

The Comedy of the Great Depression: *On Chaplin's Modern Times*

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Abstract

The research article discusses, on various levels, the relationship between Power and authority, on the one hand, and jokes, comedy and laughter, on the other. By way of analyzing the structural relation between critical comedy and (Marxist) critique of capitalism, the first section of the article draws out the difference between ideological use of laughter, relying on mechanisms of mediation and distanciation, and the use of laughter in comedy. Against this backdrop, section two of the article illustrates and further develops the initial thesis by offering an interpretation of some of the key aspects of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The concluding section focuses on the conceptual status of the figure of the Tramp and on the paradoxical structure of Chaplin's "silent talkie."

Key Words: belief, capitalism, Chaplin, comedy, communism, ideology, Kierkegaard, Lacan, Marx, power, rest

Dry, All Too Dry for Comedy?

Kierkegaard notes at one point that Power should be seized by whoever comes up with the best joke. If for a brief moment we consider the statement independently of its specific context, we can say that it is based on a brilliant premise that Power and comedy belong together, forming a privileged couple. This idea cannot but appear totally bizarre, defying common sense and running counter to the general opinion. Any recourse to general opinion, of course, is a most delicate matter. The notion of general opinion presupposes a naïve Other of bizarre beliefs who upon a closer look turns out to be but an empty place, an apparition, a fantasy which I bring into being so as to be able to account for my "enlightened" position – a phenomenon that Robert Pfaller analyzed under the concept of "illusions without owners".¹ But this particular opinion which draws a clear line of demarcation between comedy and power, placing them in a relationship of maximum distance, is perhaps a special case; a special case of a general opinion that finds its echo in infamous names of a Bakhtin or Eco. Hence, the subject of this general opinion, or common perception, "the subject supposed to be naïve," is nevertheless not entirely nameless, but rather authorized by infamous names from the arsenal of modern theories of comedy. The exercise of Power is not considered to be a laughing matter; Power is not to

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Cf. Pfaller 2014.

be trifled with. Comedy and Power effectively form the most radical opposition. Seriousness enthrones, laughter dethrones, Power is endowed with an aura of consecration, of a codified and cultural use of the voice, while laughter appears to be chaotic and untamable. Hence, laughter places the subject at a distance to authority, laughter eludes Power's grasp, doing away with its sublime aura, undermining it, and hence presumably liberating us from the grasp of its authority.²

Kierkegaard's quip seems in line with such a conceptualization despite not being limited to a mere call to an overturning of Power, to its bare sublation, but rather positing laughter as the criterion of the constitution of a new form of Power, one that remains irreducible to the seriousness which pertains to the Law and its letter, a witty Power, a Power of wit, the wit itself in Power.³ Is the installment of wittiness a sublation of Power, its passage into another quality, leaving behind the heteronomous legalistic Universality, while opening up the space for the onset of a free and autonomous subjectivity? Or does the joke aim at the opposite meaning, so that Kierkegaard's quip should be read along the lines of Adorno, this great reader of Kierkegaard? We could claim that this seemingly crazy and bizarre criterion of Power always already *is* the internal condition of its functioning, the ideological lever of its efficiency. Hence, the gist of the joke wouldn't lie in the maximum distance, but rather in a point of an impossible encounter of the two realms, an encounter of the joke as the epitome of contingency, arbitrariness and non-functionality, on the one side, and Power as the ultimate embodiment of functionality and necessity that pertain to the rule of Law, on the other. In this case, Kierkegaard's point would be the direct opposite of the one I have proposed above. Power legitimizes itself with necessity that pertains to the Law, or with eternal privileges that are rooted in transcendence; but despite all of this, Kierkegaard seems to imply, Power is just as arbitrary, occasional, haphazard and contingent as the joke itself. Once we elevate the joke into a criterion of Power, we immediately render open its decentered, heteronomous character; we render open the fact that Power is dependent on a

2 For a critique of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* see Dolar (2012 [1986], pp. 157-158) and Zupančič (2008, pp. 3-5). The most succinct and condensed critique of Bakhtin's theory of "carnival culture," of his notion of laughter which supposedly eludes Power's grasp, thus remaining a mighty weapon in the hands of the oppressed, was proposed by Todd McGowan (2014, p. 203): It was Bakhtin's bad luck that he died in 1975, missing by a hair De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). Had he seen it, he would surely be led to revoke his ideas.

3 Kierkegaard uses the German word *der Witz*, "joke." *Witz haben* means "to have Spirit": the joke, or wit, is rooted in spirit as the source of its wittiness.

moment of exteriority which is all the more fatal because this exteriority is not the exteriority of the Law, but rather the exteriority of contingency, eluding the Symbolic Law as an un-symbolizable piece of the Real. As soon as contingency is elevated into an impossible criterion of Power, it renders open the fact that the Other doesn't exist, that Power itself is impossible, hollowed out, as it were, by a lack at its very center.

