The Chaplin Machine

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Slapstick, Fordism and the Communist Avant-Garde

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Introduction
Americanism and Fordism – and Chaplinism

Let's examine Lenin's views (in a London music hall) as reported by Gorky. 'Vladimir Ilyich laughed easily and infectiously on watching the clowns and vaudeville acts, but he was only mildly interested in the rest. He watched with special interest as workers from British Columbia felled trees. The small stage represented a lumber yard, and in front, two hefty fellows within a minute chopped down a tree of about one meter circumference.

'Well, of course, this is only for the audience. They can't really work that fast,' said Ilyich. 'But, it's obvious that they really do work with axes there, too, making worthless chips out of the bulk of the tree. Here you have your cultured Englishmen!'

He started talking about the anarchy of production under capitalism and ended by expressing regret that nobody had yet thought of writing a book on the subject. I didn't quite follow this line of reasoning but he switched to an interesting discussion on 'eccentrism' as a form of theatre art. 'There is a certain satirical and sceptical attitude to the conventional, an urge to turn it inside out, to distort it slightly in order to show the illogic of the usual. Intricate but interesting' [. . .] Let's analyse this extremely important excerpt.

1. Lenin is interested in eccentrics.

2. Lenin is watching the demonstration of real work.

3. He evaluates this first class work as senseless and wasteful: he talks about the anarchy of production and the necessity to write about it.

4. Lenin talks about eccentrism in art, a sceptical attitude toward the conventional, and the illogic of the usual.

The transition which Gorky missed is that the wastefulness, and so to speak, the absurdity of the capitalist world could be shown through methods of eccentric art with its sceptical attitude toward the conventional.

Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and his Circle* (1940)[1]

Pick Up Your Pig Iron and Walk

In his 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, the American industrial theorist and engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor recounts how he managed to make an ox-like Dutch immigrant called Schmidt carry a seemingly impossible quantity of pig iron in his job at the Bethlehem Steelworks. Taylor has already outlined how the precise measurement and recording of a worker's most minute physical actions by specially trained overseers can be collated, and calculated so as to plan the most efficient series of movements for the purposes of production. When the worker is trained to use these techniques in their work, the result is massive increases in productivity. The problem is that 'it is impossible for the man who is best suited to this kind of work to understand the principles of this science.'[2] So, Schmidt is teased by Taylor into increasing his workload by asking him repeatedly if he is a 'high-priced man', and dangling the possibility of a pay rise in front of him, if only he will follow very precisely the dictates of the supervisor:

> Well, if you are a high-priced man, you will do exactly as this man tells you to-morrow, from morning till night. When he tells you to pick up a pig and walk, you pick it up and you walk, and when he tells you to sit down and rest, you sit down. You do that right straight through the

> day. And what's more, no back talk. Do you understand that? When this man tells you to walk, you walk. When he tells you to sit down, you sit down, and you don't talk back at him. Now you come on to work here to-morrow morning and I'll know before night whether you are really a high-priced man or not.[3]

Barely able to speak English, as Taylor carefully records ('Vell – did I got $1.85 for loading dot pig iron on dot car to-morrow?'), Schmidt is nonetheless able to understand eventually what a pay rise means, largely via the harshness of the instruction and the focus on the money at the end of it, as:

> with a man of the mentally sluggish type of Schmidt it is appropriate and not unkind, since it is effective in fixing his attention on the high wages which he wants and away from what, if called to his attention, he probably would consider impossibly hard work.[4]

'This goes on,' writes Bernard Doray in his study of 'Taylorism', 'until Schmidt "sees", and deluded by his desire to be well-thought-of, agrees to accept a fool's bargain which will allow him to make $1.85 by handling 48 tons of pig iron a day rather than making $1.15 by handling thirty tons.' Doray continues: 'There is something masterly about this. Were it not for the context, we might be dealing with a stage hypnotist or a circus act.'[5] This book is about people who imagined turning industrial labour into a circus act.

