

Even a Tramp Can Dream: An Examination of the Clash Between “High Art” and “Low Art” in the Films of Charlie Chaplin

Film genre scholars have long noted a struggle between “high art” and “low art” as one of the core conflicts in the dramatic plotting of motion picture musicals. One of the most brilliant examples of this conflict occurring at multiple levels throughout the narrative may be found in *The Band Wagon* (1953, dir. Vincente Minnelli). In the film, Fred Astaire plays Tony Hunter, a movie song and dance man whose career is in sharp decline. A pair of well-meaning friends has written a musical stage show as a vehicle for the resuscitation of Hunter’s career, but, inexplicably, they have chosen an excessively melodramatic stage “visionary” named Jeffrey Cordova to direct the show. Cordova sees the rather lightweight musical script as an opportunity to produce something of great importance, nothing less than a modern-day Faust. The writers and Hunter stand slack-jawed and dismayed as they listen to this perversion of their intended production, but their faith in this fully-credentialed purveyor of high art overwhelms their better judgment, and the director is given his way.

The clash of artistic sensibilities continues through Cordova’s choice of a classical ballerina as Hunter’s dancing partner, a seemingly irreconcilable mismatch of high art and low art dance styles. Inevitably, Cordova’s over-the-top “artistic” pretensions in staging his musical doom it to failure, thus confirming Hunter’s (and our) instincts that a more “common-sense”

approach to the popular musical is required. Yet the film concludes with the notion that perhaps high art and low art are not necessarily incompatible with one another. The ballerina and the hoofer learn to dance together, the pompous Cordova actually joins a revised version of the show (as originally intended by the writers) as a song and dance man, and, when the show's backers pull out after the opening (and closing) night of the Faust version, Hunter funds the revised show's continuation by selling his collection of original classical paintings (Schatz 218 – 220).

Some have speculated that the high art/low art conflict in the motion picture musical was born out of the frustration felt by those who made these films, that the artistry in their films was overlooked by critics and audiences alike. As enjoyable as these films might be, they were perceived as mere popular entertainments, not high culture. Does the same clash of high and low art appear in film comedy, possibly springing from the same disappointment of artists who feel underappreciated? Comedy filmmakers have long complained that they are usually shut out by dramas in awards ceremonies. Some have even suggested that the Academy Awards should follow the lead of the Emmys and split the Best Picture Award into Best Drama and Best Comedy, with the acting and directing awards following suit. From the beginning of the cinema, film comics have abandoned comedy for drama, often with disastrous results, in an effort to be taken more seriously. Hugh Laurie is perhaps the latest in a long line of gifted comedians to jump ship. This marvelously talented comic, once paired with Stephen Fry¹ in the classic British *Jeeves and Wooster* series, now plays the irascible title character on American TV's *House*.

One of the earliest and most enduring motion picture comedians, Charlie Chaplin, may have also been the first to face this disconnect. Chaplin personally aspired to be, and was, recognized as an artist, a true genius of the cinema. Yet the baggy pants and slap shoes that were essential to Chaplin's Tramp character were straight out of vaudeville, and, worse, burlesque: the lowest forms of lowbrow entertainment. Hence Chaplin's paradox: how to be taken seriously as an artist while clad as a low-grade clown. This internal conflict within Chaplin manifests itself repeatedly in his films in the form of the classic high art/low art conflict as seen in the depictions of high art, the portrayal of those within the high art community, and Charlie the Tramp's reactions to the pretentious trappings of high art. As in the motion picture

musical, Chaplin's approach is a combination of mocking ridicule and, at the same time, a yearning aspiration to reach a higher plane of social acceptance that may be obtained through artistic endeavor.

Three of Chaplin's films feature prominent high art/low art themes: the early short subjects *The Face on the Barroom Floor* (1914) and *The Vagabond* (1916), and the late feature-length picture *Limelight* (1952). Additionally, the shorts *Behind the Screen* (1916) and *The Immigrant* (1917), and the features *The Kid* (1921), *A Woman of Paris* (1923), *City Lights* (1931) and *The Great Dictator* (1940) have at least passing art references that deserve mention.