However, there is an obverse side to this problem. This inexistence of the Other doesn't do away with its Real efficiency. The contingency of laughter and the distance it implies form the condition of necessity, the inner condition of Power's effective functioning. To sum up Mladen Dolar's classic point:⁴ laughter does not do away with Power, but rather functions as the lever of its efficiency, as an enclave of a supposed freedom fettering us without the tiresome and strenuous use of force. Laughter appears as liberation from Power, while effectively enabling it as its ultimate support by delivering it from the use of immediate violence or physical force. *Where physical force leaves off we find laughter* as the cipher of Power's efficiency.⁵ The supposed immediacy of Power relies on the distance and ideological mediation embodied in laughter.

I would now like to add to Kierkegaard's quip another turn of the screw and a somewhat unexpected reference. Here is its context:

"Denmark holds the balance of power in Europe. A more propitious position is inconceivable. This I know from my own experience. I once held the balance of power in a family. I could do as I wished. I never suffered, but the others always did. / O may my words penetrate your ears, you who are in high places to counsel and control, you king's men and men of the people, you wise and sensible citizens of all classes! You just watch out! Old Denmark is foundering – it is a matter of life and death; it is foundering on boredom, which is the most fatal of all. In olden days, whoever eulogized the deceased most handsomely became the king. In our age, the king ought to be the one who delivers the best witticism and the crown prince the one who provides the occasion for the best witticism."⁶

And the reference:

4 Dolar 2012 [1986], pp. 156-158.

5 I paraphrase Kierkegaard's famous dictum: "where language leaves off I find the musical" (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 69)

6 Kierkegaard 1987, p. 288.

“The bourgeoisie has played a most revolutionary role in history. / The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’ It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation [‘dürre Ausbeutung’, ‘dry exploitation’].”⁷

The two quotes don’t seem to have much in common, despite the fact that they first appeared in print around the same time. Kierkegaard’s book was published in 1843, and the *Communist Manifesto* appears five years later, in February 1848, in the year of the revolution. And if the *Manifesto* strives to give voice to the specter of communism, haunting the “powers of old Europe,” then Kierkegaard warns against a seemingly totally different specter, the *Gespens*t of boredom: A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of boredom.⁸ What, if anything, could link the one to the other?

Let me begin in a somewhat anecdotal manner. At a certain historical moment these two seemingly irreducible worlds actually meet and briefly touch upon each other. Kierkegaard wrote most of the manuscript of *Either/Or* during his stay in Berlin between October 1841 and March 1842. He visited Berlin on the occasion of Schelling’s lectures which were initiated by the Prussian king to combat the specter of Hegelian philosophy. The notes on the lectures Kierkegaard published as an appendix to his book on irony demonstrate that the lectures didn’t quite meet his initial expectations. Rather it was quite the opposite. In a letter to his brother, dated 27 February 1842, Kierkegaard laments over the tediousness and the overall boring nature of Schelling’s talks, “Schelling drivels on quite intolerably,” he says, comparing the lectures to “self-inflicted punishment,” and concluding with the following

7 Marx & Engels 1994, p. 161.

8 “A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre [...]” (Marx & Engels 1994, p. 158)

devastating remark: “I am too old to attend lectures and Schelling is too old to give them.”⁹ At the time, Schelling’s lectures were attended also by the intellectual forces of the Hegelian Left, propelled by the reactionary tendencies of the Prussian powers that be, so spectacularly embodied in the figure of the (too) old Schelling. The lectures were attended also by a youngster named Friedrich Engels, who at the time was serving as a member of the Household Artillery of the Prussian Army. In defense of the Young Hegelians, Engels wrote a brochure titled *Schelling and Revelation: Critique of the Latest Attempt of Reaction against the Free Philosophy* that appeared in 1842, that is, at the time when he began contributing to the *Rheinische Zeitung* and when he first met its editor, Karl Marx. Hence, at the very source of the two seemingly very different texts, Kierkegaard’s book and *The Communist Manifesto*, there stands the old Schelling as a metaphorical embodiment of the powers of old Europe, giving unity to three seemingly very different specters: the specters of boredom, Hegelianism, and communism.

However, apart from this, the two quotes also display a certain conceptual proximity. The *Manifesto* portrays capitalist reality in ominously boring and monotonous shades. Capitalism does away with the colorfulness and variegation of premodern social divisions, ripping apart the “idyllic relations” and drowning them “in the icy water of egotistical calculation.” The specter of communism therefore grows out of this specter of boredom that bears the name of the old Europe. However, do the boredom and balance mentioned by Kierkegaard not stand in evident opposition to the explosive revolutionary character of capitalism as described by Marx and Engels? Shouldn’t we read Kierkegaard’s warning as a comradely call to the bourgeoisie that has fallen asleep and forgot or abandoned its own revolutionary mission? Such an understanding would stem from a total misunderstanding of Kierkegaard’s concept of boredom which doesn’t stand for a state of stagnation, standstill, rest or immutability, but at once designates a revolutionary force, a force of permanent revolutionizing. A couple of pages before the cited quote we read the following: “It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion.”¹⁰ There is no contradiction between the boring character of old Europe and the revolutionary role of the

9 Kierkegaard 1958, p. 79.

10 Kierkegaard 1987, p. 285.

ruling class. Boredom as the constant tendency to leave the present state behind, to overthrow the existing relations, is the emblem of the new capitalist actuality whose boring atmosphere of “dry exploitation” relies on boredom as the principle of perpetual revolutionizing.

