

## Killing Time:

### Charlie Chaplin and the Comic Passion of *Monsieur Verdoux*

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The destructive character lives from the feeling not that life is worth living, but that suicide is not worth the trouble.

Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character"

#### I

For the modernist avant-garde, Charlie Chaplin was the exemplary modern person. He was also modernity's greatest eccentric. In the first half of the twentieth century, no figure was more centrally ensconced in the emotional circuits of mass publicness than Chaplin, the one-time British music-hall performer who came to stand for the potential of Hollywood cinema as a global, sentimental vernacular. That modernity's universal person could also be its most unaccountable outsider; or that the prototype of modern personality might be located in Chaplin's very inimitability; or that the world's greatest celebrity, its most instantly recognizable public figure, would also serve as a vital conduit of intimate feeling on a global scale – such seeming paradoxes are not unique to Chaplin's public persona but constitute a fundamental fantasy of modernism's self-understanding. Chaplin's person is at once radically common and a figure of inassimilable difference. And this impossible tension fuels the construction of many of modernism's most liberatory affects.

Recall, for example, the special place of Chaplin's body in Walter Benjamin's concept of "innervation," the theory of affective transmission that grounds film's public pedagogy – cinema's function as an experiential training ground in which the collective adapts playfully to the opportunities of human nature transfigured by technology. As Benjamin's most insightful critics observe, his model of innervation is thus rather more dynamic than Freud's.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Freud understands innervation as the transfer of nervous energy from sensory perception to motor activity, Benjamin, influenced by contemporary developments in perceptual psychology and acting theory, understands affect to flow in the opposite direction as well: from the riotous movements of the publicly mediated body on film to the perceiving spectator. Innervation, for Benjamin, requires performing bodies, public figures through which the collective learns how it feels to "[have] its organs in the new technology."<sup>2</sup> Consider Benjamin's own examples: "American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. Their forerunner was the figure of the eccentric. He was the first to inhabit the new fields of action opened up by the film – the first occupant of the newly built house. This is the context in which Chaplin takes on historical significance" (WA, 118). The performing body of the "eccentric," a Russian term for circus performer, becomes for Benjamin the inaugural player in the *Spielraum* of second technology, a squatter amidst the celluloid architecture of experience. His ontology is reproducibility. And his apotheosis is Chaplin, whose dislocated gestures "dissect the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations," marking the internalization of fundamental discontinuity of both the production process of the assembly line and cinematic technology itself.<sup>3</sup> A model of mediated human being, his significance for the masses "lies in the fact that, in his work, the human being is integrated into the film image by way of his gestures"; his performance "applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions" (DS, 94). As an eccentric body, Chaplin's utopian function is twofold: he is an allegory of human being

with technological organs, and his jerky movements, circulating in the public medium of film, provide emotional therapy for his audience, whose laughter is its means of coming to grips with its own experiential reorganization.

If Chaplin is modernity's model human being, then the Chaplinesque names this being's *manner*, its affective comportment, and beyond that, the emotional potential of mass-mediated public life. Regarding the politics of the collective laughter produced by Chaplin, modernist intellectuals could disagree mightily. Theodor Adorno, for example, understood group laughter at the riotous violence of silent slapstick comedy as, at best, a form of "bourgeois sadism," and at worst, a masochistic identification with the scars of the modern subject's own mutilation.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Adorno and Benjamin often saw things differently. But their squabble over laughter highlights how, under the characterological umbrella of the Chaplinesque, moderns of various political allegiances hastened to grasp the lineaments of human personality and the timbre of emotional life as they were transformed by capitalist modernity. Because the stakes of this process of discernment were so high, its tone, ludic and hyperbolic, was often modulated by utopian and even apocalyptic strains.<sup>5</sup> In its jerky and technologically mediated movements, Chaplin's Tramp promised, as it modeled, a kind of being best suited to modernity's public world: distracted and forgetful, dislocated and improvisational, aimless and instantaneous, at home in modernity's mechanical world of things. Leftist German intellectuals like Benjamin and Kracauer would go even further. Chaplin's anarchic personality exploded bourgeois models of personality; its "negative expressionism" set him drifting from the demands of bourgeois sociality – moral propriety, consistency of character, domestication.<sup>6</sup> If Benjamin's Chaplin is a cyborg, with his organs in the new technology, Kracauer's is a man without content, an antisocial *unmensch*: "Other people have an ego consciousness and exist in human relationships; he has lost the ego; thus he is unable to take part in what is usually called life. He is a hole into which everything falls; what is otherwise connected bursts into fragments as soon as it comes into contact with him."<sup>7</sup>

