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Mythologies

Selected and translated from the French
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The Poor and the Proletariat

Charlie Chaplin's latest gag has been to transfer half of his Soviet prize into the funds of the Abbé Pierre. At bottom, this amounts to establishing an identity between the nature of the poor man and that of the proletarian. Chaplin has always seen the proletarian under the guise of the poor man: hence the broadly human force of his representations but also their political ambiguity. This is quite evident in this admirable film, *Modern Times*, in which he repeatedly approaches the proletarian theme, but never endorses it politically. What he presents us with is the proletarian still blind and mystified, defined by the immediate character of his needs, and his total alienation at the hands of his masters (the employers and the police).

For Chaplin, the proletarian is still the man who is hungry; the representations of hunger are always epic with him: excessive size of the sandwiches, rivers of milk, fruit which one tosses aside hardly touched. Ironically, the food-dispensing machine (which is part of the employers' world) delivers only fragmented and obviously flavourless nutriment. Ensnared in his starvation, Chaplin-Man is always just below political awareness. A strike is a catastrophe for him because it threatens a man truly blinded by his hunger; this man achieves an awareness of the working-class condition only when the poor man and the proletarian coincide under the gaze (and the blows) of the police. Historically, Man according to Chaplin roughly corresponds to the worker of the French Restoration, rebelling against the machines, at a loss before strikes, fascinated by the problem of bread-winning (in the literal sense of the word), but as yet unable to reach a knowledge of political causes and an insistence on a collective strategy.

But it is precisely because Chaplin portrays a kind of primitive proletarian, still outside Revolution, that the representative force of the latter is immense. No socialist work has yet succeeded in expressing the humiliated condition of the worker

with so much violence and generosity. Brecht alone, perhaps, has glimpsed the necessity, for socialist art, of always taking Man on the eve of Revolution, that is to say, alone, still blind, on the point of having his eyes opened to the revolutionary light by the 'natural' excess of his wretchedness. Other works, in showing the worker already engaged in a conscious fight, subsumed under the Cause and the Party, give an account of a political reality which is necessary, but lacks aesthetic force.

Now Chaplin, in conformity with Brecht's idea, shows the public its blindness by presenting at the same time a man who is blind and what is in front of him. To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see: thus, at a Punch and Judy show, it is the children who announce to Punch what he pretends not to see. For instance, Charlie Chaplin is in a cell, pampered by the warders, and lives there according to the ideal of the American petit-bourgeois: with legs crossed, he reads the paper under a portrait of Lincoln; but his delightfully self-satisfied posture discredits this ideal completely, so that it is no longer possible for anyone to take refuge in it without noticing the new alienation which it contains. The slightest ensnarements are thus made harmless, and the man who is poor is repeatedly cut off from temptation. All told, it is perhaps because of this that Chaplin-Man triumphs over everything: because he escapes from everything, eschews any kind of sleeping partner, and never invests in man anything but man himself. His anarchy, politically open to discussion, perhaps represents the most efficient form of revolution in the realm of art.