In this sense, Kierkegaard’s quip should be read as a statement that traverses two regimes of Power, as an utterance that stands in-between, on the very edge that separates two different dispositifs of Power. Let us not forget, that the quip speaks of royal, that is: premodern power, that relied on relations of personal dependency and servitude and that as such was not hidden but instead operated in plain sight, characterized by massive visibility. Its legitimization, its ideological substratum, was publicly declared and transparent, as it was also the case with the plainly visible nature of exploitation (say, in form of levying tithes) and with the use of violence and physical force. Contrary to this, modern capitalist Power presupposes (at least legally) free subjects who are not subjected to personal servitude and domination; it presupposes subject at a distance to Power and its ideological mechanisms. Modern Power can go without traditional ideological curtains; it takes pride in its un-ideological character, thus replacing the immediately visible exploitation relying on “idyllic relations,” religious dogmas and political illusions with a sober gaze, with “boring” systemic domination and “dry exploitation.”

After this detour we finally arrive at our topic. What is the role of comedy in the time of the sober gaze, in the time that has done away with the sublime aura that once stuck to the figures of Power and Authority, and which perhaps formed a fruitful ground for comedic subversion? What is the function of comedy in our time, after the bourgeoisie “has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers,”¹¹ when the economic calculus has undermined relations of transference? Is the reality of “dry exploitation” and of the “lean government” not dry, all too dry for comedy?

The Comedy of the Great Depression

It is only in modern capitalist societies that the ideological function of laughter truly comes to the fore in the form of a distance in relation to, or withdrawal from, immediacy. As such, it supposedly dethrones the ideological levers of Power while in fact enthroning them.

11 Marx & Engels 1994, p. 161.

And it is here that we stumble upon the key – political – problem that demands our positioning.¹² Should we conclude that comedy performs a necessary ideological function, i.e. that comedy is conservative, *lumpenproletarisch* at best, and inclined to “reactionary intrigue” (to use the terms from the *Communist Manifesto*)? Or should we introduce a further conceptual distinction, one that would snatch laughter away from ideology and return it to comedy as to its rightful owner? And is the introduction of such a distinction not the proper function of comedy taking possession of laughter by dispossessing ideology?

The most persuasive way out from this deadlock was proposed by Alenka Zupančič in the following programmatic sentence of her book on comedy:

“Comedy is and always has been a genre of non-immediacy. Not in the sense of a distance *towards* a thing or belief, but rather as an inner split of this thing or belief itself, a split which in comedy is usually embodied in an irreducible surplus.”¹³

If laughter as the locus of ideology represents the cynical distance *towards* ideology, then we have to conclude that comedy is not a simple sublation of immediacy, particularly the one pertaining to modern Power, but rather “a genre of non-immediacy,” which remains irreducible to cynical mediation. Non-immediacy is a negation of immediacy that eludes the trap of ideological mediation, the logic of mockery which is structurally blind to its own involvement in the situation from which it distances itself. Non-immediacy stands for the inner self-difference of immediacy, it stands for the “inner split,” or inner deviation, of immediacy *from itself*. As I’ve already indicated, this self-difference provides the key to understanding Kierkegaard’s quip which is itself a comic object *as well as* a theory of the comic object in miniature. In his quip, Kierkegaard opposes the simple opposition between Power and jokes, in turn bringing to our attention the inner and heterogeneous – i.e. extimate – joke of Power itself.

Modern Times (1936), one of Chaplin’s most famous films, is

12 Alenka Zupančič (2004, p. 12) was right to note that her “book [on comedy] intervenes into what I won’t hesitate to call *class struggle* in contemporary philosophy/theory and in existing ideological practices.” We should universalize this point by saying that the conceptualization of the comic necessarily implies the unavoidable and radical polarization that characterizes politics proper. (The quoted passage can only be found in the Slovenian edition of Zupančič’s book.)

13 Zupančič 2004, p. 17 (quoted from the Slovenian edition of the book).

precisely that: a not at all dry comedy of “wage-labourers,” of the factory and the assembly line, a comedy of the un-idyllic “cash payment,” a comedy of “the icy water of egotistical calculation,” a comedy of “Free Trade,” in which the pursuit of happiness goes hand in hand with increasing pauperization.¹⁴ *Modern Times* is the ultimate comedy of “dry exploitation,” and doubtlessly a genius of Chaplin’s stamp is needed to come up with a great comedy of the great depression. The Great Depression, which presents the film’s historical background and its narrative framework, doesn’t seem a particularly gratifying material for a comedy; the latter seems to thrive only within the confines of the aforementioned “idyllic relations” that ended with the onset of capitalism, or at least in the idyllic salons of the new ruling class. My thesis, however, is that – conceptually – capitalist domination – and not merely its cultural ideals – comes much closer to the structure of comedy than it might appear.