Chaplin's mutability in the modern imagination follows from modernism's own dissatisfaction with humanist notions of personality and character, abetting its efforts to fashion alternative forms of personhood and publicness. But this changeability was also central to Chaplin's Tramp persona, as Thomas Burke, a friend of Chaplin's, remarked in 1932: "At no stage can one make a firm model and say 'This is Charles Chaplin'; for by the time it has done the model has moved. One can only say, 'This is Charles Chaplin, wasn't it?'"<sup>8</sup> Chaplin's biographer explains this evanescent, protean quality as a function of Chaplin's training on the relentlessly competitive music-hall stage, where the performer had precious little time to leave a mark on his audience. Here, change issues from the professional pressures of a reified stage that trades on – even as it belies – performances of the self's expressive singularity. In this way, Chaplin's allegory of the mediated human being is also always a story of the modern person's relationship to temporality and historicity. This is a story, more specifically, of capitalist modernity's rationalization of time, its structuring of the instant that is the work of cinema and that is everywhere synonymous with the potential – and threat – of Chaplin's idiosyncratic personality.

In this essay, I argue that Chaplinesque feeling is eccentric feeling: the emotional complex that constellates around the supposed outsides of instrumental reason – unstructured contingency, singularity, unrepeatability, nonsense, and non-instrumentality – and the forms of public being they energize. I read Chaplin's late comic masterpiece, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), as a meditation on the fate of the Chaplinesque in the modern imagination, and thus, of the death of a particular kind of being-in-time. Chaplin's public image, and his public persona, had themselves changed drastically in the 1930s and 1940s when, as Gilles Deleuze has put it, Chaplin's last films "both discover sound and put Charlie to death."<sup>9</sup> But why, I ask, must this killing be so noisy? What are the politics of laughing at this funeral? And what forms of feeling and passionate intensity energize the film's crimes of dispassion? In *Monsieur Verdoux*, I suggest, comic violence operates as an excessive mimesis of the social order that hinges on the domestication of modernity's quintessential outsider. In this film, the Tramp, modernity's most public person, is killed by satire, polished smooth and supplanted by an inhuman character – both a dandy and a serial killer of women. In so doing, the film's bilious humor –

melancholic, but not quite black – at once enacts the violent defacement of Chaplin's own public image, perhaps modernity's most saleable cynosure of human feeling, and provides the defensive cover for Chaplin's more poetic performance of eccentric feeling, here under the sign of political exile.

## II

### Time's Body

In her recent study of cinema's own participation in the modern cultural imperative to rationalize time, Mary Ann Doane argues that "the lure" of contingency in capitalist modernity is "saturated with ambivalence."<sup>10</sup> "Time," Doane explains, "becomes heterogeneous and unpredictable and harbors the possibility of perpetual newness, difference, the marks of modernity itself. Accident and chance become productive. Nevertheless, these same attributes are also potentially threatening. Their danger resides in their alliance with meaninglessness, even nonsense" (11). Because Charlie's social being is instantaneous being, contingent being, it is riven with a similar ambivalence. "Charlie," explains Deleuze, is "caught in the instant, moving from one instant to the next, each requiring his full powers of improvisation" (169). Deleuze reads Charlie here in the shadow of André Bazin, for whom Chaplin's gags depended on the "basic principle of never going beyond the actual moment."<sup>11</sup> In Chaplin's signature gesture, his backward kick, he proclaims "his supreme detachment from the biographical and social world"; it is "the perfect expression of his constant determination not to be attached to the past, not to drag anything behind him" (CC, 150). This kick is a modernist event, a rupture with normativity that is haunted by mechanism. The price Charlie pays for his anti-mimetic eccentricity – his "nonadherence to the formal sequence of events" – is what Bazin calls the "mechanization of movement," Chaplin's original sin:

The activity of a social being, such as you or I, is planned with foresight and as it develops, its direction is checked by constant reference to the reality that it is concerned to shape. It adheres throughout to the evolution of an event of which it is becoming part. Charlie's activity on the contrary is composed of a succession of separate instants sufficient to each of which is the evil thereof . . . The capital sin of Charlie, and he does not hesitate to make us laugh about it at his own expense, is to project into time a mode of being that is suited to one instant, and that is what is meant by "repetition." (CC, 151)

