The Gentleman as Tramp

Charlie Chaplin and the Birth of the American Film Comedy

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

Room and time: AR-A 1093, Tuesdays 16-18

Course type: B.A./Lehramts-Seminar

Modules: Bachelor LKM M 2.2 Medienanalyse / Lehramt GHR 5.1 Textsorten

First session: April 5, 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 one of the most controversial ones, in part due to his life-long involvement with 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.’ How was the genre of the American film comedy (especially slapstick and screwball) influenced by Chaplin’s cinematic works? How did Chaplin as a free-thinking, independent director inspire other artists? 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).

Grading: For 5 or 7 CP: regular attendance, participation in discussions, at least nine entries in the discussion forum (1/3), oral presentation as part of an expert group OR short presentation of a keyword (1/3), and final paper (8-10/ 13-15 pages) (1/3). For 2 CP: attendance, participation in discussions, at least seven entries in the discussion forum (50%), oral presentation as part of an expert group OR short presentation of a keyword (50%).

Deadline for Final Papers: Friday, August 31 (Wednesday), 2011. Note: There is no extension of this deadline! Please throw papers into my box (2nd floor of the AR-H building) or send them in postal form. Do not send papers via email!

Syllabus

April 5  Introduction – Slapstick and the Birth of the American Film Comedy
           Basic text (recommended):

April 12 The Keystone Years
           Main examples (required):
           Making a Living (1914, dir. Henry Lehrman, prod. Mack Sennett). Watch online!
           Kid Auto Races at Venice (1914, Henry Lehrman, prod. Mack Sennett). Please watch online!
           Additional materials (additional):

April 19 The Mutual Years
           Main example (required):
           The Immigrant (1917, dir. Charlie Chaplin, prod. John Jasper). Watch online!
           Additional material (optional):

April 26 Easter Holiday (Ostern)
           Relax and enjoy!

May 3 The Films for First National
           Main example (required):
           A Dog’s Life (1918, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online at YouTube!
May 10  Chaplin’s First Major Success
Main example (required):
The Kid (1921, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in several parts at YouTube or check out overnight at the Sekretariat (room AR-K 222/1, Anne Weber).
Additional material (optional):

May 17  Slapstick and the Sensation Comedy – The Case of Harold Lloyd
Main example (required):
Safety Last (1923, dir. Fred C. Newmeyer, Sam Taylor, prod. Hal Roach). Watch online at YouTube!

May 24  The Era of United Artists and the Film Chaplin Wanted to Be Remembered For
Main example (required):
The Gold Rush (1925, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in five parts at YouTube or check out overnight at the Sekretariat (room AR-K 222/1, Anne Weber).
Additional material (optional):

May 31  Social Criticism, Tragedy and Loss
Main example (required):
The Circus (1928, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in eight parts at YouTube or check out overnight at the Sekretariat (room AR-K 222/1, Anne Weber).
Additional material (optional):

June 7  Illusion and Irony in Chaplin’s ‘Stroke of Genius’
Main example (required):
City Lights (1931, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in six parts at YouTube or check out overnight at the Sekretariat (room AR-K 222/1, Anne Weber).
Additional material (optional):

June 14  Pentecost Holiday (Pfingsten)
Relax and enjoy!

June 21  The Red Decade – The Great Depression and Anti-Capitalism
Main example (required):
Modern Times (1936, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in nine parts at YouTube or check out overnight at the Sekretariat (room AR-K 222/1, Anne Weber).
Additional material (optional):

June 28  The Battle against Fascism and Totalitarianism
Main example (required):
The Great Dictator (1940, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in eight parts at YouTube or check out overnight at the Sekretariat (room AR-K 222/1, Anne Weber).
Additional material (optional):

July 5  Black Comedy and the Postwar Years
Main example (required):
Monsieur Verdoux (1947, dir. & prod. Charlie Chaplin). Watch online in twelve parts at YouTube or check out overnight at the Sekretariat (room AR-K 222/1, Anne Weber).
Additional material (optional):
Claudia Clausius, “Inversion in Monsieur Verdoux,” from The Gentleman Is a Tramp (1989), 143-158.

July 12  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.