

# Rereading *A Countess from Hong Kong*: Action, Speech, and Style in Charlie Chaplin's Final Feature

*A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967) was Charlie Chaplin's final film and one of only two that he directed but in which he did not star. It received, almost without exception, terrible reviews. Bosley Crowther's appraisal in *The New York Times* is sadly representative: 'If an old fan of Mr. Chaplin's movies could have his charitable way, he would draw the curtain fast on this embarrassment and pretend it never occurred' (1967). The picture has hardly fared any better in the Chaplin scholarship. Most volumes give the film only a few sentences, if they mention it at all. 'Clumsy, visually ugly, and leaden,' in Gerald Mast's description ([1973] 1979: 258). Or, in Dan Kamin's accounting, a 'sad postscript to Chaplin's career' (2008: 207). Yet in Chaplin's own opinion, it was one of the most accomplished works of his career – 'the best thing I've done,' as he told *The Sunday Times* (Wyndham [1967] 2005: 143). In some interviews, Chaplin compares it directly to *City Lights* (1931) and implies that it may even exceed the achievements of that film (Meryman [1967] 2005: 139). He was downright puzzled by the critical response, but he remained convinced that the critics were missing something important. 'At first, when I read the reviews I wondered. Then I went again [to see it] the next day, and regained all my confidence [...]. Soon they'll come to their senses,' he recounted (Wyndham [1967] 2005: 144, 143). Such open stances on his work are atypical for Chaplin, who rarely offered direct praise of his own films in interviews and was usually at least somewhat receptive to criticism. He would come to be deeply embarrassed by *A King in New York* (1957), for instance, considering it ultimately beneath his talents and refusing to even mention it in his 1964 autobiography. Still, most have taken Chaplin's statements around *Countess* simply as evidence of a decline in artistic judgment.

And yet, to view *Countess* in contrast to his other late works and in light of his silent oeuvre is to discover something surprising: Chaplin may actually have a case. *Countess* is undoubtedly a disarming, even alienating film: it presents an unusual admixture of broad farcical tropes and romantic conceits mixed with a pervasive cynicism and even a lurking despondency. And it certainly stands far apart from the other Chaplin comedies in the notable absence of the star performer's trademark physical virtuosity. Yet the film is hardly a work that demands to be held entirely separate from Chaplin's more famous body of work, considered only as a misdirected late-career effort or even forgotten entirely as many of his critics and commentators would prefer. For all its marks of difference, *Countess* is a work that is actively and productively in dialogue with Chaplin's prior career, a film whose achievements and contributions come more clearly into view when placed immediately against the films that came before it. In its departures from his previous sound-era pictures and its re-engagement with certain compositional approaches last used in his silent work, *Countess* is even arguably one of the most significant films of Chaplin's late career. It presents a highly self-conscious redirection in his style of filmmaking: at times it can seem

downright scornful of the verbose talkies Chaplin had made in the 1940s and 1950s, which are surreptitiously referenced and mocked throughout the picture. More importantly, *Countess* is a film that openly strives to rehabilitate aspects of Chaplin's silent-era technique, harkening back to forms of visual construction and topics of thematic concern that he had not significantly engaged for decades. Chaplin was perhaps not wrong to compare *Countess* with *City Lights*, even if his last film might never approach the stature of that masterpiece. If *City Lights* can be considered a kind of culmination of everything Chaplin had achieved during the silent era, *Countess* might be seen as a culmination of everything he had learnt since the turn to sound.

## Discrediting discourse: Chaplin's self-citation

Perhaps the most immediately surprising aspect of *Countess* is the openness with which it places itself in relation to Chaplin's other dialogue films. Chaplin's work in talking pictures is generally taken to mark a redirection in both his manner of filmmaking and his most salient thematic concerns. Walter Kerr, a great admirer of the silent comedies but one of the most skeptical respondents to the sound-era pictures, centers this transformation around Chaplin's seemingly newfound fascination with a particular register of lofty discourse in his films. In a review of *Limelight* (1952), he calls the film proof of 'Chaplin's image of himself as a philosopher', and he focuses especially on a line where Chaplin's music hall performer is told that 'to hear you talk no one would ever think you were a comedian' ([1952] 1971: 146, 148). Chaplin's dialogue, Kerr observes, 'speaks out its meaning in a series of logical equations' such that 'an inspired visual scenarist has become an indifferent playwright' (146). It is something of an overstatement: physical comedy would remain a salient feature of all of Chaplin's sound-era films, but it would be paired to a new mode of speechifying that typified his late career. Each of Chaplin's talkies prior to *Countess* would mark its politics or its philosophy quite openly, and often at some length: in the Barber's nearly five-minute oration calling for a world that is 'free and beautiful' in *The Great Dictator* (1940), in Verdoux's lengthy condemnation of militarism at the end of *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), in Calvero's constant turn to metaphysics and his explications on how 'desire is the theme of all life' in *Limelight*, or in King Shadov's anti-nuclear weapons platform and calls for peaceful nuclear power in *A King in New York* (1957). Chaplin's sound-era work won him many political enemies in Cold War America, but even some of his most sympathetic critics felt the new fascination with discursive dialogue presented an aesthetic problem. Mostly Chaplin's defenders would seek to sideline the role of politics and philosophy in these works as ultimately secondary to the films' reflections on Chaplin's Tramp persona or on the man himself. Hence André Bazin's defense that 'if *Verdoux* has a "meaning," why look for it in terms of some moral, political, or social ideology or other [...] when it is so easy to discover it in

Charlie?' ([1971] 2005: 105). Or Andrew Sarris' claim that Chaplin in his later years 'used the screen as his personal diary', making his late work 'a study less in decline than in modal metamorphosis' (1998: 151).