This formulation is especially curious because it suggests that Chaplin's anti-sociality, his being-in-an-instant, in fact refuses *real* change, the co-evolution of "social being" and reality. In Chaplin's refusal of the past, and his dwelling in the instant, he repeats. In repeating, he "has been imprudent enough, one way or another, to presume that the future will resemble the past, or to join naively in the game played by society and to have faith in its elaborate machinery for building the future . . . its moral, religious, social, and political machinery" (CC, 152). Chaplin's comedy inheres in the ambivalence of contingency: his instant is always a repetition; his momentary life, rather than a rejection of the social order, bespeaks an absurd faith in its mimetic operation. When we laugh at Chaplin, Bazin suggests, we laugh at his conversion of the moment into an abstraction, a homogeneous temporal, moral, and social continuity projected seamlessly into the future.

Before turning to the fate of the moment in *Verdoux*, then, we might profitably return to two of modernism's more cutting meditations on the relationship between Chaplinesque feeling and the temporality of life under capitalism: those of Wyndham Lewis and Sergei Eisenstein. The modernist gadfly with fascist leanings and the queer Russian revolutionary filmmaker and theorist are, admittedly, strange bedfellows. I choose them because I see Chaplin's satire in *Verdoux* operating in a quasi-Lewisian fashion, and because the revolutionary nature of Chaplin's comedy in the film is bound not just to his radical political sympathies but also his film's proto-queer critique of heterosexual domesticity. Writing some twenty years before Bazin, Lewis offered a related appraisal of Chaplin as a

being-in-time in a short chapter of *Time and Western Man* devoted to “The Secret of the Success of Charles Chaplin.” For Lewis, Chaplin’s small personality holds the key to an emotional pathology of modern publicness:

For the pathos of the Public is of a sentimental and also a naively selfish order. It is its own pathos and triumphs that it wishes to hear about. It seldom rises to an understanding of other forms of pathos than that of the kind represented by Chaplin, and the indirect reference to “greatness” in a more general sense, conveyed by mere physical size, repels it.<sup>12</sup>

Chaplin, for Lewis, is a faux-revolutionary *mannerism*, an adjective or adverb, a *rhetoric* of emotional public appeal characterized by the “pathos of the small” (*TWM*, 64). Such pathos skillfully packages revolutionary sentiment and child-style for “crowd consumption” (64). In this sense, in the childish prose repetitions of Gertrude Stein and Anita Loos, Lewis discerns “all the craft of the Charlie Chaplin appeal, all those little, dissimulated threads run cunningly to the great, big, silly heart of the innocent public,” which is, of course, “maternal” (57). The “naively selfish order” of Chaplinesque pathos cements the narcissism of democratic mass publics, aided in Lewis’s paranoid narrative by the self-feeling of the Bergsonian “time-mind.” And the time of this mind, to follow Lewis’s hyper-connective logic, is the “time of the true-romantic,” which is the discontinuous capitalist temporality of fashion and advertisement, “which is” – with one last turn of the paranoid screw – “fundamentally sensation . . . the glorification of the life-of-the-moment, with no reference beyond itself and no absolute or universal value; only so much value as is conveyed by the famous proverb: *Time is money*” (64, 8, 11). Fueling this hermetic circuit of public sensation, Chaplinesque feeling is a “perfidious flattery of the multitude,” a sham “plainmanism” that marks, for Lewis, yet another vulgarization of the revolutionary “will-to-change.” The phenomenon of Chaplin, the “great revolutionary propagandist,” only further convinces Lewis that modernity’s public world is incapable of *authentic* change; its fashionable revolts follow, and further reify, the rhythms of capitalist industry.