In the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary wave of 1917–19, there was perhaps a rather unexpected rise in enthusiasm among the revolutionary leaders for the seemingly oppressive and anti-worker methods being developed in the

industrial north of the United States of America, particularly by Taylor and the 'time and motion' theorists that came after him, and their apparent application in the immense, integrated car factories of Henry Ford. This reached its greatest extent in the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, where a former metalworker, trade union leader and poet in the Proletkult ('proletarian culture') movement named Alexei Gastev founded a Central Institute of Labour to train workers in the new socialist state in accordance with Taylorist principles, which had now been taken to the level of being applied even outside of the factory and in everyday life. At the same time, there was a massive rise in the distribution of American cinema and other forms of mass culture, particularly the 'slapstick' comedy of Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, along with great adventurers and stars like Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. As a rule, these are treated as rather separate phenomena. At moments they clash, entirely by accident. In their work on the creation of the Soviet 'planned economy', E.H. Carr and R.W. Davies notice a critique of the new focus on the scientific management of labour, technocracy and assembly line production, summed up by Gastev in *Pravda* as accepting that:

> the time has gone beyond recall when one could speak of freedom of the worker in regard to the machine [. . .] Manoeuvres and motions at the bench, the concentration of attention, the movement of the hands, the position of the body, these elementary elements of behaviour become the cornerstone.[6]

At a conference of the Komsomol in 1928, we find a sharp reaction to this among young Communists. 'Chaplin, speaking

for the Komsomol, fiercely attacked Gastev's "anti-Marxist" platform (which makes) the worker an adjunct of the machine, not a creator of socialist production. Gastev in his understanding of the new worker is indistinguishable from Ford.'[7]

Here, Charles Chaplin's otherwise unknown namesake in the Young Communist League has prefigured the critique of Fordism and Taylorism that the man himself would make in his 1936 film *Modern Times*. But what if scientific management and slapstick comedy were not actually antipodes at all, but instead were closely linked and complementary phenomena?

The Other American Dream

The setting for this book is an unplanned cultural exchange that took place between three poles. Two of these consisted of the Trans-European route that stretched from Weimar Germany to the USSR; a route common both to the Third International and the international Constructivist movement – which, in a nod to the Comintern itself, described itself in the early 1920s as the Constructivist International[8] – moving between Moscow and Berlin, with various stopping points in between – but with a difficult and ambiguous relationship with Paris, and a practically non-existent one with London and New York.[9] The two countries which are the poles of this movement, the Weimar Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, were both the ambiguous product of socialist revolutions, largely administered by self-proclaimed Marxists, both using some form of mixed economy throughout the 1920s in the absence of the World Revolution which was seemingly in the offing between 1917 and 1923. The third entity is 'America'. This should not necessarily denote the actual political space of the United

Soviet Poster for Charlie Chaplin's City Lights, *1934*

States of America, but a collection of ideas, technologies, mass produced art objects and archetypes. The United States is the home of the Ku Klux Klan, of the Pinkerton strike-breaking gangs, of the Red Scare and the mechanisation of labour; but 'America' is also the home of Charlie Chaplin, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Frank Lloyd Wright, awe-inspiring industrial monuments, mass abundance – and the mechanisation of labour.[10]

'America' was the place where humankind had begun to shape nature to its will, 'the Motherland of Industry', a land

of social peace and astounding technological dynamism, and occasionally our protagonists had to remind themselves that it was also a political adversary. Yet the fact that very few of the figures who will populate this book actually visited the United States, and that even those who did formulated their ideas about 'America' beforehand, meant that for them America was a dream, not a place. It was, in fact, the locus for a gigantic act of collective dreaming on the part of both political activists and politicised aesthetes, as well as a focal point for the populations they attempted to mobilise (or whose mobilisations they

were forced to respond to). 'America' was, then, for the political aesthetics of the Moscow–Berlin axis in the 1920s, a series of dream-images – fantasy projections conveyed in architectural projects, in poetry, in advertising and propaganda posters, attempts to will an Americanised communism into being via imagination and reverie.[11]