Yet in *Countess* the very idea that the film may be just another politics-heavy work from a director who liked to hear himself talk provides the set-up for the picture's first joke. We see Marlon Brando as the American diplomat Ogden Mears standing in his cabin on a docked luxury liner,



a man behind him sitting at a table with a typewriter on it. We know nothing of who they are or what the film will be about. And for those who have dreaded Chaplin's speechifying, Brando's first lines are not promising: 'Every statesman, every minister and diplomat should dedicate himself to the cause of world peace.' It looks for a moment as if Chaplin has gone off the deep end – now all his characters will do is spout political positions from the very first moments of the film. Yet as soon as Ogden stops, his words are contextualised when the man behind him begins typing: Ogden is dictating a speech. It is a significant relief. Chaplin may still be committed to espousing clear political positions in his films but at least the precious manner of Ogden's speechifying is not supposed to pass for actual dialogue in the same way that it did in parts of his previous films.

But Chaplin goes several steps further in this recontextualisation with the next line. Barging into the cabin as Ogden's associate begins typing, Harvey Crothers – Ogden's friend and advisor, played by Chaplin's son Sydney – chides Ogden for his words: 'Oh, Ogden, are you still at that speech? Now here we are China, Hong Kong and you're still trying to save the world. Let's get out of here and see the town.' Diegetically, the comment is one friend playfully harassing another. For anyone steeped in Chaplin's sound work, however, it is something surprising: a character making a statement of beliefs is being told to shut up in favour of simply having some fun. Even from what little we know of Ogden's address from the sentence he utters, it telegraphs as a synecdoche for all of Chaplin's speechifying; it is as though Harvey has single-handedly cast out some of Chaplin's most cherished filmic moments since the turn to sound.

Instead of speechifying, what is offered in this scene is a new variation on Chaplin's old technique of object transformation, what Kamin calls 'gags of confusion' where the 'underlying structure is a confusion of one thing with another' (2008: 55). More than a recurring element, such gags constitute a basic substructure to Chaplin's silent comedy, and they take on a remarkable number of variations in Chaplin's silent films: an object can be used like another (a wooden spoon is treated like a ukulele in *The Pawnshop* [1916]); a setting can be treated like a different one (a twelve-person choir in *The Pilgrim* [1923] turns the church into a courtroom in the mind of Chaplin's escaped convict);

a human body can be turned into an object (Chaplin pretends to be a statue in *The Circus* [1928]); an inanimate object can be turned into an animate one (Chaplin kisses an upturned mop like a girlfriend in *The Bank* [1915]); the inorganic can be made organic (Chaplin famously eats a boiled shoe in *The Gold Rush* [1925]); one form of action can be turned into another (Chaplin's repetitive factory motions become a kind of ballet in *Modern Times* [1936]); even a relationship between individuals can be turned into another relationship (Chaplin goes from encouraging his boy like a boxing coach during a fight to scolding him like a father when he notices that he is being watched in *The Kid* [1921]).<sup>1</sup> Chaplin's famous bit with the alarm clock in *The Pawnshop* is perhaps the quintessential example of his obsession with transformation in action: asked to consider purchasing an alarm clock, Chaplin proceeds to examine it is as a sick patient, a diamond, a can of sardines, and a mouth full of teeth, to name only a few of his improbabilities. Of course, the opening moments of *Countess* are nothing so intricate as this, but they operate on the same comic principle. Chaplin is here doing with language what he once delighted in doing with objects. What looks at first like normal spoken dialogue is transformed into a formal speech through the man who is typing; then, what looks like a speech to be taken seriously – a heartfelt statement of principle – is transformed into just another part of Ogden's job. What once would have been a serious statement in Chaplin's earlier dialogue films has now instead become a very serious kind of joke, not a testament to the importance of world peace but a reflection on the transmutability of speech itself. Political speech, treated solemnly in most of his other late films, is here capable of becoming as much a comic point of transformation as any silent-era prop.

Should the recalibration of speechifying in the film's opening moments not be clear enough, Chaplin takes pains throughout *Countess* to remind us that we are not operating in the same discursive mode as his other late films. Hence the ballroom sequence where he offers a kind of 'greatest hits' collection of ponderous statements from his previous talkies only to open them up to comic mockery. Chaplin's earlier dialogue pictures were frequently marked by their highbrow references to those whom Chaplin called 'the great abstract thinkers' (De Casseres [1920] 2005: 47): Schopenhauer in *Monsieur Verdoux*, Freud in *Limelight*, Marx in *A King in New York*. In the ballroom scene from *Countess*, Chaplin begins with what seems like another entry into this catalogue, appearing for a moment to align the interests of this film with his previous preoccupation with elevated discourse. 'I think dancing stimulates conversation. Wasn't it Aristotle who used to walk and lecture around the Lyceum and talk of the soul?' says a young socialite (Angela Scoular) with whom Ogden is dancing. But there is clearly something less serious in this instance of philosopher name-dropping: the girl is shaking her body violently as she shows off a bizarre dance move, her voice trembling from the contortions as she speaks in an outrageously affected Kensington accent. She looks and sounds like an overprivileged fool. There is not even a pretence of intellectual engagement – Aristotle is simply like a piece of jewellery to her, just something to show off. And so too is philosophising itself, even a kind of philosophising that intersects directly with Chaplin's own previous efforts in this area. Still doing her shimmy, she goes on to paraphrase one of Calvero's insights from *Limelight*, declaring, 'The soul is desire and [...] the whole of life is desire'. (In Calvero's formulation, it was 'Life is a desire, not a meaning'.) Moments later, she forces Ogden into replaying a



sequence from *The Great Dictator*. 'Do you believe in the immortality of the soul?' she asks. 'Well,' he begins to answer haltingly. She interrupts him to assert that she does and to explain her idea that 'When we die our souls go on until they're reborn again through love'. Structurally, it replicates an exchange between Hannah (Paulette Godard) and the Barber (Chaplin), which also culminates in grand pronouncements:

Hannah: Do you believe in God?