Sergei Eisenstein, who finally befriended Chaplin, his longtime hero, during his brief stint in Hollywood in 1930, found himself again preoccupied with the Chaplinesque near the end of his life, as he struggled to complete the second part of *Ivan the Terrible*. In his essay “Charlie the Kid” (1945), Eisenstein locates “the unique and inimitable conceptions of what is called the Chaplinesque humor” in Chaplin’s brand of “evolutionary escapism,” his strategic “regress into infantilism.”<sup>13</sup> Returning to the terms of his Disney essay, Eisenstein insists that Chaplin’s infantilism is specifically American, allowing for an “intellectual and emotional exit” from America’s ruthlessly rationalized social system, its “intellectual conveyor-belt system” and its “businesslike formality” (119). In putting humor to use as, paradoxically, an escape from use, Chaplin’s comedy reflects what Eisenstein sees as America’s dominant philosophical paradigm – pragmatism – which asks, above all, that humor be “*useful and applicable*” (112). Like joke books that instruct Americans how to use humor to hone the efficiency of their personality, to make it maximally effective within its environment, Chaplin’s humor is both a cure for and a symptom of rationalization: at once “evidence of ‘Americanism,’ reaction to which gives birth to a particular kind of comic treatment: that of escape from this kind of ‘Americanism’” (113-114). Chaplin’s method performs a similar function for his spectators, “offering an infantile pattern for imitation, psychologically infecting the spectator” with a “leap into infantilism . . . as a means of psychological escape from the limits of the regulated, ordained, and calculated world about him” (119).

The leap is no less appealing for being an ideological lure, “merely a palliative” (*CK*, 120). Eisenstein’s manifest theoretical burden in this essay is to use the Chaplinesque “cry of longing for that most perfect form of escape” to distinguish the shortcomings of American capitalism from the evident perfections of the Soviet State. “In the Soviet Union,” Eisenstein continues, “we do not flee from reality into fairy-tales; we make fairy tales real” (121). And yet the more Eisenstein insists that he has no sympathy with concepts like “infantilism” and “flight from reality,” and the more rigidly he constructs a developmental narrative that positions the Soviets as “inevitably ‘grown-ups,’” as “people

with a 'conscious purpose,'" the more he betrays his profound attraction to Chaplin's eyes, his wish "to see the images of things spontaneously and suddenly – outside their moral-ethical significance, outside valuation, and outside judgment and condemnation – to see them as a child sees them through a burst of laughter" (124). I have argued elsewhere for the implications of Eisenstein's investment in affect freed from purpose and morality for our understanding both of his mimetic politics and his queerness.<sup>14</sup> In "Charlie the Kid," Eisenstein's fascination with Chaplinesque humor – the burst of laughter that is a cry for escape "from interdiction on children's unrestricted desires" – reflects a similar longing. The outside of rationalization is also an outside of heteronormative and totalitarian social models (134). "Marriage," Eisenstein notes, "is the end of childish, infantile existence – the last little boy dies and an adult emerges!" (132). On the other hand, a grown-up man that "has retained unrestrained infantile traits in their fullest" is "a shameless aggressor, a conquerer, an Attila," an Ivan, an Adenoid Hynkel (136). Sympathy eventually becomes identification with Chaplin's queer social position, with he who "will inevitably be unable to adapt himself to life, will always be placed in a ridiculous situation, will be funny and provoke laughter" (134). Eisenstein describes this situation in a variety of ways: it is the position of Chaplin's favorite animal, the wolf, "[o]bligated to live with the pack. But always to be alone . . . [a]lways at war with his own pack"; it is the position of Charlie in the final scene of *The Pilgrim*, "[o]ne foot on the territory of the Sheriff, the law, shackled feet; the other foot on the territory of freedom from law, responsibility, court and police" (128, 135).

And it is also the position of satire, in which the Chaplin of *The Great Dictator* (1940) grows up, joining the great "age-long struggle of Satire with Darkness," while preserving the cruel "ruthlessness of the child's approach to phenomena" (CK 134). Anent the violent eccentricity of the satirist, its odd position both inside and outside the social world, Lewis and Eisenstein might have found some rare common ground with each other, and with Chaplin, at war with his pack in the 1940s. Lewis, remember, describes his own laughter as "chaplinesque in its violence," which is to say, in its exaggerated mimesis of the social, the way it "made a drama of mock-violence of every social relationship."<sup>15</sup> When *Monsieur Verdoux*, "A Comedy of Murders," premiered in 1947, Chaplin's popularity was at its nadir, and the comedian was poised to make a killing. Chaplin's reputation had been savaged in the press in 1943 and 1944 following Joan Barry's much publicized paternity suit against the comedian, which resulted in two sensational public trials under Mann Act violations. Though blood tests confirmed that Chaplin was not the father of Barry's child, the jury in the second trial concluded differently, and ordered Chaplin to pay child support. In the courtroom, and in the press, Chaplin was painted as a serial womanizer, an immoral alien, a "gray-headed old buzzard, little runt of a Svengali, [a] debaucher and a lecherous hound who lies like a cheap Cockney cad," in the words of Barry's lawyer.<sup>16</sup> This surely hyperbolic example enacts the associative chain of otherness that accrued around Chaplin in the 1940s, when his sexual deviance blurred with his progressive political opinions, and both solidified his status as America's most famous internal other.