***The Face on the Barroom Floor* (1914)**

The first treatment of art and artists in Chaplin's films comes in *The Face on the Barroom Floor*, made midway through Chaplin's inaugural year in the movies. While Chaplin was the official director, the production was supervised by Keystone Studios chief Mack Sennett in his usual micro-managerial style (McDonald, Conway, and Ricci 11). Therefore, Chaplin had very little free reign to muse upon the clash of high and low art or anything else. Yet *The Face on the Barroom Floor* does plant the seeds of what was to come.

A parody of Hugh Antoine D'Arcy's 1887 tragic poem, the story involves an alcoholic vagabond who wanders into a saloon one evening. He begs drinks with the promise of entertaining the bar patrons with his life's story. He had once been a celebrated artist who fell in love with a woman "with eyes that petrified my brain, and sunk into my heart," a woman "for whom your soul you'd give, with a form like the Milo Venus, too beautiful to live." Yet she left him for another, and, to deepen his despair, she was sadly neglected by her new husband and died within a year. After a final drink, the artist commences to draw a chalk sketch of his love on the barroom floor. As he finishes, placing "another lock upon the shapely head, with a fearful shriek, he leaped and fell across the picture – dead."

Chaplin's Keystone film version follows the poem faithfully until nearly the end. The Tramp's clothes are much shabbier in the saloon sequence than usual, and the barroom scenes are handled in a relatively straight dramatic fashion. However, the flashback scenes of his fame and downfall as

an artist are played for comedy. He wears a tuxedo while painting, and actually seems to be rather inept in his craft. With a roomful of scantily clad female models, he paints a portrait of a plaster bust. When he paints the “fair-haired boy . . . who lived across the way” who will shortly steal his love, the resulting portrait is a grotesque caricature, and Charlie spends an inordinate amount of time attending to the fine details of the hair sprouting from the subject’s ears. The film veers away from the poem’s tragedy at the end. Upon completing the portrait of his lost love, in stick figure form, Charlie falls across the picture “dead – drunk.” A year later he again encounters the woman, bitterly badgering the “fair-haired boy” as they walk through a park with a biologically impossible parade of children in tow. Hence, in Chaplin’s filmic rendition of *The Face on the Barroom Floor*, both poetry and painting are held up for ridicule through the prism of a lowly slapstick comedy. While D’Arcy’s poem was clearly a work intended for the mass audience and seems comically sentimental today, Chaplin’s film may be seen as taking the pretensions of a high art form down a peg or two. The same is true for Chaplin’s tuxedo-wearing artist, totally incompetent in the viewer’s eyes, yet apparently celebrated by the “art crowd.”

The Vagabond (1916)

Far richer in its examination of the tension between artistic forms and comedy, *The Vagabond* presents Chaplin as an itinerant violinist who lives on the donations of passersby. In the opening scene, he vies for approbation with an oompah band outside of a bar, and the band wins. Later, wandering the countryside, he finds and rescues a young woman (played by Edna Purviance, Chaplin’s leading lady from 1915 to 1923, whose characters will hereafter be referred to as “Edna”) from the band of gypsies that kidnapped her as a child (a common conceit in period melodrama). Edna is enamored of the violinist, until an artist seeking pastoral inspiration happens upon their caravan. The artist immediately sketches Edna, foregrounding a shamrock-shaped birthmark on her upper arm. Charlie senses that he is losing Edna’s affections, and he resolves to learn how to paint. His cartoonish rendering of Edna on the side of the caravan does little to console her as she longs for the handsome artist to return. When a painting made from the artist’s sketch is presented in a large gallery, it is the subject of much ac-

claim. A wealthy art patroness is nearly overwhelmed when she sees the portrait; from the birthmark, she recognizes Edna as her daughter, stolen by the gypsies years earlier. That very day, the wealthy woman arrives with the artist in her limousine at Charlie and Edna's caravan. She "rescues" Edna, who is overjoyed at seeing the artist again. A heartbroken Charlie watches them drive away. Reportedly, Chaplin originally intended to have his character commit suicide. In the end, he settled on an improbable conclusion of having Edna experience an "awakening of the real love" and ordering the car to turn around, so that she could bring Charlie into her new life.