Barber: Well...

Hannah: I do. But if there wasn't one, would you live any different? I wouldn't.

It is a remarkable sequence of self-citations: Chaplin is revisiting his gravest offences in pontification, replaying as ridiculous what he once presented as heartfelt. It is less an act of remembrance than an act of cleansing, a re-marking of such conversations as hollow or self-indulgent. Chaplin's philosophical socialite gives herself away by starting almost all of her sentences with 'Daddy says', as in 'Daddy says [Aristotle] never had a clear idea of what the soul is. But Daddy has'. She doesn't have an original thought in her head – and, given the overlap between her deep thoughts and the dialogue of Chaplin's previous films, it seems to be a winking reference to the emptiness of the comedian's own prior ponderousness, as though Chaplin is distancing himself from his own previous approach to using speech within his films.

### Turning speech into action

Even beyond the pretensions with which he often burdened it, dialogue had frequently been an artistic problem for Chaplin. The dialogue-heavy portions of his late films were largely antithetical to the continual kinesis of his silent work, and most commentators saw in Chaplin's attempts at screenwriting an unseemly abandonment of his visual sensibilities. 'From being that genius who brought the form of the motion picture to its purest realization, Mr. Chaplin has moved to the logical opposite: he is no longer a man interested in making a *motion* picture at all,' Kerr writes in his *Limelight* review ([1952] 1971: 146; emphasis in original).

Siegfried Kracauer would call Chaplin's method in his full-sound films a reversion to 'dialogue in theatrical fashion' and declare that 'from the angle of the cinema this is undeniably a retrogression' ([1960] 1997: 108). Even Bazin, generally more favorably inclined to Chaplin's sound films than other critics, defends his use of dialogue mostly by identifying a redemptive purpose in its failures: 'I have seen *Limelight* three times and I admit I was bored three times. I never wished for any shortening of this period of boredom. It was rather a relaxing of attention that left my mind free to wander – a daydreaming about the images' ([1971] 2005: 132).

But speech in *Countess* functions quite differently than in Chaplin's other dialogue films, opening the door to greater flexibility in the treatment of action and visual composition. In most of Chaplin's sound films, the vital information within a scene is conveyed in the wording of the dialogue itself. Hence Kamin's description of Chaplin's penchant 'for telling stories in words' in the late works (2008: 192). Yet throughout *Countess*, speech is typically made to function in close coordination with the action of a scene or even placed in a subordinate position to that action; quite frequently it is even evacuated of its meaning to become simply another form of action in itself. The ruminations of the socialite, for instance, have no real content – they get no closer to any kind of truth simply by being articulated. They merely exist to make her seem interesting and attractive; they have a functional, rather than discursive, purpose. Even Ogden's opening speech can be seen as meaningless from a content perspective: for all its lofty language, it gets us no closer to understanding the world or how to live in it. The speech is primarily something Ogden has to do as part of his job as an ambassador. It doesn't mean so much as it functions – it marks him as a statesman, as someone who is supposed to think about things like world peace. In fact, the film's comic climax specifically revolves around a supreme instance of language doing a great deal without actually meaning anything: a marriage of pure convenience, perhaps the 'purest' of speech acts. Trying to get Natascha, the stowaway Russian prostitute played by Sophia Loren, legally into the United States, Ogden orders his valet, Hudson (Patrick Cargill), to marry her so she





can become a citizen. When the captain asks Hudson the pivotal question of the ceremony, the valet faints. 'It was [...] those drastic words, 'til death do us part', he later explains – that is, the idea that the content of the question might truly mean something and that his answer might be taken as a real statement of affection and commitment. But the marriage is action only, designed to end in divorce in a matter of days. When Hudson and Natascha ultimately answer yes, they are not vocalising an emotional truth; they are trying to pull off a scam. It is an extreme case of how speech functions in numerous instances throughout the film. The act of speaking is often meaningful, and the objective of speaking may be vitally important. But often the actual words uttered are the least important part of what is being communicated.

In fact, throughout the process of directing the film, Chaplin seemed markedly disinterested in anything that any of the characters had to say; he couldn't even seem to remember the actors' lines as he directed them. After Gloria Swanson visited the set, she recounted one of the most unusual forms of direction she had ever seen:

He tried to work out a way in which Loren could walk over to Brando, holding a glass. He paid no attention to dialogue. I heard him give only one dialogue direction. He may have written the words, but he could not remember them. 'So-and-so-and-so-and-so etcetera,' would be his delivery of an average line. The associate producer, Jerry Epstein, paced behind him, reading the correct lines from a script (Brownlow 1968: 505).

Chaplin's disregard for dialogue did not seem to come from a lack of memory or from old age. Swanson recounts that 'he looked fit as a fiddle. He was bouncing in and out of his chair' (507). It might seem to be a significant act of artistic oversight for a director in the sound era. Wes Gehring, for instance, sees it as evidence of a filmmaker who was never able to adjust to the world of dialogue, who continued to direct his actors as though they were in a silent film where the words they mouthed literally did not matter at all (1983: 163). But if Chaplin's directorial style in creating *Countess* seems similar to how one might direct a silent film, that is perhaps because Chaplin had found a way after more than thirty years to make this manner of direction bear fruit again. That is, Chaplin's insensitivity to dialogue is perhaps most productively considered as a matter of approach grounded in the idea that the specific wording that is used in a scene is often subordinate to – and sometimes even overshadowed by – the larger performative context in which the act of speech occurs. Frequently what most determines the characters' meaning in a given conversation is what Chaplin chose to focus on in his direction – how they hold a glass, how they cross the room, how they inflect their voice as

they say 'so-and-so'. What matters, in other words, is what they do, which includes what they mean to do through their speech.