While Chaplin's form of socially critical filmmaking had long been celebrated by the left in American and abroad – and would often be explicitly championed in the Soviet Union – the comedian's star image in the 1930s became increasingly wedded to those progressive political commitments expressed in his most celebrated satires, *Modern Times* (1936) and *The Great Dictator* (1940). A consistent supporter of Roosevelt and the New Deal, and a fervent anti-fascist, Chaplin was actively involved in Popular Front activities in Hollywood, attending meetings of the Anti-Nazi League and the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. In the wake of the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941 and the US's entry into the war, Chaplin became a featured speaker in at least a half-dozen fundraising rallies in 1942 for the Russian War Relief – speeches in which he embraced the Soviet Allies as "comrades" and called for the opening of a second front. In the late 40s, Chaplin's staunchly pro-Russian stance during the war, like his personal friendships with Hollywood's community of exiled European leftists like Hanns Eisler, Leon Feuchtwanger, Salka Viertel, and Bertolt Brecht, were signs of procommunist dissidence, downright immoral in America's reigning post-war climate of liberal consensus and virulent anti-Stalinism. In this freighted political atmosphere of rising Cold War paranoia, sexual intimacies and private friendships were not just the stuff of public

sensation but inescapably political, tainted by the recriminations of immorality, criminality, and ethnic alterity that stain the mantle of American bourgeois citizenship. Though he could never prove Chaplin a member of the Communist Party, J. Edgar Hoover, who had first become interested in Chaplin's subversive activities in the 1920s, began exhaustively documenting Chaplin's "subversive" activity in the 40s, and eventually amassed an FBI file on the comedian totaling nearly 1900 pages. Hoover's paranoid construction of Chaplin as dangerous radical, abetted by the yellow press, conservative patriotic groups like the American Legion and the Catholic War Veterans, and Attorney General James McGranery, would – in 1952 – result in Chaplin being denied a reentry permit into the US by the INS following his trip overseas to promote *Limelight*. By the time *Monsieur Verdoux* opened in 1947, the cruel political machinery that would, just five years later, result in Chaplin's decision to renounce his residence in the country that been his home for forty years, had been set in motion. Before leaving America for good, Chaplin was already on the path of exile.

### III

#### Being on Time

*Monsieur Verdoux* should be understood as Chaplin's own self-instrumentalization: the efficient putting to work, and death, of a body so often positioned, in the modern imagination, as the outside of instrumental reason and proper social being. Based on an "idea" by Orson Welles, the film is a loose fictionalization of the life of the famous murderer Henri Desiré Landru, a middle-class Frenchman and darling of the surrealists, who swindled and killed 10 women between 1915 and 1919, before being guillotined in 1921.<sup>17</sup> Still set in France, Chaplin's film takes place in the context of the Great Depression and the onset of World War II, and chronicles the criminal activities that result in Verdoux's eventual capture by the police, his prosecution, and in the film's final scene, his non-criminal putting-to-death at the hands of the French state. The film opens elegiacally with a shot of a tombstone, which reads "Henri Verdoux, 1880-1937." As the camera tracks across the cemetery, we hear the sound of a disembodied, sophisticated voice:

Good evening. As you see, my real name is Henri Verdoux, and for 30 years I was an honest bank clerk until the depression of 1930, in which year I found myself unemployed. It was then that I became occupied in liquidating members of the opposite sex. This I did as a strictly business enterprise, to support a home and family. But let me assure you that the career of a Bluebeard is by no means profitable. Only a person with undaunted optimism would embark on such an adventure. Unfortunately, I did. What follows is history.

This cool opening suggests what the remainder of the film will bear out: that Verdoux's murderous line of work – wooing, marrying, and killing women – is overdetermined by the violent fluctuations and temporal rhythms of a capitalist economy and, in fact, goaded by an untenable fantasy of bourgeois domesticity. Verdoux, a monster of middle-class optimism, builds his personality on the futures market, but the lie of this futurity is underscored by the retrospective finality of the voiceover. The person of "undaunted optimism" is already dead, his future always a past.