The film begins with a scene of a clock that marks the anonymous and systemic character of capitalist domination, whose actors or agents are only so many personifications of economic abstractions, characters who appear on the economic stage.¹⁵ Doesn’t this minimal dispositif already contain a certain comic potential? In reference to Hegel,¹⁶ Alenka Zupan i¹⁷ has argued that the comic character consists of a specific relation between Universal and Particular, between the abstract and the concrete, where – contrary to a widely spread opinion – the comic doesn’t emerge at the moment when a figure of Universality stumbles upon the Concrete which is external to it and which undermines its Universal character, but rather at the moment when the Universal as *Universal* is concretized, i.e. when the Universal proves to be marked by its own inherent Concreteness. Hence, a miser doesn’t become comical when he stumbles upon an obstacle that undermines the automatism of his or her actions; the miser is comical in this very automatism itself. Comedy renders visible the “inner split” of this automatism, its self-alienating character and self-

14 The film’s motto reads as follows: “‘Modern Times.’ A story of industry, of individual enterprise – humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness.” Chaplin’s film differed substantially from other comedies from the times of the Great Depression, the latter portraying high society of “individual entrepreneurship,” while systematically disavowing the misery as the truth of its own “humanity.”

15 Marx 1976, pp.92, 179.

16 Hegel 1998.

17 Zupančič 2004, pp. 44-45; 2008, p. 30.

difference that functions as its privileged object. Therefore the minimal, structurally-critical point of comedy would be that there is more truth in the automatism of the Universal than in the intimate motives and idiosyncrasies of the individual, just as the truth of capitalist domination is to be sought in abstractions, like the compulsory law of competition that by way of a blind automatism forces individual capitalists into accumulation, as opposed to some individual greed and pathological lust for appropriation. Greed, the lust for appropriation, can very well be a source of laughter that results from the external difference between individual lust and abstract, systemic law of competition. But the lust for appropriation only becomes comical when it is elevated to the status of the Universal and when it is nothing but the bare embodiment of an abstraction. Just as the comic object has to be situated in the “inner split” of the Universal itself (as opposed to personal idiosyncrasies), so too the pathological character of capitalism doesn’t lie in personal perversity of individuals, but rather in the pathology of abstractions themselves. In a paraphrase of Alenka Zupan i’s point we could say that the critique of capitalism – just like critical comedy – isn’t grounded in undermining the Universal, but rather in a depiction of the Universal at work:¹⁸ the capitalist excesses are not idiosyncratic sins of individual capitalists; it is rather that *individual capitalists embody the excess of the Universal itself*.

Hence, against all odds, there exists a certain conceptual affinity between comedy and capitalism, or more precisely: between critical comedy and the (Marxist) critique of capitalism. *Modern Times* provides an excellent example of the comic object as the self-difference of “wage-labor.” I have said that the Universal doesn’t become comical by distancing itself from itself and by slipping into concreteness. It is only at the peak of its abstraction, of full coincidence with itself, that the Universal becomes truly comical and truly concrete. In other words, the Universal only becomes truly comical and truly concrete at the moment when it rids itself of its worldly umbilical cord and fully asserts itself as a pure abstraction. *The Universal becomes Concrete Universal in the excessive extreme of its own abstraction*.

A great example of this is the scene of a worker, going by the name of “Worker” (Charlie Chaplin), who is repeating over and over

18 “Comedy is not the undermining of the universal, but its (own) reversal into the concrete; it is not an objection to the universal, but the concrete labor or work of the universal itself. Or, to put it in a single slogan: *comedy is the universal at work*.” (Zupančič 2008, p. 27)

again the same gesture of tightening bolts at the assembly line. In itself, this repetitive gesture is not yet truly comical. It becomes truly comical when it liberates itself from “external concreteness” and concretizes itself internally as it were, by abandoning the reference to any utilitarian purpose. In the film this liberation of the Universal is portrayed as the substitution of the bolt for a button on the dress of a female coworker. Of course, the button requires no tightening, but as soon as we begin tightening it, the gesture of tightening is liberated from its utilitarian function, so as to pass into the domain of functionless concreteness which lies at the core of Universality. The gesture of tightening is subjectivized by deviating from its substantiality, i.e. from its functional fusion with an external object. To put it yet another way: here, the passage to comedy consists of a replacement of a thing for an object; the passage from the bolt to the button is the passage from a thing, or a *Gegenstand*, to the (comic) object which remains irreducible to the button and is nothing but an embodiment of the void that separates the function of tightening from itself. Isn't it obvious that this scene doesn't become comical due to the “tightening of the button,” but rather because the tightening of the button is “running on empty,” because it is devoid of any proper purpose, whereby this void (as opposed to the button that replaced the bolt) is the true comic object? However, what is at stake here is not a mere loss of function, but rather its depiction in its purest form. The tightening becomes comical (and truly concrete) at the very peak of its Universality, i.e. in its abstraction from functionality as such, as “the universal at work.”

The scene presents us with a portrayal of an ideal worker, the Idea of the Worker, which fully coincides with his wage essence. But this radical normalization, this sublation of the difference between a person and a function, coincides with the point of radical madness. And the coworkers effectively accompany the worker's strange tightening of everything that comes into his hands with the words “He's crazy!!!”, with three exclamation marks. Perfectly in line with Lacan's remark about the crazy king who thinks that he is the King, the worker goes crazy when he becomes the Worker, i.e. when he directly embodies the Idea of the Worker. The words “He's crazy!!!” should hence be interpreted as follows: “Look at him, the madman; he thinks he actually *is* a worker!!!” The comical gist of this statement and of this scene is due to the confrontation of the viewer with the craziness of zero-degree identification in a capitalist society. We have seen that capitalism “has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of

science, into its paid wage-labourers”.¹⁹ That is why it makes perfect sense to say that a physician who thinks he's a physician, a poet who thinks he's poet, or a philosopher who thinks he's a philosopher, is crazy, because he doesn't see that, in fact, he is but a wage-laborer.

