hollywood, including a special Oscar. In 1975, he received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II of England. Two years later, on December 25, 1977, Chaplin died in his sleep at his home in Switzerland.

Due to his turbulent life and numerous successes, biographies were published, each of which revealed new pages from his life. These biographies appeared both as literary works, such as: *Chaplin. Predicting the Present*⁴, *The*

³ J. Sayers, *Chapter 272 – Sir Charlie Chaplin* [w:] *Encyclopedia of creativity*, 2nd Edition, Elsevier, 2011.

⁴ P. Mościcki, *Chaplin. Przewidywanie teraźniejszości*, Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz/terytoria, 2017.

*Charlie Chaplin Archives*⁵, the author's *My Autobiography*⁶, and in film form, including: *Chaplin. Legend of the Century* from 2014⁷ or *Chaplin* from 1992⁸.

Charles Chaplin was a screenwriter, director, composer, and above all one of the most famous actors of the silent film era, and his literary output includes travel letters, numerous film scripts, scene descriptions, as well as short stories and poetry.

Autonomous works of art and unique authorial styles, which sometimes diminished the importance of certain genres and writing styles in relation to others, were particularly recognized and celebrated by literary modernism. In the Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1929)⁹, where Breton evokes "a century of truly incendiary philosophy and poetry," it is not surprising that in his personal pantheon are the names of Hegel, Marx, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, and Freud. Yet among these giants of literature and philosophy we find another name, included without comment, as if his inclusion required no justification: Charles Chaplin. Almost a decade earlier, Louis Aragon—whose first published poem, *Charlot sentimental*, was inspired by Chaplin—had declared in an article *On Décor* (1918) that to fully appreciate *The Tramp* (1916)

it is absolutely necessary to know and love Pablo Picasso's 'Blue Period' paintings, [...] to read Kant and Nietzsche, and to believe that one's own heart is braver than that of all other men¹⁰.

Soupault, who would devote many poems, essays, and even an entire novel to Chaplin, confidently declared in 1924, the year of the official birth of the Surrealist movement, that "Charlie Chaplin genuinely 'discovered' cinema. It was no easy task, no doubt, because he is a poet"¹¹.

Three years later, in 1927, the Surrealists came to Chaplin's defense during his notorious divorce trial from Lita Grey, publishing the manifesto "Hands off Love." Its emphatic final lines leave no doubt as to the Surrealists' devotion to Chaplin: "We shout our thanks to you, we are your servants"¹².

⁵ P. Duncan, *The Charlie Chaplin Archives*, Taschen, 2015.

⁶ Ch. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, Chicago, 2012.

⁷ A. Leboulch, F. Martin, *Un jour, une histoire – Charlie Chaplin, la légende du siècle*, 2015.

⁸ R. Attenborough, *Chaplin. Legend of the Century*. Artisan Entertainment, 2014.

⁹ A. Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Gallimard, 1985, p. 105.

¹⁰ L. 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].

¹¹ P. Soupault, *Le cinéma U.S.A.*, Écrits de cinéma, 1979, p. 44.

¹² The Surrealist Group, *Hands off Love*, [w:] *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. 9-10 (1927), Gallimard, pp. 6-8.

Although the fascination with Chaplin was by no means unique among the avant-garde of the era, many of Chaplin's creations served a privileged role for Surrealist writers. Their interest in Chaplin preceded the official birth of the movement, and for more than three decades they developed side by side as historical contemporaries.

In the surrealists' writings about Chaplin, there are recurring references to love, poetry, freedom, morality, eroticism, revolution. These ideals also characterized the entire movement, and it is clear that Chaplin was seen as a brother in arms. But above all, for the surrealists, Chaplin was a model poet. If comparing Chaplin to a poet is a common critical trope, then as now, it was not a convenient cliché for the Surrealists. There was no greater honour for those writers who would elevate poetry to the status of a philosophy of everyday experience. The Surrealists further blurred the lines between Charles Chaplin and Charlie, or as he was known in France, Charlot, by consistently using the terms as if they were interchangeable. In their writings about the artist, life, poetry and film seem to merge into one lofty ideal, and consistently suggest that his very existence constitutes poetry. Could this possibly explain the tendency of many Surrealists in their poems to simply describe the action of their films, as if it required no translation, as if it were already poetry in itself? As Philippe Soupault suggested in 1924, poets were able to grasp this because no one else understood "that sublime ability of Charlie Chaplin which, for us poets, is called poetry"¹³.

In a 1923 article on American cinema, Soupault saw in American film a new form of modernity capable of reviving French poetry. In an article analyzing the Americanization of the avant-garde movement, the author compiles scenes from across Chaplin's oeuvre into a kind of meta-narrative, in many ways an apotheosis of the phenomenon. As he explains in his preface: "I have simply reported what I saw on the screen, respecting as much as possible the wonderful poetry that moves Charlotte"¹⁴.