This is also, of course, a joke about the demise of the Chaplinesque body, to which we are introduced in a series of displacements: first, as a frictionless, cultivated voice, speaking in 1937, from beyond the grave; second, as a picture produced by the Couvais family as they discuss the mysterious disappearance of their daughter, one of our hero's victims; and then, finally, in the flesh at Verdoux's villa in the south of France, where the killer prunes his rose bushes as the smoky remains of what can only be Thelma Couvais billow from a chimney in the background. From sound without a body (the inversion of Chaplin's silent screen persona), to the frozen contingency of the photograph, to monstrous animation – the defacement of the Tramp is theatrical, and played for laughs. As the odious Couvais family gathers around the photo of Thelma's new husband, Verdoux, Thelma's boorish

brother notes: "Funny-looking bird, isn't he?" We cut to the photo of Verdoux, a torso shot. Attired in cufflinks, cravat, and beret, his left arm held across his midsection and supporting his right arm, the forefinger of his right hand poised delicately on his right cheek, Verdoux camps in the hysterical bosom of the bourgeois family. Thelma's father, holding the photo, notes "Must be a pretty good salesman to sell anything with a face like that." Verdoux's dandification is central to the Tramp's execution, which the film accomplishes with nearly perfect symmetry, with mechanical efficiency. As Bazin noted long ago, "there is not a feature of the former character that is not turned inside out like the fingers of a glove. No ridiculous cutaway, no bowler, no outsize boots, no bamboo cane, rather a dapper suit, a broad grey silk tie, a soft felt hat, a gold-handled cane."<sup>18</sup> If Charlie "is essentially a socially unadapted person; Verdoux is superadapted" (*MM* 106). The most obvious sign of such domestication is Verdoux's marriage to a frail invalid, which Bazin reads suggestively as the mark of Charlie's adoption of bourgeois morality and interiority: "love alone can prompt his desire . . . not only to adapt himself to society but one might even say to accept a moral way of living and a psychological individualism" (*MM*, 115). And yet this adaptation fails, or better yet, succeeds too well: Verdoux's hyper-mimesis of the proper bourgeois yields not morality but amorality, not stable interiority but a pathological blurring between the individual and the social, the public and the private.



**A Superadapted Person**

Central to *Verdoux's* modernism is its ironic reworking of the tropes of aestheticism and decadence, and specifically its knowing exaggeration of the aporias of the dandy's expressivism. Often overlooked in readings of *Verdoux* is the fact that Chaplin's serial killer is modeled not just on Landru, but also on the English aesthete, art critic, painter, forger, and poisoner Thomas Griffith Wainwright, lionized in Oscar Wilde's famous essay, "Pen, Pencil, and Poison: A Study in Green" (1889). Of Wainwright's virtuosic person, Wilde wrote: "But then it is only the Philistine who seeks to estimate a personality by the vulgar test of production. This young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than to do something. He recognized that Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it."<sup>19</sup> Wainwright's killings, Wilde continues, "gave a strong personality to his style," proving how one "can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin" (89). Using Wainwright's style to deny the "essential incongruity between crime and culture" (90), Wilde's essay in many ways epitomizes aestheticism's role as a "counterdiscourse" of nineteenth-century bourgeois masculinity, one whose modernity "lay paradoxically in a proclamation of the exhaustion of the modern, a refusal of complacent bourgeois ideals of reason, progress, and industrial masculinity through a defiant celebration of the deviant."<sup>20</sup> And yet the dandy's Baudelairean heroism – his repudiation of the rationalized sphere of work and nationalistic striving for the feminine space of consumption, style, and the cultivation of the self as an aesthetic object – depends upon the incessant production and consumption of novelty and difference. The dandy's private sphere of distinction is always the public temporal horizon of the market. If Chaplin's *Verdoux* is, as one contemporary reviewer suggests, a model of the "'completely integrated' bourgeois, as thoroughly conditioned by society as one of Pavlov's dogs was conditioned by the sound of the bell," then *Verdoux's* status as both deviant dandy and exemplary businessman underscores how the aesthete's heroic eccentricity – like the Chaplinesque, a supposed outside of bourgeois instrumentality – is, in fact, always on capitalist time.<sup>21</sup>