However, the analyzed scene entails another turn of the screw, a radicalization of madness: not only a poet who believes himself to be a poet (when in fact he is merely a wage-laborer) is crazy; it is first and foremost the worker who believes he's a worker that is crazy, given that he is not a worker at all, but merely the embodiment of a pure abstraction, i.e. the commodity we call labor power.²⁰

The whole succession of scenes, beginning with the first scene of the assembly line and concluding with the worker's madness, effectively forms a complete comic sequence that has a very precise conceptual relevance. In the first scene of the sequence we see the worker who, in the company of two coworkers, is tightening bolts at the assembly line when suddenly his armpit starts itching so that he is forced to put down his work for a moment to be able to scratch himself. But the machine runs on relentlessly, the coworkers display disapproval, and Chaplin has to quickly make up for his brief deference. An agitated supervisor appears to let him know that a trespass like this could get him sacked. Chaplin tries to object, he tries to explain that he was itching, but as soon as he lifts up his hands and opens his mouth he's trespassing again, the machine runs on and he's once again forced to compensate for the “loss.” The situation is repeated once again, this time due to an insect of some sort, flying around Chaplin's head and disturbing his work to such an extent that the machine has to be brought to a halt. A brief break follows. He leaves his work space and enters a toilet where he attempts to take some time off, removed from the watchful gaze of his superiors, and smoke a cigarette. But the moment he lights it and has his first puff, the director addresses him via a gigantic screen, installed to monitor the workers, and orders him to stop stalling and immediately get back to work. In the meantime, the worker who has replaced Chaplin for the time of his absence is diligently tightening bolts, but Chaplin decides to extend his break a bit and starts polishing his fingernails. The other worker is deeply dissatisfied with his behavior,

19 Marx & Engels 1994, p. 161.

20 As an aside: to get this joke of the crazy worker who believes he's a worker one has to read *Capital*, for the *Manifesto* does not yet distinguish between labor and labor-power and hence fails to provide us with the joke's proper “cognitive mapping.”

so Chaplin eventually gets back to work. Next, it is time for lunch. The director enters, accompanied by representatives of a company selling the “Bellows Feeding Machine.” The machine is intended to reduce the time for lunch, thus substantially increasing productivity. They try it out on Chaplin, but the machine proves inefficient, so the boss rejects the company representatives by saying: “It’s no good – it isn’t practical.” What follows is the already described scene of Chaplin’s fall into madness.

The background of this sequence consists of the Fordist organization of the labor process, the prevalence of machinery which deskills the worker by reducing his or her work to the performance of simple and monotonous operations, finally turning him or her into a mere “appendage to the machine.” Deskilling serves a very specific function of increasing productivity and the degree of exploitation of the labor power. In another text, I have already placed the process of deskilling into a relation with what Marx calls “gaps of rest.”²¹ In short: gaps of rest are intervals in the labor process that, from the point of view of production which is in the service of profit, stand for the unproductive use of labor power. From the point of view of Capital, which always strives to increase the degree of production of surplus-value, gaps of rest stand for functionless elements of a pure loss, they represent islands of enjoyment, enjoyment which (according to Lacan) is essentially useless. That is why Capital strives to close these gaps by adding them to the specter of productive use of labor power, thus turning them into elements of surplus-value.

We immediately see that the entire sequence just described rests on this specific problem of rest. The gaps of rest form its leitmotiv, giving the entire succession of the scenes a unified conceptual premise and a properly dialectical character. At different points in the sequence, gaps of rest take on different forms: first the form of an itch and a scratch, then the form of speech or voice, then of the polishing of fingernails, and finally of the insect and the cigarette. The itch, the voice, the insect and the cigarette give body to something essentially lacking any form of materiality; these objects embody gaps of rest inserting themselves into the labor process. And simultaneously with their emergence there also emerges the threat of a decrease in productivity, the threat of effectively bringing production to a standstill. As soon as this happens, the supervisor, or representative of capital, enters

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21 Marx 1976, p. 460.

the stage, performing his disciplinary function, trying to close up the gap, to undo it and enable once again the smooth continuation of the production process. The cigarette scene demonstrates that the time for rest is effectively limited to what is most necessary, to the satisfaction of purely biological needs that form the limit of its admissibility and acceptability. All these scenes therefore testify to the universal tendency of Capital to close up the gaps of rest, to fill in the void, to eliminate and to take control over the useless leftover. This is best exemplified by the scene with the “Feeding Machine” which is supposed to guarantee optimum economical use of lunch time by limiting the worker to his role of a mere “appendage to the machine,” in this case the appendage to the feeding machine.²²