The Surrealists' writings on Chaplin consistently suggested that his films represented poetry in its purest state, as if they were created automatically, without the mediation of the pen (or in this case, the camera). But if, in the movement's view, Charlot was a poet, he was certainly no artist. In this context, Chaplin's growing artistic ambitions in the early 1920s did not sit well with the Surrealists, and the release of *The Kid* briefly softened their praise. They could not understand why the artist would make unnecessary attempts at art, when his very existence was poetry to them.

¹³ P. Soupault, *Le cinéma U.S.A.*, op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 10.

A few years later, in 1925, this opposition between art and poetry was clearly defined, claiming that as soon as Chaplin becomes aware of what he is doing, he loses the ability to create and the art of film begins to replace poetry. It would seem that the surrealists were redefining their ideal of automatism, not creating but existing in front of the camera. In his review, Desnos claims that

Here you can feel the “work of art”, that is, patience. The actors are no longer able to carry us away. They simply move before our eyes – this is nothing more than literature. Art gradually usurped the right to all film formulas¹⁵.

However, with time the surrealists appreciated the value of Chaplin's work, and subsequent films restore his true physiognomy. Robert Desnos referred to *The Kid* with clear delight, “this time Charlot has found a kid who really makes it clear to us – this dirty brat is a real achievement”¹⁶.

The Surrealists noted that Chaplin's statements during his divorce proceedings shed new light on “the morality of those films from which we have derived more than mere pleasure, that is to say an almost unequalled critical interest”¹⁷. They concluded from Chaplin's statements that “in all this matter it so happens that Charlot is simply and solely the defender of love”¹⁸.

They also consistently suggested that Chaplin's life and films presented him as the enemy of hypocritical bourgeois morality. The Surrealists still could not completely free themselves from Charlot, and in the final paragraph of their manifesto they were still keen to identify the man with his work¹⁹. Although this manifesto is justly famous, a few months before its publication Robert Desnos had written a little-known article in “Le Soir” newspaper which introduced many of the ideas that were later to be presented in *Hands off Love*. His article is entitled “Charlot before the Puritans” and puts Chaplin on an equal footing with the Marquis de Sade and compares him to Baudelaire, “who was another moralist and poet in love condemned by the law”. For Desnos, everything came down to this fundamental question: “The choice between morality and art, between love and decency, between the forces of life and revolution and the reactionary forces of death”²⁰.

¹⁵ R. Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres, cinema*, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 62.

¹⁷ The Surrealist Group, *Hands off Love*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 8.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 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].

²⁰ R. Desnos, *Les rayons et les ombres, cinema*, op. cit., p. 78-79

It was not only the French who analyzed the figure of Chaplin, presenting him as an icon of the art world. He also appeared in the pop culture of the Polish interwar period. At that time, the literary tradition did not refer in any way to the description of the existing cultural situation, Charlie Chaplin began to interest Polish artists only after four years of gaining independence. At first, he was greeted with sarcasm and indulgence, perceived as an American clown with great popularity, which, however, soon turned into full recognition²¹. The change in the approach to his person was primarily influenced by his extraordinary acting skills. Perfect facial expressions and gestures were what silent cinema needed, and Chaplin delivered them in excellent form. After several debuting slapstick comedies by Sennett, in February 1914 Chaplin created the immortal character of the Little Tramp, which, as David Robinson suggests, took place

...in a shared men's dressing room, where Chaplin borrowed the baggy trousers of the fat "Fatty" Arbuckle, the jacket of the tiny Charles Avery, the No. 46 Ford Sterling shoes, which he put on backwards so they wouldn't fall off, the bowler hat of Arbuckle's father-in-law that was too small, and the mustache intended for Mack Swain, which he trimmed to the size of a toothbrush²².

These were the parts of the artist's costume that became the most recognizable elements of the artistic figure in the world. Although the character of the tramp with a heart of gold has evolved over the decades, adapting to the message that suited its creator at a given time, the characteristic figure of Charlie in shabby clothes, with a bowler hat on his head and a cane in his hand has become an icon of cinema. And the recognizable elements of his outfit brought Charles Chaplin worldwide recognition and permanently inscribed themselves into the iconic figure in the film industry. The bowler hat and bamboo cane, attributes that are a kind of calling card of the artist, were auctioned at the Banhaus auction house in Los Angeles in November 2012, for over 62 thousand dollars²³.

On the other hand, iconographic materials referring to the character of Charlie and connoting Chaplin playing the role of a tramp/vagrant are important cultural texts and confirm the fascination with this filmmaker of so many artists, writers and intellectuals. This includes film posters, book and magazine covers, drawings with Charlie's likeness or attributes published in newspapers and periodicals as well as monographs and leaflets, paintings,

²¹ R. Birkholm, *Charlie Chaplin as a Figure of Modernity in the Perception of Polish Writers of the Interwar Period*, Warsaw, 2012

²² D. Robinson, *Chaplin. His Life and Art*, p. 109

²³ <https://kultura.onet.pl/wiadomosci/charlie-chaplin-zarabia-w-los-angeles/4qn-qvc3>, (acc. 21 VIII 2024).

collages, caricatures, sculptures, etc. Over the decades, many artists have used the image of Chaplin, or rather the character of Charlie brought into being by him, as an inspiration for creating new artistic and functional forms.