The temporality of *Verdoux's* private life – his serial intimacies and killings – is determined by the rhythms of the public world, ravaged as it is by economic depression and the onset of war. His murders, and his amorous techniques more generally, are managerial responses to his uncertain financial health and the temporal vicissitudes of the marketplace. He marries and murders serially, we are led to believe, to sustain his "real" home with an invalid and long-suffering wife named Mona (what else?) and his cherubic son, Peter. Even though *Verdoux*, in the scene which introduces us to this family, triumphantly presents Mona with the deed to their "beautiful home and garden" ("*That*," *Verdoux* asserts, "they will never take away from us"), the domestic foundation upon which he builds his personality is shaky, at best. For example, a call from his stockbroker informs him that if he doesn't come up with 50,000 francs by the morning he'll be wiped out, and so he resumes his identity as "Mr. Varnay," and hops on a train to con his wife Lydia, whom he kills after convincing her to withdraw all her money from the bank. But even when he is in the reassuring bosom of his first, true home, entertaining guests, he is at work, perfecting his criminal style by plying his pharmacist neighbor for information about undetectable poisons, "a humane method of doing away with dumb animals." The film's dark humor thus comes, in large part, from *Verdoux's* increasingly intractable and multiplying domestic entanglements, his desperate criss-crossing of the French countryside as he attempts to manage his portfolio and, when necessary, "liquidate" his assets. "In this monoxide world of speed and confusion," *Verdoux* explains, he must "always be on the go every minute." For there is always a train to catch, and so his wooing must be rushed. His sonorous bromides about love and tenderness are punctuated by furtive glances at his wristwatch or the omnipresent clocks on the mantels of his multiple hearths. *Verdoux* has at once too many homes and too few, and the more abodes produced by this serial killer in the service of a romantic dream of feeling truly at home, the more he finds himself internally displaced, a stranger to himself. As James Agee, one of the film's greatest champions, noted long ago, "*Verdoux* cannot bear to sit still, to stop work, long enough to realize his predicament. He cannot feel 'at home,' at home . . . He gets home seldom, apparently never longer than overnight; the divided spirit can only assert its unity, even its illusion of unity or its desire, in twilight contemplation or in dreams; and the pressure of business is always on him."<sup>22</sup> This is

another way of saying that Verdoux's amorous being, like his home life, is about technique. "To be successful," Verdoux quips, "one has to be well-organized."

This is perhaps most evident in his seduction strategy for the unusually resistant Madame Grosnay (Isobel Elsom). In one scene, Verdoux visits a local florist where he asks that Grosnay be sent three dozen roses and a corsage of orchids, and that the order be repeated "twice a week for the next two weeks." Returning to the shop a week later, Verdoux asks how many orders Mme. has received so far. "Two, Monsieur," replies the shopgirl, "one every three days." "So there's still a week to go?," Verdoux asks. "Very well," he continues, "we must keep up the good work and hope for the best." The violence of Verdoux's amorous style is remarked upon by Mme. Grosnay, who explains to a female friend that the card accompanying the flowers is "Always the same thing. Just two words: 'Please. Please.' I've never known such aggressiveness." Verdoux puts even *roses* to work, using the accoutrements of romance to mark and manage time, to render it calculable and available for use. This passion is a relentless formalism, his entreaty a travesty of bourgeois manners that converts mercy into aggression, ruth into ruthlessness, as the film itself turns sentiment into satiric violence.

There is also a good joke in the florist's shop about the relationship between the fate of sentiment and the disembodied character of Verdoux's voice: both its peculiar emptiness and its efficiency as a tool of seduction. Just after Verdoux gives the word to repeat the floral assault, the comely young sales girl hands him a telegram from Grosnay. Verdoux tells the girl to cancel the order, and asks to borrow the shop phone: evidently, the steady insinuations of his florid patter will continue where his bouquets left off. Chaplin frames the call in a curious two-shot: Verdoux occupies the left half of the frame; in the right half, and slightly closer to the camera, is the shopgirl, tending perfunctorily to an arrangement of roses at the frame's border. Both characters face the camera so that we can best register their reactions to the artful plying of Verdoux's instrument. Explaining that "she should be very angry" with Verdoux but has "no more resistance," Grosnay asks Verdoux (as Mr. Varnay) why he is so persistent. His response, and the dialogue that follows, is worth quoting in full:

Verdoux: Very simple. Because I love you, Marie.