In an interesting departure from the depiction of the "artist" as seen in *The Face on the Barroom Floor*, Chaplin here presents himself as a serious musician, not a parody of one. Not only does this set up the conflicts to follow in the film, it also attempts to establish Charlie the tramp, and, by extension, Chaplin the filmmaker, as dignified and serious-minded about his craft. In fact, *The Vagabond* comes far closer to straight drama than any of Chaplin's previous films. From his soulful violin renditions to his absolute devastation at seeing a rare chance at human companionship slip away, Charlie's Tramp reaches for, and achieves, far deeper pathos than in any of his work to date. Only when he betrays his true gift for music and attempts instead to paint Edna on the caravan does he appear ridiculous and inept.

In *The Vagabond*, Chaplin actually examines the downside to being a purveyor of high art. If the high artist is not embraced by the arbiters of high culture, he becomes a starving artist. Here Charlie falls between two worlds. His classical violin renderings are doomed to failure when pitted outside of a saloon against popular culture in the form of an oompah band. Yet, for reasons of birth or circumstance, he does not have the respect and social acceptance enjoyed by Edna's artist.

The artist is presented in a surprisingly straightforward manner. He does not condescend to Charlie; he bows when they first meet and affably shakes Charlie's hand when he leaves with the sketch for what will become "The Living Shamrock." He has just wandered into the situation and is oblivious (as is Edna) that Charlie may have ambitions beyond being Edna's guardian. He seems as sincere about his art as Charlie is about his music. Beyond this, *The Vagabond* only gives us one moment of special insight into the character, while withholding another. When the artist arrives in the

countryside, but before he meets Edna, he is stuck for inspiration. He petulantly throws his pencil and sketchpad to the ground, somewhat like a spoiled child. However, we are denied the moment that would serve as a true measure of the character. In the final scene, when Edna is whisked away from Charlie in her mother's limousine, she is seated between the artist and her mother. At this point, the artist presumably sees a romantic future with Edna. Yet, at the moment of "the awakening of the real love," the camera pans from a two shot of Edna and the artist and reframes as a two shot of Edna and her mother. In our last view of the artist, he is concerned at Edna's distress, but has not yet comprehended the meaning of it. It is Edna's mother who orders the car to turn around to pick up Charlie. We never know the artist's reaction to Edna's epiphany.

***Behind the Screen (1916), The Immigrant (1917), The Kid (1921)
and A Woman of Paris (1923)***

These four films are taken together because the art theme, while present in sometimes subtle digs at artistic pretensions, is rather superfluous to the plot of the films themselves. *Behind the Screen* is a comic exploration of a day at a movie studio. Late in the film, a slapstick comedy and a period costume drama are filming in close proximity on the same stage. This was a common practice in the 1910s, when the lack of sound recording eliminated the possibility of the sound from one production interfering with another. The comedy troupe is trying out a new innovation, the pie fight. After getting plastered with custard, one performer stomps off in a huff, proclaiming "I don't like this high-brow stuff." As might be expected, the pie fight soon gets out of hand, and presently their royal highnesses on the adjoining set are covered in whipped cream. Artistic pretense is vanquished once more.

The Immigrant presents a fleeting parody of the artistic personality. Charlie and Edna have just finished a meal in a café when Charlie discovers that he has lost his money. He is terrified of a pummeling at the hands of a bullying waiter, when, suddenly, an artist spots the pair and decides that they would make perfect models. He pays their check and saves the day. The

artist is presented with flamboyant gestures, his hands constantly sketching portraits in the air when not forming a frame around his subjects.

