Artistry in Motion

Charlie Chaplin’s Comedies in Historical Perspective

Lecturer: PD Dr. Stefan L. Brandt, Guest Professor

Room and time: Unterrichtsraum, Tuesdays 16-18

Course number and type: 124262 – Arbeitsgemeinschaft im Bereich “Cultural and Media Studies”

First session: October 11, 2011

Course description: This seminar deals with one of the greatest male screen legends of all time, Charlie Chaplin. “Chaplin was not just ‘big,’” one of his biographers notes, “he was gigantic” (Sieff, 2008). One of the most distinguished and influential filmmakers and actors of the foundational years of cinema, Chaplin was also a most controversial director, in part due to his life-long involvement with pacifist, progressive and left-leaning causes. The course will trace Chaplin’s career from the early days at Keystone and his co-founding of the film studio United Artists to his break with the silent film in the 1930s and his banishment from America in the late 1940s. We will deal with Chaplin’s extraordinary merits in the visual aesthetics of silent cinema and analyze his unusual acting techniques which culminated in the creation of his screen persona ‘The Tramp.’ In what way was the genre of the American film comedy (especially with its variations slapstick and screwball) influenced by Chaplin’s cinematic works? How did Chaplin as a free-thinking, independent director reflect 20th-century American history? Films to be discussed in class include The Kid (1921), The Gold Rush (1925), City Lights (1931), Modern Times (1936), The Great Dictator (1940), and Monsieur Verdoux (1947).

Credit requirements: I. Regular attendance & participation in discussions, at least nine entries in the discussion forum (1/3); II. Oral presentation as part of an expert group, with 2-page handout & fact file (1/3); III. Final paper of 8-10 pages.

Deadline for Final Papers: Friday, January 13, 2012. Note: There is no extension of this deadline! Please throw papers into the institute mailbox or send them in postal form. Do not send papers via email.

Syllabus

Oct. 11 Introduction – Slapstick and the Birth of the American Film Comedy
    Basic texts (recommended):
    Fact file on Charlie Chaplin.¹

Oct. 18 The Keystone Years
    Main examples (required):
    Making a Living (1914, dir. Henry Lehrman, prod. Mack Sennett). Watch online!
    The Tramp (1915, Charles Chaplin, prod. Jess Robbins). Please watch online!
    Additional materials (optional):

Oct. 25 The Mutual Years
    Main example (required):
    The Immigrant (1917, dir. Charlie Chaplin, prod. John Jasper). Watch online!
    Additional material (optional):

Nov. 1 No class!
    Relax and enjoy!

Nov. 8 The Films for First National
    Main example (required):
    A Dog’s Life (1918, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online!

¹ All main texts for this course are available at Moodle: https://moodle.univie.ac.at/.
Nov. 15  Chaplin’s First Major Success  
Main example (required):  
*The Kid* (1921, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in several parts.  
Additional material (optional):  

Nov. 22  The Era of United Artists and the Film Chaplin Wanted to Be Remembered For  
Main example (required):  
Additional material (optional):  

Nov. 29  Social Criticism, Tragedy and Loss  
Main example (required):  
*The Circus* (1928, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in eight parts.  
Additional material (optional):  

Dec. 6  Illusion and Irony in Chaplin’s ‘Stroke of Genius’  
Main example (required):  
*City Lights* (1931, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in six parts.  
Additional material (optional):  

Dec. 13  The Red Decade – The Great Depression and Anti-Capitalism  
Main example (required):  
Additional material (optional):  

Jan. 10  The Battle against Fascism and Totalitarianism  
Main example (required):  
*The Great Dictator* (1940, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in eight parts.  
Additional material (optional):  
Adrian Daub, “‘Hannah, Can You Hear Me?’ Chaplin’s *Great Dictator,* ‘Schtonk’, and the Vicissitudes of Voice” (2009), 451-482.

Jan. 17  Black Comedy and the Postwar Years  
Main example (required):  
Additional material (optional):  

Jan. 24  Exile and Revenge  
Main example (required):  
Additional material (optional):  
John Sbardellati and Tony Shaw, “Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI, and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America” (2003), 495-530.