The comic sequence confronts us with the opposition between work, the expenditure of labor-power, and idleness, rest, the unproductive use of labor-power. The singular instances of this encounter are elements of class struggle, in which we are faced with a collision of two totally opposed interests. The itch, the voice, the insect and the cigarette are partial objects that embody the interest of the working class by undermining the laws of capitalist production. In relation to the status of the comic sequence, we cannot overlook the fact that these elements are funny, but not yet truly comical. Only the last scene of the sequence, adding an essential dialectical twist, is to be considered truly comical. If in preceding scenes we laugh at the ultimate failure of the general agenda of Capital to limitlessly exploit labor power, if we laugh at the instantaneous and short-lived victory of the Particular over the Universal which falls prey to “castration” by a tiny itch, what we effectively laugh at in the final scene of the worker’s madness is the Concrete of this Universal itself, we laugh at the Universal’s inherent itch. Put differently, at first, the relation between Capital and labor is entirely external, the Particular provokes the Universal, the Concrete opposes the Abstract, rendering open its inherent powerlessness in subjecting the worker to its functioning. The sequence, however, only becomes comical with the last scene that sublates the external split between the subject and the demand of the Other, transposing it into an

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22 What compels the capitalist to eliminate the gaps of rest is the compulsory law of competition, as it is clearly stated in the advertisement for the “Bellows Feeding Machine”: “Bellows Feeding Machine, a practical device which automatically feeds your men while at work. Don’t stop for lunch. Be ahead of your competitor. The Bellows Feeding Machine will eliminate the lunch hour, increase your production and decrease your overhead. [...] Remember, if you wish to keep ahead of your competitor, you cannot afford to ignore the importance of the Bellows Feeding Machine.”

internal – and heterogeneous – split of the Other itself. Hence, the true source of comedy is not the impossibility of subjecting labor to Capital, but rather the impossibility of Capital itself that comes to the fore at the moment when the worker fully identifies with his social role and actualizes – here and now – Capital's fantasy of incessant exploitation of labor power. And (the representative of) Capital quickly establishes that this doesn't work (better put: that it works *too much*), that it is “no good,” that it is “not practical.”

Labor power is not a commodity like any other; in contrast to all other commodities it has to rest, if it is to be useful again. Capital dreams of labor power as a commodity that needs no rest, an essentially restless commodity that is incessantly up for exploitation. But as soon as this fantasy becomes reality, as soon as the worker, who has previously tried to snatch the gap of rest away from Capital, enacts its own closure, as soon as he coincides with his own wage essence and with the universe of (all other) commodities, he presents us with the madness of Capital, i.e. with its phantasmatic support as the target of comic subversion.²³

The Silent Talkie

The worker, merged with his abstract essence, embodies the immanent drive of Capital, striving after incessant appropriation of labor time. If the preceding scenes of the comic sequence have confronted us with the external negation of Universality, with moments of negativity that are embodied in partial objects, then the last scene *negates by means of affirmative repetition*, which opens up the space of comical non-immediacy as opposed to the ridiculing (ideological) mediation. The previous scenes of the sequence therefore correspond to the ideological use of laughter. The deviation from Universality, embodied in the partial objects, is precisely an enclave of false freedom which grounds us even more radically in relations of domination that it purports to subvert with its distancing mediation. The last scene abandons this false autonomy, suspending (ideological) mediation. In a gesture of immediate coincidence with the Universal (or with the role of the Worker), the Universal itself is marked with a moment of non-immediacy or with an element of its own Concreteness. Here, the

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23 The scene with the Bellows Feeding Machine is comical because the subject cannot keep up with it, just as he was unable to keep up with the assembly line. It is difficult to work as fast as the machine demands of us, but it is even more difficult to rest as fast...

relationship between the Universal, on the one hand, and the excessive enjoyment, on the other, is no longer external as in the case of the itch or the insect. Despite appearing radical, these excesses remain radically grounded within the coordinates of the Universal; their excessiveness is the result of normalization introduced by the Law. In the last scene, this duality is suspended, however this suspense that corresponds to the full identification of the worker with the Worker does not eliminate enjoyment; it merely eliminates the external difference between the spheres of Universality and enjoyment, whereby this external split between the One (Universality) and the Other (enjoyment) is transposed into the inner split of the One, i.e. into enjoyment of the Universal itself. The antinomy between the automatism of mechanical gestures that turn the worker into an embodiment of a machine and the islands of spontaneous enjoyment is sublated in the enjoyment-machine. Put in Žižek's²⁴ terms: the final dialectical passage should be read as a passage *from Nothing* (embodied in partial objects that undermine the integrity of the Universal) *to less-than-Nothing*, standing for a tiny lag or gap of Universality itself, for its inner self-difference that rests on the impossibility of (affirmative) repetition, thus marking Universality with a “minimal difference” as a sign of its inherently non-totalizable character.