To a large degree, previous analyses of these dream-images, such as Richard Stites' *Revolutionary Dreams*,[12] Susan Buck-Morss' *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* and Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain*, have focused on the element of industrial dreaming that is common throughout the period. For all its virtues, this can lead to neglect of the popular, collective and directly political elements in this dreaming. Accordingly, it is necessary to discuss Chaplin *and* Ford *and* Lenin, to connect Edison *and* Frank Lloyd Wright *and* Walter Rathenau – to discover a more conflicted, comic, collective form of American dreaming. The deep involvement in 'American' popular culture on the part of the Constructivist avant-garde does not fit with the occasionally still prevalent notion of an elitist high modernism aloof from popular forms and mass culture. Yet, what took place in the 1920s was a reciprocal process, a tense and ambiguous dialogue. In this, the Constructivist obsession with American mass media could not be further from the more recent celebration of popular culture as consisting in little 'resistances' against sundry 'totalising' forces, whether state power, class analysis, economic planning or modernism itself. This was one of the central claims of postmodernism in the 1980s, emerging at a couple of removes from the notion of popular subcultures as a form of 'resistance through rituals', developed by the likes of Dick Hebdige and Stuart Hall at the Birmingham School of Sociology. By contrast, the 1920s largely didn't see an uncritical celebration of popular culture, or a patronising elevation of

an undialectically formulated 'popular taste' above the efforts of intellectual avant-gardes. Rather, there were a series of critical engagements, where certain elements in a given object or form would be borrowed, some emphasised, while others were rejected as reactionary or not politically useful.[13]

These dream-images are not purely celebratory, and nor are they purely Fordist and Platonic – they are thoroughly historicised, and they undergo a series of morphings and warpings depending on place and politics. The same photograph – and it is usually a photograph of 'America', rather than a first-hand experience – becomes a multitude of different images. The parameters of the present work are, as we have noted, summed up in a series of proper names: Ford plus Chaplin plus Lenin. This work aims to give all three equal emphasis, displaying and analysing in its fullness the interplay between industrial organisation, comic entertainment and socialist politics in the aesthetics of the avant-garde. This is in order to treat the political aesthetics of the time in immanent terms, welding each element together, rather than imposing a Cold War (or post-Cold War triumphalist) grid on them. If at one point histories of the avant-garde were criticised for emphasising aesthetic affinities and alliances rather than political affinities, it seems that now the reverse move must be made – to emphasise the concrete centrality of the political context.[14]

Bertolt Brecht claimed in 1932 that 'photography is the possibility of a reproduction that masks the context. The Marxist (Fritz) Sternberg [. . .] explains that from the (carefully taken) photograph of a Ford factory no opinion about this factory can be deduced.'[15] This is no doubt true of the industrial propaganda and *Neue Sachlichkeit* industrial photography he was referring to, and while a single photograph of a factory can tell us very little about the direct relations of production

inside, it can communicate an enormous amount of political–aesthetic information when placed in historical and political context, and when arranged in contrast with other images – a montage principle favoured by Brecht himself. So, here, we put into juxtaposition particular images and objects from the Berlin–Moscow–'America' axis as political and aesthetic dream-images. The various dreams are not, however, considered to be of equal political value. The dreamers range from industrialists to aesthetes, from proletarians to bureaucrats, from architects to propaganda designers, and the oneiric energies they convey with each image shift each time that it is morphed and adapted.

It is important to tie this closely to the processes of revolution, reaction and reform that link the revolutionary period of 1917–23 with the consolidation of Stalinism and Nazism in 1933–36. We must not patronise Constructivism as a kind of aestheticism of politics and machinery that only affixes itself to politics through an aesthete's fetishisation.[16] A generation which battled through civil war, revolution and the privations of what can now be seen as an abortive attempt at creating socialism, does not deserve to be treated as naive and unworldly. In addition, while I will be careful not to present an avant-garde that corresponds with my own political predilections, and have no intention to ignore domination when I see it, the present work takes particular issue with Boris Groys' view of the Constructivist avant-garde as a proto-Stalinist experiment in Hegelian totalisation; this is buttressed by a reading of the particularly extravagant writings of Kasimir Malevich and, more seldom, of a couple of writers from *LEF*, in *The Total Art of Stalinism*.[17] It is a smart work of satire and an insightful attempt to inhabit the Stalinist mindset, but it is a book which should never have been taken seriously as a work of avant-garde