

ROBERT MUSIL**Impressions of a Naïf**

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One would be hard-pressed to name a film star who could unite the admiration of both popular audiences and intellectuals more fully than Charlie Chaplin. In this article, the Austrian writer and passionate filmgoer Robert Musil (1880–1942) discusses his discovery of Chaplin during a trip to Berlin and reflects more broadly on his fascination with cinema. Where other writers might have written off slapstick as an “American” phenomenon, Musil locates its origins in a long tradition of popular European stage humor. In 1925, Musil would also review Balázs’s *Visible Man* (1924) in an essay titled “Ansätze zu neuer Ästhetik: Bemerkungen über eine Dramaturgie des Films” (Toward a new aesthetic: Observations on a dramaturgy of film), arguing that silent film could place spectators in an “other condition” beyond the conceptual limits of ordinary experience. On Chaplin, see also chapter 12, nos. 182, 183, and 184.

It was in Berlin. The theaters had not yet opened for the winter season, and the cinemas were buzzing. What should I do? I set aside my existence and went to the movies. If anyone

living between Berlin and Charlottenburg—*between* understood in the direction leading over Chernyshevskoye, Peking, and New York—had never experienced Chaplin, then it was surely me. I was encouraged by the fact that everything significant had already been said about cinema: for beside the polished intellect of experts, the voice of someone fresh from the backwoods has always been able to hold its own. Chaplin did not surprise me; I was already familiar with his kind. I had seen Chaplin's father in the operetta back in the generation of my own forefathers. I had seen that fantastical shiny pearl of a physiognomist, thrown, as it were, before the swine, and fidgeting about stupidly with a sigh of resignation. Long before our current knockabouts, I had seen the knockabout roil the souls with his gallows humor. Yes, good comedians already existed, and all of them were acrobats. Perhaps Chaplin is better, but I am struck by what they all share, the common line leading to the rise of cinema. The swift and contorted gait, that flexibility that climbs over wardrobes as if they were footstools, the running-around and being run around, the face slaps, the mix-ups, kicks, somersaults, falls and leaps over rooftops: had this not always been the actor's lifeblood, in which his fortunes first came to fruition? This is an ancient tradition, stretching back at least to Hanswurst comedies and Venetian masks,¹ if it is not the very lifeline of the theater as such. Fleeing the austerity of religious service, into which he had been reluctantly driven by the development of European theater, the actor found refuge in the operetta, and he is now experiencing an explosive liberation in the cinema.

I also saw a female Chaplin, an American actress. She seemed hardly noticeable in her skirts, but then she put on an old suit for men. The real catastrophe set in when she got to the collar button. The finger grabs the button from the top, but it refuses to snap shut. The finger grabs it from the bottom; it still refuses to close. The hands descend into the neck from raised elbows, slip upwards from below, twist around the corners, but the button naturally refuses to close—and this continues until the entire little human form is reduced to a bundle of colliding and diverging body parts, writhing about in convulsions of impotent anger; the parts meet one another over, under, in, and beside beds, wardrobes, corners, and chairs, until—yes, until suddenly the button simply closes, and a soft breeze caresses the feverish spectator. In its theatrical precision, all of this might be American, but it was born under a German bush named Wilhelm.²

I also had the occasion to witness an actor in a summer theater, hence in three dimensions and in the flesh. He gave a satirical rendition of a fistfight. Here too, the actor climbed over tables, wardrobes, backs, and here too, he struck the soft elegiac note characteristic of the comedy of bodily excess. We arrived in the loge just in time for his scene, and we exited again as he threw the last punch. Thus he stood before us, projected out of the emptiness, exactly as if appearing on a magic screen. Still, he remained a pale (albeit pleasant enough) comparison. How to explain this? I do not have much faith in the dramaturgic philosophy of the cinema (which is nonetheless becoming popular today), but rather in its technology. Considered from this angle, the reason likely resides in nothing other than this: This actor gives the same performance five hundred times, but I see him only once. Hence the probability that I see his best performance is one in five hundred. The film director, on the other hand, would film the same action five hundred times if necessary, and in this case the probability of spectators seeing the best moment always amounts to a certainty. This certainty is a source of superiority. I also used to think that I had already experienced violent brawls, but I had never seen fights like the one I saw that time in the cinema. The people in the film went flying, and the tempo reached such a pitch that we spectators also flew through the air. You could no longer decide whether you were the human beast defending himself or one of the bloodhounds that he hurled through the air. What purpose this element that technology stirs up within us might serve is a different question. I do not know. But it is there.

Another question: what use are words? I once saw a German film based on a sordid, kitschy novel. Such a sequence of events, which provokes nausea when a reader has to imagine it, is swallowed whole when placed before a spectator. After all, people sit for hours in tramways, rooms, and waiting halls looking at much more boring things, and we would long ago have committed suicide if our eyes were not much more patient, inured, and thankful than our ears; our eyes are more easily amused. And from time to time, when a girl says to a man, “Come join me in the water,” when her hair flutters in the wind, her fingers grab onto his sleeves and her eyes cry out, all of this taking place on a windy dune, ridiculously large before the tiny infinity of the sea lapping the shore below: from time to time, there are impressions that one never forgets. It is perhaps not so bad to be faced with the question as to why we really need words. Someone should try removing from the theater all those words that say nothing more than what the spectator can guess at first glance! The theaters would admittedly lose their best source of revenue: the platitudes.³

Notes

1. Hanswurst was a stock figure in popular improvised comedy in the German-speaking world during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Eighteenth-century proponents of bourgeois theater such as Johann Christoph Gottsched sought to banish the figure from the stage, though it survived in popular forms such as puppet theater.

2. Musil is referring to the comic poet and illustrator Wilhelm Busch (1832–1908). *Busch* is also the German word for “bush.”

3. The original text contains an untranslatable wordplay: “Die Theater kämen freilich um ihre bestbezahlten Plätze, die Gemeinplätze.”