Hence the scene in which Ogden informs Hudson of the arranged marriage he has devised. The specific information that Ogden conveys is of course vitally important to the plot: Hudson is to marry Natascha and he must be ready in ten minutes. Yet the interest of the scene has nothing to do with these points of data in particular and everything to do with how Ogden presents them, casually and matter-of-factly. He sits back in his chair, allows his eyes to wander distractedly, and speaks in a calm and unrushed monotone as he explains the operation. Ogden might as well be asking Hudson to press his suit. His tone and mannerisms do not change at all as he switches from telling Hudson of the plan to ordering himself a drink when a waiter arrives, as if going from one menial request to another. The scene does not 'speak out its meaning', as per Kerr's criticisms of the other dialogue films. It performs its meaning through action, allowing the words to exist in coordination with – and often in counterpoint to – the physical comportment and vocal inflections of the actor. The comedy comes not from any humor in the dialogue itself but from the utter disconnect between expression and meaning, and the real import of the sequence has nothing to do with the words Ogden uses and everything to do with how they are presented – Ogden, the privileged son of the richest oilman in the world, is giving his servant an order; and Hudson, no matter his personal reservations or trepidations, cannot disobey. By stripping his dialogue of the exclusive meaning-making function that he afforded it throughout much of his later work, Chaplin has returned bodily comportment and nonverbal communication – always a preeminent part of his own famous performances – to a primary place within his comedy, turning his sound-era filmic world back into one more reminiscent of the silent universe he left behind.

Ultimately this is a shift with significant compositional implications, opening up to Chaplin the possibility of treating speech as just another action in the frame and thereby presenting new opportunities for the deployment of simultaneous action, one of the defining visual hallmarks of his silent comedies. In *Cinema I*, Gilles Deleuze observes in Chaplin's filmmaking a unique insistence on what he calls an 'irreducible simultaneity' ([1983] 1986: 153), a purposeful refusal to visually isolate items or actions within his frame; Chaplin is always taking disconnected or even opposing actions, emotions, or situations and 'doing both together [...] without the one obliterating or diminishing the other' (171). It is, in Deleuze's words, a manner of composition 'so compressed' that it 'rebels against any montage' (153). One can recognise this as the basic compositional mode of a film like *The Rink* (1916), where multiple lines of narratively important action remain visible on-screen at once, or of the restaurant scene from *The Immigrant* (1917), where five separate characters remain on-screen together for minutes at a time, each pursuing divergent agendas. In the pivotal moment of that scene where the Tramp manages to steal another patron's tip to pay for his own bill, Chaplin allows the entirety of the action to unfold in a single take encompassing all of the relevant parties; part of the comedy of the sequence is seeing it all take place directly before us, one patron scheming and the other unawares. Though such sequences were a trademark of Chaplin's silent work, he generally abandoned these constructions in his dialogue films with the exception of a brief (and, importantly, wordless) scene in *The Great Dictator* where five characters sitting at a table together attempt to circumvent the rules of a

pact they've made by which the one who finds a coin baked into his cake must accept a suicide mission.

And yet, after a hiatus of nearly thirty years, this form of comic construction enters into Chaplin's filmmaking once again, this time with dialogue fully included in the comedy. The most prominent example in *Countess* is the scene where Ogden finally delivers his full speech to an assembly of reporters on the ship. It is the only instance of open speechifying in the film, yet the oration is actually at odds with the main action of the scene. We never fully pay attention to what Ogden is saying, as Chaplin asks us instead to focus on the action happening just behind him. As Ogden begins speaking, Harvey is uncorking a bottle of champagne, which spills all over a photographer at his side. Harvey goes to fetch a towel off-screen, where we know he will discover Natascha in hiding. When he returns, his expression in the background of the frame is of utter disbelief.



But Ogden, oblivious to all of this, goes right on giving his address. It is a classic Chaplin moment of two characters' conflicting but simultaneous perceptions of events being placed on-screen together, akin to the side-by-side depiction of the scammer and the scammed in the conclusion of *The Immigrant*. Only here, for the first time, the element of speech has been incorporated into the scene. In Ogden's version of events, he is a respectable government official delivering a perfectly standard speech about political morality. In Harvey's version, Ogden is a reckless adulterer spewing moral hypocrisies. The two perceptions, like the two friends, stand side-by-side yet worlds apart. Ogden's address plays a significant role in the comedy: the loftiness of the ideas he is expressing stands in ironic contrast to the inelegant accident and scandalous discovery happening behind him. But only by de-emphasising the word-by-word content of Ogden's speech is this feat of simultaneity made possible. Whereas before Chaplin might have wanted us to listen intently to the address as our primary source of meaning, here he asks us, quite literally, to care more about the action going on in the background. Turning dialogue into another element of action on-screen to be ignored or emphasised as needed, Chaplin has essentially found a way to incorporate speech – even political speech – into a more visually based and action-oriented mode of filmmaking.

### Reengaging style: Chaplin's lost and found

Chaplin's revaluation of speech was a liberating discovery, returning him at the end of his career to a filmic universe that resembles in significant ways the one he left behind in the 1930s. With his rediscovered ability to manipulate multiple simultaneous action lines, Chaplin is able to recreate some of his classic forms of framing and shot composition, long ago abandoned in his other dialogue films. One of the most prominent examples occurs when Ogden and Harvey pursue Natascha into a bar where one of her old johns