The Kid also treats art tangentially, although with a bit sharper edge than in the two previous films. In this story, a woman (played by Edna Purviance) has become pregnant by an artist. He has abandoned her to have her child in a charity hospital. Despondent, she leaves the infant in the back seat of a limousine with a note attached, and then comes very close to committing suicide. She has second thoughts and tries to retrieve her child, only to find that the limousine has been stolen. The baby is abandoned by the thieves and found by Charlie, who raises him. The woman becomes a "great star" (although it is never established whether she is an actress or a singer), and the artist becomes a fashion designer, by today's standards more of a craft than an art. The two meet at a swank party and relive their regrets. However, each goes his or her own way. The woman devotes herself to charity work and discovers her child and Charlie. In the end it is Charlie the everyman, and not the artists, who has raised and nurtured the child. Charlie, and not the artist father, is invited into the woman's home to fill an undefined role in her life and that of the child.

A Woman of Paris features an artist character, but its inclusion in this study is due more to the nature of the film itself. As noted earlier, one way comedians attempt to be taken seriously as artists is to turn to drama. Chaplin's comedies incorporated increasingly dramatic themes from *The Vagabond* onward. With *A Woman of Paris*, Chaplin created a drama with comic touches in an attempt to launch Edna Purviance as a dramatic star. While the film did little for Edna, it did launch Adolph Menjou on a career that would last decades. To establish the serious tone of the film, and to credential himself as a serious dramatic artist, Chaplin opens with a title card that reads,

A Woman of Paris
A Drama of Fate
Written and Directed
by
CHARLES CHAPLIN
Featuring
EDNAPURVIANCE

Note that Chaplin's name is in a larger typeface and above Purviance's, and that Purviance is "featured," not "starred." The next card reinforces the solemnity of the proceedings.

TO THE PUBLIC

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I wish to announce that I do not appear in this picture. It is the first serious drama written and directed by myself.

CHARLES CHAPLIN

In point of fact Chaplin does appear in the film, in a quick walk-on as a heavily disguised railroad baggage-handler. However, the story belongs to a triangle formed by Marie (Purviance) who flees her unhappy life in a rural French town for the city of light, the artist-lover she left behind (Carl Miller, the same actor who played the artist-father in *The Kid*), and a wealthy Paris playboy (Menjou), who "remakes" the country girl into a kept "woman of Paris." Marie meets the artist by accident in Paris, the two renew their relationship, but a tragic misunderstanding causes the artist to commit suicide. (Chaplin finally got a suicide into a picture.) Marie leaves the playboy and returns to rural France, where she raises a family of foster children.

In *A Woman of Paris*, the profession of Marie's lover as an artist largely serves a rather conventional narrative purpose: he is poor and can't possibly support Marie's lifestyle. They are reunited in Paris when Marie and her society friends are slumming in the "Latin Quarter." She arrives at his apartment instead of the one across the hall where the party is going on. Looking around his drab surroundings, Marie comments, "I see you've become quite an artist," despite the fact that there are no paintings and nothing to suggest his vocation beyond an easel and the fact that he is wearing an artist's smock. She commissions him to paint her portrait in one of her best gowns, yet the very affluence that permits this is dependent on her continued relationship with the playboy, dooming any possible future with the artist.

Limelight (1952)

Limelight is Chaplin's definitive exploration of the concepts of high and low art, and also the only one whose complexity approaches that of *The Band Wagon*. The last vestiges of Chaplin's famous "tramp" character had appeared in *The Great Dictator* (1940), in which he had played the dual role of a Hitler-type dictator (Adenoid Hynkel) and a Jewish barber. The film's success would be Chaplin's last. The 1940s was a difficult decade for Chaplin, with personal scandal, allegations of being a Communist sympathizer (the worst sin imaginable in post-World War II America), and a disastrously-received film entitled *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), in which he played a man who married wealthy women only to murder them for their money. This character was as far from the Tramp as Chaplin could get, with trim moustache, impeccable grooming and the natty attire of a boulevardier. After the failure of *Monsieur Verdoux*, Chaplin correctly perceived that his once-adoring fans had, at best, turned their backs on him. At worst, they were in the process of forming a lynch mob (McDonald, Conway, and Ricci 21-22).

