Charlie Chaplin and the Silent Film

Beginnings

Chaplin, an Englishman, toured American vaudeville houses with an English music hall show doing knockabout comedy. One of the Keystone executives, who produced the Keystone Kops features, hired Chaplin away from vaudeville for $150 a week in 1913. In six years he was the highest paid entertainer in the history of show business.

The Mack Sennett Keystone comedies gave Chaplin a start, but the frenzied pace and empty plots of the Sennett movies did not appeal to Chaplin's more refined sense of character. Chaplin wanted to use comedy to get underlying ideas and conflicts across to his audience.

Chaplin's Moviemaking Philosophy

Chaplin was the first major artist to exercise creative control as both director and performer. He thus had a unique opportunity to present a consistent vision of character and situation.

Chaplin created his distinctive Little Tramp in some ways out of his own experience. He had grown up poor, and he understood the complex feelings of envy and resentment felt by poor people toward their "betters." The Tramp always wants to advance in the world, but when the world knocks him back down, he encourages sympathetic rather than mocking laughter from his audience. Invariably, though, Chaplin uses comedy to get across the idea that even though materialism is appealing, virtue is its own reward. The Tramp is mischievous and ambitious, but he has romantic ideals, and he will be self-sacrificing if the occasion demands, particularly for his love interest. In fact, the Little Tramp portrays some of the purest, most idealistic lovers in all of movie history in The Gold Rush, City Lights, and Modern Times. Anyone who is not moved by the reunion of the Tramp and the formerly blind girl in City Lights has a heart of stone.

Chaplin put together his films visually. Rarely did he rely on a shooting script. He tried out one idea after another on film, and spliced together a completed product from sometimes hundreds of takes. He directed by example. Rather than just telling an actor what he wanted, he would also act it out physically.

Also, Chaplin's ideas could never have come across without his inventive genius as a physical comedian. He engages the audience's eyes and laughter first and never attempts to present any situation that cannot be generally understood. A list of some Chaplin's better-known early films shows how close he stayed to the common American experience: The Immigrant, The Gold Rush, The Circus. Chaplin's material was always familiar but never presented in a trite or hackneyed manner.

As Chaplin's career progressed into the 1930s, he made only a few concessions to the "talkies," and his social commentary became more overt and pointed. His great movies of the Depression, City Lights and Modern Times, have plenty of his trademark physical comedy,
but they are also sympathetic portrayals of people victimized by economic hardship and social oppression.

*The Idle Class*

This film, made in 1921, demonstrates Chaplin’s mature mastery of the two-reel comedy format. The mistaken identity-based plot has been a staple of comedy since Roman times, and Chaplin employs it to perfection here, playing both his classic Little Tramp character and a rich husband estranged from his wife by his drinking problem.

In many of Chaplin’s comedies, the Tramp is victimized, but in this one he is an accomplished hustler who makes fools of the rich men on the golf course and nearly steals the wife of his look alike. Although by this time in career, Chaplin was one of the wealthiest men in show business, he always kept his allegiance to his working class roots. He never tired of satirizing the foibles of the rich, and in this film the supposed dignity and “class” of the golf course and the ballroom receive some pretty merciless ribbing.

Note the timing and rhythm of the sight gags in this film: the misadventures of the hung-over, absent-minded husband who forgets to put on his pants before going into the hotel lobby, and the sleights of hand (and feet) the Tramp uses to manipulate the rich men on the golf course.

As mentioned above, Chaplin almost never used a shooting script. He developed a scenario to cover the basic plot outline, and then improvised answers to his characters’ problems on the set: How many ways can a man avoid being seen in his underwear? How can the Tramp and his rich double appear on screen at the same time?

Until the advent of video transfer technology in the 1980s, appreciation of silent films by younger audiences conditioned to sound movies was impeded by the technical fact that the 24 frames a second projection speed necessary for sound made silent films (made at 16 frames a second) look fast and jerky. Fortunately, in the digital transfers in which we see these films today, all scratches have been scrubbed from the images, and they run at the proper speed. In addition, Chaplin himself wrote musical scores and created sound tracks for re-issued versions his early films. The version of *The Idle Class* that we will see has been thus “re-mastered.”