(Michael Medwin) has compelled her to have a drink, taking up seats on opposite ends of the couple to eavesdrop and interfere. It is a classic Chaplin shot: a symmetrical, frontal presentation of the simultaneous actions of multiple individuals, a visual echo of any number of silent-era shots in which several figures are carefully organised in a row in the middle ground looking to the camera – from the ten-person lunchtime sequence in *Behind the Screen* (1916) and the five-person restaurant shot at the end of *The Immigrant* to the two-person lunch and tea sequences in the jail house in *Modern Times* or the five-person wordless cake sequence in *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin often uses the arrangement of the mise-en-scène to echo and emphasise the organisation of the figures: in *The Immigrant*, for instance, the vertical beams on the back wall of the dining hall serve to segment each character's visual position, giving them a defined section of the plane in which to operate. Here, Natascha and



the john are framed within a decorative gold enclosure on the far back wall while two large decorative poles separate Ogden and Harvey from the couple on either end. The characters are physically divided in the frame in a spatial sequence of one figure / two figures / one figure, anticipating the interactions to come. As the john tries to woo Natascha, oblivious to the strangers sitting around him, Ogden and Harvey distract from either end, Ogden leaning obtrusively to one side to listen to their words and Harvey sprinkling water behind the man's ear and stealing his drink – a classic Chaplin gag. Here once again it is the visuals that count: the actions are tantamount and the specific words are entirely irrelevant to the total event, allowing for a division of attention and a visual de-centering that is difficult to establish when dialogue is over-privileged. Although Natascha and the john talk continually, the scene easily could have come from any of Chaplin's silent films – its humour is the humour of overlapping but discordant actions and perceptions and its symmetrical shot composition is arranged to encompass them all.

The analogs to Chaplin's silent-era works are more than a matter of visual framing, however; the connection is ultimately most powerful in the playful uncertainty that reappears within his filmic world. In contrast to the relative surety of his message-heavy dialogue films, Chaplin's early cinematic universe was a remarkably unstable one. As Kerr puts it, an 'awareness of instability in some way exhilarated him' (1975: 92) such that his greatest silent films would 'work over the theme of "instability" obsessively' (247). As if by way of announcing his return to this largely abandoned preoccupation, Chaplin's first major plot point in *Countess* turns on a classic but unexpected instance of his famous object transformations, this time 'Relationship / Relationship' to use one of Kamin's categories (68). Early in the film, as he tries to decide what to do for a good time in Hong Kong, Ogden learns that an associate of his father



who works in the city (Oliver Johnston) would like to see him and show him the town. He is, by Ogden's description, a 'venerable old gentleman,' and Harvey convinces his friend to feign the flu so that they can escape spending the day visiting the city's boring parks and museums. When the elderly gentleman appears, it seems to be even worse than Harvey imagines: he announces that he has three friends waiting in the lounge that he would like to introduce. Ogden agrees against Harvey's protests, but he informs his father's friend that he is unfortunately too ill to see the city's cultural landmarks. But that is not exactly what the old man had in mind. His three 'friends' turn out to be Russian prostitutes, and the 'venerable old gentleman' is essentially



acting as a pimp. Diegetically, it is a minor case of comic mistaken identity. Yet as the moment that starts the narrative of the film in motion, it is also a prominently placed example of a kind of comic transformation that has not played a notable role in Chaplin's filmmaking since his silent comedies, indicating that all might not be as it seems in the filmic world that is about to unfold.

There are numerous similar instances of mistaken identity (or even fungible identity) in the film, but ultimately the uncertainty presaged by this moment is more formal than narrative. For all the film's comic transformations, the plot is ultimately as predictable as that of most romantic comedies, the final pairing of Ogden and Natascha hardly ever in doubt. Yet Chaplin deliberately makes the film difficult to interpret insofar as we often cannot trust a given shot or scene to be forthcoming to us about its own content. This is a condition that was at the center of much of Chaplin's silent filmmaking, most typically conveyed through deliberately deceptive shot compositions wherein the position of the frame actually forces us to misperceive the actions it displays. In one instance in *The Immigrant*, for example, a shot seems to show Chaplin gesticulating over the side of an ocean liner as though vomiting; only when he turns around do we realise he has been fishing. Another instance in *The Idle Class* (1921) shows Chaplin from behind seemingly shuddering with tears after reading a note explaining that his wife has left him on account of his drinking problem; when he turns around, we realise he has simply been fixing himself another cocktail. After all but abandoning this mode in his sound-era work, Chaplin reintroduces in *Countess* a pervasive element of formal deception and misapprehension once again, created this time not through the frame but through his manipulations of the film's score. (It was actually an approach he originally considered using in *City Lights*, his first scored film.) Throughout *Countess*, Chaplin deliberately and consistently undermines our narrative expectations by problematising the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music. Early in the story, for instance, Chaplin scores the scene where the prostitutes first appear with an uptempo melody that is indicative of the

sudden and exciting turn in events. Just as it is confirmed that the prostitutes will stay, the music cuts out at what seems like an appropriate point in the scene. But then one of the prostitutes protests: 'No, no, don't turn it off. The music compliments the champagne.' Hudson, who was just seen reaching for some kind of knob, has turned the music off – it was coming from a radio in the suite all along. He turns it back on and a slower melody begins, again entirely appropriate to the mood of the scene. It is disconcerting enough the first time, but the gag happens several more times. In one instance, as Ogden and Natascha prepare for bed, the scene seems to be underscored with romantic music, but it turns out to be the radio again – Ogden unexpectedly reaches over to adjust the radio volume and the volume of the diegetic music adjusts as well; it adjusts again as Natascha plays with the knob until Ogden tells her to leave it alone. Later in the film, Chaplin begins a scene with a jazzy song that fades away. The socialite from the ballroom scene happens to be carrying a small radio; she examines it as if it is broken and then hits it until the song comes back at full volume, startling the people around her. She was the source of the music, and it didn't fade out in the scene – her radio simply stopped working.