Let's approach this problem from another perspective. *Modern Times* is Chaplin's last film with the figure of the Tramp which he first brought to the screen some twenty years earlier, the Tramp as a dispossessed social outcast culminating in the figure of dispossessed labor. Simultaneously, *Modern Times* is the only film in which the Tramp is not merely seen but also heard. The film uniquely situates itself in the interspace, the tiny interval, separating silent films from talkies; it is an unusual hybrid of the two, the paradoxical *silent talkie*. The Tramp, this infamous figure of the silent era, its paradigm, is like Moses who will lead Chaplin's films into the promised land of talkies, being the first to peek through the door, only to finally remain outside, confined to the threshold of the new era of sound film. It is well known that Chaplin was very much opposed to directing a sound film; not because he was clinging to the “idyllic relations,” bound to be undermined by the use of the voice, but because in the supposedly unproblematic passage from silent to sound film he detected a certain problem, best formulated by Žižek:

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24 Žižek 2012.

“Chaplin’s well-known aversion to sound is thus not to be dismissed as a simple nostalgic commitment to a silent paradise; it reveals a far deeper than usual knowledge (or at least presentiment) of the disruptive power of the voice, of the fact that the voice functions as a foreign body, as a kind of parasite introducing a radical split: the advent of the Word throws the human animal off balance and makes of him a ridiculous, impotent figure, gesticulating and striving desperately for a lost balance.”²⁵

Modern Times stands at the very edge separating and joining these two worlds, half way out of the silent and half way into the sound universe. I claim that it is no coincidence that the lead role in this passage is entrusted to the Tramp who is perfectly cut for this passage. In what sense? According to Žižek,²⁶ the whole trick of the figure of the Tramp lies in the fact that he “accidentally occupies a place which is not his own, which is not destined for him – he is mistaken for a rich man or for a distinguished guest; on the run from his pursuers, he finds himself on a stage, all of a sudden the center of the attention of numerous gazes.” This typical dispositif of the “comedy of errors,” this discrepancy between an element and the place of its inscription, was analyzed by Alenka Zupan i in dialectical terms of the suspension of the Other and its objectal embodiment.²⁷ It is precisely this suspension of the Other, the suspension of the symbolic coordinates, guaranteeing the distribution of places pertaining to individual subjects in a given narrative, that is the minimal condition enabling the Tramp to “accidentally occupy a place which is not his own.” It is this suspension of the fixed coordinates which enables the Tramp to occupy the place that is not destined for him. In *Modern Times* he picks up a red flag which suffices to mark his place, placing him at the front of a group of protesters and catapulting him right into the role of the revolutionary leader. In its double mirroring, this example best exemplifies the aforementioned point. What is better suited to embody the temporary suspension of the Other than the revolutionary mob? And what is better suited to give body to the irreducible bearer, the surplus leftover of the

25 Žižek 2008 [1992], p. 3.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

27 “In this perspective one could also say that the comic suspense of the Other functions in such a way that the suspension of the symbolic Other coincides with the surprising appearance of a (small) other [...]” (Zupančič 2008, p. 92)

suspended Other, than a red flag, transposing the figure of the Tramp into the Leader of a revolutionary movement, marching at the head of the crowd? It is this object that lends to the mob as emblem of the suspended Other the required minimum of symbolic consistency, while at the same time bearing witness to the fact that consistency ultimately rests on contingency, on a nonsensical objectal leftover or the “inner split” of Concrete Universality.

By definition, a tramp is someone who roams around from place to place, lacking a proper place of his own, hence eternally oscillating between radical deterritorialization and failed (and thus comically successful) attempts at reterritorialization. The Tramp can occupy any place, but remains without place, and it is precisely this contingent tension between the two, between the always foreign and unsuitable places (which seem to fit him in an almost uncanny manner) and his own implacability or out-of-place-ness that is the principal source of his comedy. The Tramp has no place, but aside from his out-of-place-ness, there perhaps exists a single place that is truly his own and from which he remains absolutely inseparable: *the place of the silent film itself*. It is therefore absolutely no coincidence that *Modern Times* – which is situated in the interspace between a silent and a sound film and which for the first and last time gives voice to the Tramp – is the last film with this character. On the contrary: in this film, the Tramp is brought to the status of a concept. It is only here that he occupies the place which is truly not his own, a place which is not foreign to him simply by accident but structurally robs him of his only citizenship. The Tramp’s silent place, the only place that is truly his own, hence only emerges against the background of the voice. But the voice brings this place into being only at the price of abolishing it. As long as he remained in the homeland of the silent film he could lose himself as much as he wanted and he would still remain at home. It is only when he breaks silence and begins to speak that he becomes truly homeless, radically deterritorialized by the use of the voice. And it is precisely this use of the voice, excluding him from the domain of the silent film, catapulting him into the kingdom of talkies, which in a speculative twist condemns him to silence and disappearance. It is only when he breaks silence, that he remains forever silent.