Hence, his next film was *Limelight*, a story set in the London of 1914 (the year Chaplin began his film career at Keystone). Chaplin plays Calvero, a once-great music hall comic whose most famous stage persona was that of a tramp comedian. By 1914, Calvero is an alcoholic has-been. Even when he sleeps and dreams of his glory days, his dream-act ends with the realization that he is playing to an empty house. Calvero discovers a would-be ballerina, Terry (played by Claire Bloom), attempting to commit suicide (one of Chaplin's obsessions reemerging) because she has suffered what is ultimately revealed as psychosomatic paralysis. As Calvero nurses Terry back to health, he has a dream in which she becomes part of his music hall act. In Calvero's world, though, the low art of slapstick comedy can never trump the high art of ballet. When Terry recovers, she is "discovered" and becomes a prima ballerina. Only through her insistence, Calvero is given a minor role as a background extra, a clown, in the ballet *Death of Columbine*. A theater impresario recognizes Calvero (just as he is about to fire Calvero for incompetence in the ballet) and stages a "comeback" show for him. Calvero reprises his most famous routines, including one in which he and a fellow old-time low comic (played by Chaplin's silent film contempo-

rary, Buster Keaton) play a lively piece on piano and violin, musical instruments more associated with high culture than low. At the end of his bravura performance, Calvero is stricken with a heart attack. He dies in the wings, watching Terry perform her ballet.

The conflict between low art and high art as represented by a music hall comic and a ballerina is at the core of *Limelight*. Terry and Calvero are from different generations and, in many ways, different worlds. Terry's incorporation into Calvero's stage act could only happen in his dreams, and Calvero is a failure as a performer in Terry's ballet. With Calvero's death at the end, the older generation gives way for the younger, and, unlike the ending of *The Band Wagon*, one is left with the distinct impression that low art and high art are ultimately incompatible.

Art Patrons

Although not as well-developed or consistent a theme as his depiction of the artist, Chaplin does occasionally present art patrons, and they are generally portrayed as stiff and rather foolish. Edna's mother in *The Vagabond* clearly considers Charlie, who rescued her daughter from the gypsies, as a filthy tramp who is beneath contempt. She practically holds her nose when she offers her hand to Charlie in "gratitude," and she attempts to pay him off for services rendered, a gesture Charlie contemptuously rejects.

A better, but brief, depiction of art patrons comes at the beginning of Chaplin's masterpiece, *City Lights* (1931). Released nearly two years after the film industry had converted completely to sound, *City Lights* is a silent film with recorded music and sound effects. The film begins with the dedication of a large and rather grotesque statue entitled "Peace and Prosperity." Before the wraps are taken off of the statue, the city's mayor, a female art patron, and the sculptor take turns at the microphone to speak about the glorious unveiling about to take place. Chaplin takes a shot at talking-picture technology here: the voices are mostly unintelligible and sound as though the speakers are talking through a kazoo. While the actual speech cannot be deciphered, it is apparent from body language, nose pointed skyward, and her sing-song rhythm that the art patron is quite overcome with the magnitude of the moment and her own participation that made it possible.

When the statue is unveiled, Charlie is revealed, peacefully sleeping in the lap of one of the three figures. A dirty tramp sleeping on the statue is the ultimate artistic desecration in the eyes of the assembled dignitaries, and they all begin to yell at Charlie. He awakens and scrambles off of the statue, but not before unintentionally sitting on the face of one of the figures and positioning himself beside the hand of another figure, making it appear that he is thumbing his nose at the crowd. In fact, Chaplin the filmmaker is thumbing his nose at those with artistic pretensions.

A final swipe at art patrons, although one based on reality in this particular instance, may be found in the Hitler-like dictator Adenoid Hynkel (played by Chaplin) in *The Great Dictator* (1940). Hynkel fancies himself a connoisseur and patron of the arts, but the art must glorify and immortalize him. Hence Hynkel Strasse is lined with perversions of famous statues: Venus de Milo (endowed with one arm) and The Thinker both give the Nazi salute. Hynkel commissions a bust and a portrait of himself. He poses for both simultaneously, and the artist and sculptor work frantically to do as much as they can in the mere seconds he is willing to give them. Hynkel also fancies himself a classical pianist, although most of his performances, to put it charitably, are a tad overwrought.