On one level, the persistently uncertain place of the music is simply a kind of metanarrative joke, a game of hide-and-seek with the audience. But it also has a much more destabilising role. The constant return to the gag leaves the viewer with no choice but to hold the emotional register of each scene in a kind of aesthetic suspension: it is never clear until a scene has ended whether the music underscoring it, which often does significant emotional work, is to be trusted. It may be that going to sleep on their first night together has romantic undertones for Ogden and Natascha; or it may be that Ogden wants to use the radio to drown the noises coming from the bathroom – one sonic gag covering over another. Later, it may be that Chaplin for one of the few times in his career has chosen to use a pop-infused song to underscore a scene and call out some particular emotional resonance that only it can capture. Or it may be that the song is being played on a radio by a fool and he associates such music with such people. To disrupt the soundtrack's capacity to function within the film as Chaplin does is to unsettle the idea that it might prove narratively or emotionally relevant at all. Chaplin essentially compromises the right of the film to interpret itself to us. As with his use of the frame in his silent films, anything the soundtrack tells us might only be a tease, or anything it tells us might simply be wrong.

Of course, there is a significant difference between the formal uncertainties and diegetic transformations that mark *Countess* and those that mark Chaplin's silent work – and that difference is Chaplin himself. In the silent comedies, Chaplin's masterful comic performances offer not only humour but an important element of grace. If Chaplin's comic universe is premised on what Raoul Sobel and David Francis call 'the overthrow of order, the sudden inversion of all we take for granted' (1977: 218), his own presence within that universe serves an ameliorative function: he offers through his body a sense of elegance and ease that creates a kind of order within the chaos. According to Deleuze, the essence of a Chaplin performance is organisational: 'Charlie caught in the instant, moving from one instant to the next', providing 'finally, the line of the universe which he describes in this way' ([1983] 1986: 169–170). Hence, for example, the transformations of the alarm clock sequence in *The Pawnshop*. Chaplin's inspection of the clock is a riot of surrealistic responses to a simple

physical object: he examines it with a stethoscope, taps its joints, bangs on it with a hammer, applies a can opener, smells it, magnifies its innards like a jeweller, applies oil, extracts its gears like a dentist removing a tooth, smells it again, measures it, dumps all of its parts onto the counter, holds it up to his ear. Chaplin's disregard for the normal rules of our world is on full display, but so too is the degree to which his actions spring to life in full form, implying the existence of an order underneath the anarchy. Even more remarkable than the actions themselves is the rapid and seamless transitions between them; Chaplin's disparate gesticulations unfold as if they were all part of some single greater means of handling the object – one that seems perfectly sensible and natural to the logic of the Tramp's personal universe, even if it appears comically incomprehensible to our own.

Nothing in the performances in *Countess* approach anything like this level of physical poise and mastery. Loren and Brando will occasionally mimic aspects of Chaplin's old physicality, but they are traces only. More typical of their performances is a kind of jagged, physical uneasiness. Repeatedly they are surprised by a doorbell or a sudden knock on the door, scrambling desperately to hide themselves or to rearrange their clothes or their surroundings. They are captive to the elements of farce: fully reactive to the world, subject entirely to its forces and not elegantly above its limits. Yet *Countess* is able to maintain a kind of classic Chaplin balance between equipoise and chaos, depicting a world of transformation and misapprehension without sacrificing a sense of control and calm. It is an elegance and poise that still comes from Chaplin's presence in the film – only this time not as its star performer but as its director. That is, Chaplin's camera (with cinematography by Arthur Ibbetson) provides a degree of composure and grace to an otherwise unruly comic world. Operating for the first time in colour and in widescreen, Chaplin's fluid, stately directorial work stands in marked contrast to the haltingness and discomfort of much of the diegetic content. Though the film has pockets of fast cutting, *Countess* is filmed for the most part in some of the longest and most elegant takes of Chaplin's career, shots that regularly run forty-five seconds or even a minute at a time as a matter of course. There is, for instance, an early scene where Natascha and two other call-girls approach Ogden and his friends in a stately ballroom; here, the entire motion of walking across the dance floor is rendered as if it were part of a larger dance through the tracking of the camera, which holds the three women in the same symmetrical composition and central position in the frame. It is a simple arrangement but also striking in its visual control: it seems almost as if the dance hall is receding behind the call girls as they stand seemingly unmoving, the world spinning around them. The sequence is visually mirrored at the end of the film in a kind of obverse moment where Ogden approaches Natascha after she thinks he has left her, a move that could easily be accomplished in just a second or two with a simple cut but that takes a full thirty seconds to unfold in Chaplin's unhurried composition. Again, the camera tracks the protagonist's motions across the dance floor, but Ogden's procession is ultimately as staccato as Natascha's was fluid: his approach is constantly interrupted by dancers who momentarily dominate the frame as he waits for them to pass. Natascha's approach was confident and unencumbered; Ogden's approach is tortured at every turn. Yet in both instances Chaplin's camera remains unphased, navigating the spaces and figures of the filmic world with a kind of cinematic omniscience, always knowing exactly when to turn and pan and track. This is of

course almost always the condition of the camera in any film, but the relative scarcity of cutting in *Countess* serves to foreground this aspect of control. Chaplin does not ultimately mask or naturalise the way in which his camera reveals the story to us; we can see and follow where it means to draw our attention, and we can recognise the degree to which it can anticipate and arrange for us the narrative developments of the film – like a perfect spectator embedded in the action who always knows exactly where to look.

Chaplin's camera, in other words, demonstrates a degree of composure and control that is otherwise lacking in the film's chaotic comic world, organising the action on screen and turning frenzy into order. In one take just before the impromptu wedding that runs nearly a minute, for instance, Chaplin pans the camera back and forth across the space of Ogden's cabin to capture in one sequence the entrance of the Captain, his conversation with Ogden, the surprise ringing of the doorbell, Harvey's opening the door, Hudson's entrance, his conversation with the Captain and with Ogden, Natascha's entrance, and her conversation with all of the others in the room – rendering as visually planned and unrushed that which is diegetically intricate and fraught. Elsewhere in the film, Chaplin's camera captures entire routines as though they were a single uniform action. In one take that runs nearly a minute, Chaplin shows Ogden preparing for his bath in real time: entering his bedroom, removing his jacket and suspenders and shirt, conversing with Hudson, removing his shoes, putting on his robe, removing his pants, conversing with Hudson again – all as he moves about the room and all to the strains of a lilting classical waltz, as though this series of mundane actions were a significant aesthetic whole. It is a kind of visual analog to the extraordinary actions of the *Pawnshop* sequence, a diversity of gestures and movements explicitly rendered as a single unified piece. And it is a confirmation that the turbulent comic exigencies of the film will always be artfully controlled and gracefully presented. It is a new direction in Chaplin's visual approach but also an extrapolation from his core visual concerns. Chaplin insisted throughout his career that 'the placing of a camera' should be regarded as 'the basis of cinematic style,' defining it as 'cinematic inflection' itself (1964: 151). If this working method was often dismissed by critics as cinematically uninteresting in his silent-era direction, Chaplin makes a renewed and newly impassioned case for its vitality in the authoritative long takes of *Countess*, which carefully organise and compose for us an otherwise uncomfortable diegetic world.

