

WHAT IS CINEMA?

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*An Introduction to the Charlie Chaplin Persona*

The techniques used in Charlie's gags naturally deserve a study all their own, which cannot be undertaken here. It will have to suffice to point out that these techniques attain in his films a sort of ultimate perfection, a supreme density of style. It is absurd, for example, to call Charlie a brilliant clown. If films did not exist, Charlie would no doubt have been a brilliant clown, but film enabled him to raise circus and music-hall comedy to its highest aesthetic level. Chaplin needed film to liberate comedy totally from the tyranny of time and space imposed by the theatre stage and the circus ring. With a camera, the unfolding of a gag can be shown in full and with the greatest clarity. Not only does a gag no longer need to be exaggerated so that everyone in the hall can understand it, but the opposite is true: he is now able to refine it in the extreme, to trim and polish its inner workings so as to create a high-precision machine able to respond immediately to the most delicate stimulus.

It is significant, moreover, that Chaplin's best films can be seen over and over again indefinitely without a loss of enjoyment. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the satisfaction we derive from certain gags is so deep as to be inexhaustible, but especially because their comic form and aesthetic value owe basically nothing to surprise. Surprise, which is exhausted after the first viewing, yields to a much more refined pleasure: the anticipation and recognition of perfection.