Conclusions

It would appear that the conflict between high and low art does indeed play out in myriad ways in the films of Charlie Chaplin, from the inept artist in *The Face on the Barroom Floor* to the underappreciated characters of violinist in *The Vagabond* and the music hall comic of *Limelight*. Additionally, Chaplin's films disparage art patrons as the elite, totally disconnected from the sufferings of the working classes, as pompous fools, or, in the case of *The Great Dictator*, as a mass-murdering tyrant.

Yet Chaplin sought the approval of actual art connoisseurs by presenting himself as a serious film artist, most notably with his dramatic effort *A Woman of Paris*, but also by pursuing increasingly dramatic storylines in his comedies. While many of his contemporaries constructed their films around fairly simple boy-meets-girl plots which inevitably ended with a romantic clench, Chaplin's mature work deals with more complicated relational themes, and the Tramp is often alone at the final fade out.

Additionally, Chaplin sought to establish credentials as a serious artist through music. Charlie in *The Vagabond* and Calvero in *Limelight* both play the violin. Chaplin himself played the violin a bit. Beyond that, though, Chaplin took composer credit on every one of his films with a soundtrack, and composed and choreographed the ballet *Death of Columbine* in *Limelight*. Chaplin's last creative endeavors, from the late 1960s to the early-1970s, involved the composition and recording of scores for several of his silent films. Even before he began composing film scores, Chaplin took pride in presenting himself, often out of his tramp costume, as a musician, composer and conductor. In the 1910s he had a studio photograph made with him appearing to play a cello. He admitted in the book *My Life in Pictures* "As for the cello – I could pose well with it, but that's about all" (116 – 117). During the same period, he founded the Charlie Chaplin Music Publishing Company, partially to handle his own compositions (Chaplin, *My Life in Pictures* 116 – 117). He may be seen in film clips from 1916 to 1957 acting as an orchestral conductor.

Finally, Chaplin himself became an art patron in his association with Granville Redmond. Chaplin met Redmond in 1918 and provided him studio space at his movie lot. In return, the hearing-impaired Redmond taught Chaplin sign language, which Chaplin hoped would enhance his pantomimic skills. During his stay at the Chaplin studio, Redmond also appeared in bit parts in several of Chaplin's films; he is the saloon owner in *A Dog's Life* (1918), an art-appreciating friend of the father in *The Kid*, and the sculptor of "Peace and Prosperity" in *City Lights* (Southgate 1659).

In the end, and despite the difficult times of the late 1940s through the late 1950s, Chaplin need not have worried either about his status as a comedian or as an artist. Among other lifetime accolades, he was recognized by his peers in the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences with special awards twice: in 1928 "for versatility and genius in acting, writing, directing and producing *The Circus*" (McDonald, Conway, and Ricci 189), and again in 1972 for "incalculable effect in making motion pictures the art form of this century" (Awards Database). In 1975, two years before his death, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II ("'Little Tramp' Dubbed Sir").

Prioritizing helps humans organize information and understand their world. We are bombarded by lists of the best and worst of practically everything imaginable, from oft-repeated canons of best artists to rankings of

worst movies. Of course, these lists tend to be highly subjective and they change over time. Similarly, we seem to prioritize entertainment by genre and form (e.g. "Film is art; television is furniture"). Unfortunately for those working in it, comedy is not often highly esteemed by the arbiters of cultural value. If a comic filmmaker places serious stock in the rather artificial standards of worth imposed upon his craft, he must either attempt to reconcile his work with high art, or he must abandon the form altogether. Fortunately for the many generations who have enjoyed and even revered his work, Charlie Chaplin was able to balance his desire for artistic recognition with the low-comedy world in which he worked.

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Notes

¹Editor's note: American audiences may recognize Fry as having portrayed the recurrent character of a British psychiatrist on the popular television series *Bones* (2005-).

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