### Remembering the Tramp, rediscovering darkness

Yet if *Countess* is one of the most visually elegant films Chaplin had made in years, it is also one of the darkest. Its darkness is not the flagrantly macabre mode of *Monsieur Verdoux* or the self-pitying tragic register of *Limelight* but a darkness of despair and desperation, a thematic link to the kind of destitution that dominated Chaplin's imagination in his silent work. For all the glamour of the shipboard world, the film's production design is more in line with the poverty-stricken universe that defined Chaplin's filmmaking in the 1920s than almost anything he had made since. Beginning with the First National shorts, Chaplin's filmic world in that decade becomes noticeably grim; in Kerr's terms, it is a world where dirt has become 'real dirt, hard, soiling, transparently uncomfortable' and where 'the comedy and a certain harshness of fact are being welded' (1975: 166). It seems a long way from the sparkling dream kingdom of the ocean liner in *Countess*, yet that luxurious realm

is bookended by jarring reminders of the destitute spaces of the world that used to be Chaplin's filmic home. *Countess* opens in a brothel where tourists can pay to 'dance with a countess for half a dollar' – it specialises in refugees from the former Russian aristocracy, and presumably they'll do a good deal more than dance for some extra cash. There is nothing prurient about the scene, but it is as hopeless as anything Chaplin ever put on film. The girls at best look despondent and at worst emotionally dead; the johns look lonely and desperate, some pitifully so and some chillingly so. As they spin across the dance floor in awkward circles, they become a paradoxical crowd that is made up completely of isolates – as though the whole dance hall from *The Gold Rush* were filled only with versions of the Tramp. This is the world that Natascha comes from, and it is the world to which she returns, briefly, at the film's end. Despite Ogden's intimations that he will take care of her, Natascha does not trust him; she risks her life diving off the ocean liner when they reach port in Hawaii. Alone on the island, she has a plan to meet up with Ogden again, but to get to him she takes one of the strangest modes of transportation that Chaplin would put on film. Freezing and wet, she hitch-hikes alone in a dirty alleyway. The only ride she can find is on the flatbed of a tractor trailer carrying a huge, filthy piece of construction equipment. The jarring image of Sophia Lauren sopping wet on the back of a flatbed – and the complete naturalness with which she accepts this strange ride, grateful for any help at all – is a shocking reminder of how much her world is not the elegant realm of the ship. This world of dirt and discomfort is the one that she knows best.

And it is also the world that Chaplin knows best. He has situated himself again in the universe of stark contrasts between rich and poor that animated so much of his best work, from *The Kid* to *City Lights*, and he has populated that universe with the characters that have always been most familiar to him – not the political operators of *The Great Dictator* or the businessmen of *Monsieur Verdoux* or even the entertainers of *Limelight* and *A King in New York*. He is back to something much more elemental: people desperate from poverty and, ultimately, people desperate from wealth.

Chaplin pulls no punches. Natascha is not a prostitute with a heart of gold, and she is not a fallen woman searching for redemption. She is a prostitute whose former boyfriend was a violent gangster, who admits she is used to going hungry and sometimes sleeping on the street, who shows no particular kindness anywhere in the film, and who has no interest in redemption of any sort other than the most material kind. She wants to get to America, and she doesn't seem to care who she has to compromise in order to do so. Within her first scene she blackmails Ogden with the threat of a sex scandal if he reports her, and she ends the film by risking her life jumping off the boat even though Ogden does not want her to do it. She is perhaps closest to Goddard's Gamin from *Modern Times*, and Chaplin in fact wrote an early draft of the script in 1936 with the intention of putting Goddard in the leading role. Like the Gamin, Natascha is driven by her material needs and her survival instinct, but she has a noticeably harder edge than her plucky predecessor. She has none of the Gamin's regard for domestic niceties and none of her happy resolve; she is too far gone for that. And in this sense, she is the perfect mate for Ogden, who is just as desperate emotionally as Natascha is materially. He is the son of the wealthiest oil man in the world. Money is nothing to him, and he uses it even more casually than the millionaire in *City Lights*. But for all his wealth, he seems to take no happiness in life. He is on the verge of divorce from a wife he never sees. He goes out for wild nights on the town but wakes up exhausted and disgusted at himself. He seems trapped in his profession, reduced to giving passionless speeches to uninterested reporters. Harvey tells him at one point that he is being considered for secretary of state, but in fact he gets a glamourless ambassadorship to Saudi Arabia instead. We get the sense that Ogden comes to love Natascha – or think that he loves her – not because of anything she does or says but because she is something different that he cannot predict. He cannot really fathom her desperation, just as she cannot really fathom his languor.