But the point is not simply that the Tramp, once he is endowed with a voice, loses his silent essence. The point is rather that it is with his use of the voice that he arrives at his full and radical realization: *only when he begins to speak do we truly hear him go silent*. His essence is actualized in

a voice without sonority which transfigures the figure of the Tramp from someone who is merely mute into the figure of the mute voice as object. And is this transubstantiation which seemingly abolishes the Tramp's essence, functioning as the lever of his disappearance, not his ultimate comedic performance, reproducing the dialectic of the comic sequence? The Tramp begins to speak, suspending the universe of the silent film, only to embody it in a mute voice as the irreducible objectal bearer of the suspended Other. The inner essence of the Tramp is not objectivized only in the externality of the film's narrative, but rather embodies the fate of the silent film as such, which henceforth persists in the kingdom of talkies as an irreducible mute voice that *Modern Times* cannot get rid of and pass on without friction into a fully realized domain of sound films.²⁸

To conclude, let me return to Kierkegaard and the problem of Power. The impossible relationship between comedy and Power is the topic of yet another one of his brilliant quips:

"In a theater, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed – amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke."²⁹

This quip is a sort of sequel to the first, and if we examine it closely, we realize that it explicates the key premises of the former. This joke could, of course, be read in the sense of a critique of the hilarious heads buried in the sand of ideology. It could be read as a critique of the ideological function of laughter providing a false distance towards Power while freely and even more radically exposing us to its pernicious flames. The point of the joke would therefore be that a joke is never merely a joke, and that the enclave of supposed freedom

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28 For Chaplin, the problem of the sound film was not simply that it introduced the element of audibility and the voice. As a master of silent film he undoubtedly knew that the introduction of sound also transfigures the domain of muteness or silence that acquires a totally different quality. *Modern Times* as a silent talkie perhaps best exemplifies Chaplin's awareness of the delicateness of this passage by for the first time putting forward an entity that is situated at the edge between the audible and the inaudible, between the sonorous and the mute, namely precisely the entity of the (Lacanian) voice as object. That which in *Modern Times* is present only in its embryonal form, moves center stage in *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin's first complete talkie. Both films target a certain disposition of Power which in both cases seems as far removed from comedy as possible. To a large extent, *Modern Times* as the comedy of capitalism provides the key to *The Great Dictator*, this ultimate comedy of fascism. So much so that we could paraphrase Max Horkheimer's notorious dictum and conclude: "Whoever is not prepared to talk about *Modern Times* should also remain silent about *The Great Dictator*!"

29 Kierkegaard 1987, p. 30.

of cynically-enlightened subjects is paid and overpaid by their most palpable servitude. But the joke can also be read in the opposite sense that comes closer to my point and which illustrates once again the passage from laughter as the lever of ideological mediation to laughter as the lever of non-immediacy. If we begin with the first quip stating that Power should be seized by whoever comes up with the best joke, the clown from the second quip who is receiving loud ovations seems the best candidate for this impossible position. But what is most evident is that the gist of the joke lies in the fact that the clown's authoritative call doesn't work, that it miserably fails to hit the target, that the public is unable to recognize itself as its addressee, that the evacuation is a failure because all of them speak and listen past one another. In this, but also in other, regards Kierkegaard's story is very similar to the joke which is told by Mladen Dolar at the very beginning of his magisterial book on the voice.³⁰ The joke tells the story of a company of Italian soldiers called to attack by their commander. But instead of following the commander's order they remain in the trenches finally uttering the following comment: »Ah, che bella voce!«, what a beautiful voice. In both cases the call is issued in face of imminent danger, first in the middle of a menacing fire, second in the midst of a raging battle. And in both cases the call becomes literally misplaced by an applause that is at extreme odds with the initial intention of the speaker. The comic effect thus rests once again on the suspense of the Other, or the destruction of the world, as Kierkegaard would have it. We could say that the evacuation (of the public) is unsuccessful due to the (temporary) evacuation of the Other, and this evacuation of the Other as the place from which the clown's call would receive its (true) meaning once again opens up the space for the characteristic comic reconfiguration.

But yet another reading is possible. The scene with the clown could be read along the lines of the worker's fall into madness which takes place at the moment when the person totally coincides with his or her universal essence, in turn realizing this essence in the excessive extreme of its abstraction. What if the clown effectively doesn't enter the stage as a private person trying to alert the public to the threat of a menacing fire? What if he enters the stage as a clown, in his full symbolic capacity, using the menacing fire as the occasion for performing his ultimate comical act? And doesn't this act rely precisely on the split of non-immediacy, i.e. on the mechanism of a failed

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30 Dolar 2006, p. 3.

affirmative repetition? A fire breaks out offstage, so I say: “A fire broke out offstage” – and this very repetition produces an irreducible surplus as the lever of laughter which swallows the public like a withering fire - the fire as the ultimate comic relief, as the pure embodiment of the Real excess of Universality.

Hence, the clown could serve as the first model, the first experimental realization of that particular criterion of Power that Kierkegaard proposed in his quip. And the audience’s laughter can only enthrone him by bringing the world to an end, by snatching the kingdom away from the king. Power should be seized by whoever comes up with the best joke. Isn’t it evident that such a criterion excludes merit and appropriation? A joke cannot be signed, its witticism is of the character of an anonymous specter, *Gespensst*, that reaches us, hits us from the outside, from an other hand, from the hand of a non-localizable Other, so that in relation to the joke we are merely holders and carriers on which it clings like a parasite. The joke is nameless, homeless, anonymous, structurally expropriated, and as soon as we take it as the criterion of Power, the latter is radically de-substantialized and loses its right to ownership. The joke is an emblem of dispossession, at once possessing and dispossessing; it is the proletarian genre *par excellence*, the pendant to the other specter, the specter of communism, which haunts the powers of old Europe. In a mad extension, the gist of this joke is finally also the gist of the communist revolution.

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