With the development of technology, artists who wanted to modernize their art by introducing and developing a new means of expression, which the poster became, gained the opportunity to mass-produce it and introduce it into the public space. As Mateusz M. Bieczyński describes,

Poster production and capitalism were therefore closely linked. What did this change consist in? Until now, public space was empty. No one was interested in the walls of abandoned buildings, construction site fences or park fences. Suddenly, all these surfaces became a potential

source of income. Numerous visual testimonies confirming the scale of this change have survived to this day. In photos of city views, attention is drawn to walls and partitions densely populated with posters. In this context, it should come as no surprise that entrepreneurs are convinced that posters have turned emptiness into gold²⁴.

The new form of communication resulted in the development of new forms of economic activity, primarily the rental of advertising space and graphic and advertising agencies. And, starting from the 1920s, the figure of the Tramp was very often used to create advertisements, and so, for example, in 1924 Aleksander Wat founded the Reklama-Mechano advertising office together with Henryk Berlewi, which in 1925 received an order from the “Plutos” company to advertise their chocolate products. The cooperation resulted in the creation of a slogan informing customers that the “age of Chaplin, jazz band and Einstein”²⁵ had come, while Tadeusz Gronowski’s poster, using the actor’s icon, encouraged them to buy the magazine “To i owo”. Charlie also became a character on movie posters

The “Mewa” cinema in Sochaczew on Saturday, April 9, 1932 from 7 p.m. and on Sunday, April 10 from 5:40 p.m. shows a wonderful comedy, stimulating the audience to spasmodic laughter, entitled “Charlie Chaplin as the Toreador’s rival”²⁶.

In the 1930s, Chaplin, in addition to being an icon of the international avant-garde, had already gained the status of a celebrity. As Przemysław Stożek writes, understood as a specific example of “a tragic, but also opti-

²⁴ M. M. Bieczyński, *The history of poster autonomy. Attitudes, Directions, Trends.*, Wrocław, 2022, p. 81.

²⁵ <https://ochocianie.pl/czekoladowa-agresja-z-barskiej/> (acc. 21 VIII 2024).

²⁶ <https://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.bn.org.pl/download/document/1533558650.pdf>, (acc. 21 VIII 2024).

mistic symbol of the machine age”²⁷, Chaplin became the hero of a collage created in 1933 by Kazimierz Podsadecki entitled “Sentimental robot”. Stożek explains that

The title itself indicates a clear paradox. It juxtaposes “robot”, a mechanical figure, with the adjective “sentimental”, which describes a person with great emotionality and large reserves of emotions²⁸.

The members of the “Polish School of Posters” created after World War II, such as Jan Młodożeniec, Roman Cieślewicz and Waldemar Świerzy, raised the quality of utility posters to the level of art, and

Polish film and theatre posters created after World War II were strongly connected with visual art, and their creators used painting and drawing tools in their production. One could even say that artistic skills were their trademark²⁹.

And once again, the immortal Charlie returned as an inspiration for creating film posters. In 1957, Roman Cieślewicz created a poster promoting the 1938 West German production “Laughter Forbidden”, a compilation of six films by Chaplin in which he appeared with Edna Purviance. The early comedies of the American genius, in which the little tramp thumbs his nose at the tall policemen, were immortalized on a poster from around 1962 entitled *Charlie Chaplin* by Jan Młodożeniec. Meanwhile, Waldemar Świerzy, whose style evolved from poetic metaphor to colourful expression, is the author of a poster combining the two brightest stars of Hollywood entitled *Marilyn and Chaplin* from 1992.

The Polish film poster was still intended to convey information, but

its setting became ennobling. It raised the prestige of Polish Film, which received a strong propaganda weapon in the form of a catchy slogan – a film poster is not an advertisement, but art³⁰.

The tradition of using Chaplin’s image, despite the passage of time, is still alive in the work of Polish graphic artists and poster designers. The face of the film Tramp was immortalised in 2010 by Wiktor Sadowski on an extremely dynamic and colourful poster entitled *Charlie the Boxer*. In 2015, the young artist Magda Danaj used the figure of Charlie to create the cover of the magazine “Bliza”, and in cooperation with the film distributor Vivarto, the owners of the “Homework” studio Joanna Górńska and Jerzy Skakun, since 2008 have

²⁷ P. Stożek, *Kazimierz Podsadecki, “Sentimental Robot”*, 2017 [in:] <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/kazimierz-podsadecki-sentymentalny-robot> (acc. 22 VIII 2024).

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ M. M. Bieczyński, *The history of poster...*, p. 172.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 176.

been creating film posters announcing the Classics of Cinema, i.e. outstanding icons of world cinematography, such as, among others, the series of films with Charlie Chaplin. Their posters are characterized by geometric forms and contrasting colour combinations. The skillful use of symbols referring to individual images conveys the very essence of the plot of the presented films. These posters could have been admired from October to November 2023 in the “Przytyk” gallery in Tarnowskie Góry.

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