Hence the dynamics of one of the few quiet moments that Ogden and Natascha share in the film. Here, as they play chess together one morning, what should be a tender conversation is something closer to an exercise in incom-





prehension. Ogden asks Natascha the details of her background – what happened after her parents died, whether she loved the aging gangster who took her in and became her lover when she was fourteen. Natascha's answers and her tone are matter-of-fact. She dismisses the idea that she loved this man, a pat way to ameliorate a harsh reality: she was young and alone and, in her words, this 'desperate' man was 'very kind' to her. Her descriptions are transactional. Yet for Ogden this is a delicate matter: he pauses and contemplates her words in a way we have not seen before in the film, his tone is quiet and almost consoling as he speaks to her. The difference in registers is palpable, and it speaks to a wider gap in their experiences and outlooks that is never quite reconciled in the film. Natascha and Ogden are actually quite jarring as protagonists of a comedy in this respect, a point which seemed to translate into so many of the poor reviews that Brando in particular received. It seems no coincidence that Ogden's most direct statement of affection is also one of the most criticised moments of Brando's performance. 'You must believe me when I tell you that this is the first real happiness I've known', he says to her near the end of the film – but the inflection is flat and the tone is almost angry. It is emblematic of the broader ways in which Brando seems divorced from the film; there is no life in many of his line readings and little energy in his relationship with Natascha. In the words of Brendan Gil's review, 'Mr. Brando often gives the impression of being revolted by having to work in movies at all' (1967: 152). But the uncomfortableness of Brando's performance is arguably a function of the character, as Chaplin was at pains to repeat during interviews. 'They picked on such puerile things to say', he observed of the film's critics. 'Brando is wooden' – but that's just the whole point!' (Wyndham [1967] 2005: 143).

*Countess*, in other words, is not a typical comedy, and if Crowther declared Brando's performance to be without any 'real glimmers of comic talent or spirit' (1967) that is perhaps because he was looking for the wrong kinds of comic features. *Countess* can be said to participate in what Kerr identifies as the 'philosophical premise for dimensional comedy' that defined Chaplin's greatest silent works, 'permitting us to see and to feel what is realistically distressing about life through the magnifying glass [...] of humor' (1975: 171). Chaplin, in other words, would learn in his silent films to take issues of emotional and material desperation and present them in comic form. Philosophically, it is essentially the premise on which *Countess* operates: a study of two self-interested and in many ways traumatised individuals composed around farcical tropes and calling itself a comedy. In the total context of the film, Brando is actually quite perfect for the part. Ogden is a diplomat, perfectly willing to smile and be basically polite, but in Brando's performance he seems almost as drained as the prostitutes in the opening dance hall, all of whom are also quite willing to smile lifelessly for the people that they meet. Ogden's supposed love for Natascha is more an act of working through demons that have nothing to do with her – his disintegrating marriage, his troubled relationship to his inherited wealth, his stagnated political career – than it is an emotionally honest response to anything she has said or done. Hence the difficult delivery of that climactic declaration of affection, and hence the troubling conclusion of the film. *Countess* ends with what looks to be a triumphant reunion and a loving dance between Ogden and Natascha; Ogden has left his wife and he returns to the hotel ballroom where Natascha is sitting by herself. Yet it is hardly an unequivocal triumph of love in Chaplin's construction. This

scene of dancing has been preceded by three others in the film: one in the opening brothel, one where Ogden and Harvey are dancing with the Russian prostitutes, and one on the ocean liner where Natascha is recognised by a former john. Each dance has been tinged by prostitution – by something that might look from the outside like love but is nothing but an exchange of loneliness and money. There is no reason to believe that the ending dance is any different. Ogden seems not even alive enough to the world around him to notice that Natascha seems to have little interest in him beyond his wealth. Chaplin does not judge her for this: her problems are real, and marrying Ogden is a real solution. But neither does he sentimentalise it. In Chaplin's description, 'It's a very sad story. This man who leaves his icicle of a wife for a girl who's a whore. I think the end, when they're dancing, is tragic' (Wyndham [1967] 2005: 144).

Chaplin was endlessly frustrated by critics' stunned reactions to his last film. 'The reviews of my pictures have always been mixed,' he explained. 'But what shocked me about the English reviews of the *Countess* was the fact that they were all unanimous [...]. I thought the whole world was going to go mad over it!' (Wyndham [1967] 2005: 143). But they were arguably looking at different films. Critics and scholars then and now seem, when they look at the film, to be looking for the Tramp. An unsigned review called 'Time to Retire' in *Time* magazine was more telling than it perhaps meant to be in its central statement: '*Countess* is bad enough to make a new generation of moviegoers wonder what the Chaplin cult was all about' (1967). But the 'Chaplin cult' was always based on the Tramp. Between 1915 and 1940, Chaplin made only one film without the character (or an obvious substitute like the Barber in *The Great Dictator*), and he spent the subsequent years making films that pointed backwards to his great creation, from the anti-Tramp protagonist of *Monsieur Verdoux* to Calvero the 'Tramp Comedian' in *Limelight* to Shadov the media star in *A King in New York*. Yet, as Eric Rohmer points out, *Countess* cannot be properly seen through this lens. This is not a film where one can 'explain Chaplin by Charlie and his myth,' as he says (1972: 106; original translation). For those who think of Chaplin primarily in terms of the Tramp, there is hardly anything on offer in the picture. It presents a cold, darkly cynical world that is elegant in its construction but deceptive in its presentation. But to Chaplin, this is the filmic world in which the Tramp had always lived, though he was no longer in residence by 1967. Had Chaplin produced *Countess* in the moment when it was first written – in 1936, four years before *The Great Dictator* – it would have been his first talkie, and it would have come at a moment when his very ability to survive as an artist in the sound era was still in question. There is every reason to believe that had he made it then, he would have wanted the picture to serve as a summation of what a sound film in the Chaplin style might properly look like absent his famous Tramp. It would take him more than thirty years to make it, but *A Countess from Hong Kong* would finally be that film.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Kamin has provided a detailed accounting of this kind of transformational gag humor across Chaplin's films, from which a number of the preceding examples are drawn. For a more complete account of the role that these transformations play in Chaplin's comedy, see Kamin, 56-72.