Grosnay: Why you hardly know me!

Verdoux: I've always known you. From the moment we met, I knew there was a deep, wordless understanding between us. It was in your eyes, Marie. They are beautiful, like the loneliness of distant stars. I often wonder, who are you *in the dark*?

Grosnay: I . . . don't quite understand.

Verdoux: I can't express it in words. Only a symphony could say it. The music of the spheres! [Cut to medium-close of Grosnay]

Grosnay: My dear, I'm not as ethereal as all that. [Cut to close-up of Verdoux]

Verdoux: You are everything. Saint, sinner, snake and gazelle all in one. I can't forget you. Every look, tone, gesture, is engraved in my mind. I must see you Marie. Immediately. Now! [Verdoux pauses for Marie's assent.] Good. I'll be right over!

The comic thrust of the scene depends upon the various ways Verdoux's sweet talk can be considered empty, since this Lothario is so obviously full of it. As Verdoux extols the astral virtues of Mme. Grosnay, he is making eyes at the shopgirl, who is clearly aroused by this nonsense. In fact, the scene ends with a close-up of the inflamed girl who, overcome by this voice, has to stifle a swoon as Verdoux doffs his hat in an adieu. And ample Marie, as the cut-away reminds us, is anything but ethereal, as she herself knows. The comic transactions of the scene thus trade, in part, on an old

misogynist joke about the suggestibility of female passion, which becomes only more ridiculous the more Verdoux's words beggar sense. (This is also, of course, a comment on Chaplin's own longstanding public reputation as an immoral womanizer, as Verdoux plays Svengali to each girl's Trilby.) In this way, the scene continues a running aestheticist gag about the impoverishments of feminine discernment, here the shopgirl's bad taste in men. Unable to discern emotional sincerity from hamming, the girl repeats the mistake of another of Verdoux's wives, Annabella Bonheur (Martha Raye), who – susceptible to scams of all sorts except Verdoux's own – invests poorly, in one instance putting some of her money into a stunning chunk of glass that she takes for a diamond. Verdoux, who has his own designs on Annabella's fortune, is outraged: "It's glass, you ass! Glass!" The florist scene offers another iteration of the same nasty joke: "He's a lying ass, you ass! An ass!" And Chaplin's performance lets his viewers in on it: as he pronounces "Good. I'll be right over!," Verdoux looks directly at the camera, winking at our shared knowledge of the inevitable, if inexplicable, success of technique. Resistance is futile.

On another level, the scene gives voice to a more pointed comment about passion's fate. Verdoux – like many good businessmen – does his best work on the phone, where emotional sincerity is mediated by distance. The joke is not about the misdirection of passion, but its *capacity* – the inability of Verdoux's passion to exteriorize itself, to take another as its object. It is not the case that Verdoux *says* that he simply loves dowdy Grosnay when in fact the object of his purple outburst is the beautiful, impressionable young clerk. Rather, the scene clarifies that what Verdoux most enjoys is the sound of his own voice. If Verdoux is a love machine, it is one fueled by its own rhetoric, by the kind of sonorous narcissism – that, taking such evident pleasure in its own form – winds him up and keeps on the go. This joke then, and it is a dark one, has rather to do with the very bankruptcy of Verdoux's emotional being, which cannot get outside of an empty, redundant, passionate circuit because it is devoid of memory and desire. The punchline comes in the next scene, when Verdoux presents himself at the home of his unforgettable amante, whose "every look, tone, gesture," remember, is engraved in his mind. Verdoux (as Varnay) is welcomed into the home by Grosnay's maid, whom Varnay sweeps into his arms, mistaking her for Grosnay. So much for memorable Marie. The confused maid leads the newly chastened Varnay into the living room, where he repeats the blunder, taking Grosnay's friend Mme. Lasalle for his beloved until Lasalle introduces herself and explains that Grosnay will join them soon. The laugh here is at the expense of Verdoux's connoisseurship, since the lady killer proves to be no more discerning than the film's battery of gullible women. But his incapacity for passion is more costly – and more damning – than the women's failure in taste, which produces a surfeit of passion, however misguided; Verdoux's passion fails at its source. The scene is cruel, not just because of the evident interchangeability of the female to Verdoux – their function, for him, as all one body – but also because these comic repetitions reflect the hermetic sameness of a voice that is all form and no body – a ruthless, grainless voice bereft of history, remembrance, and the passion that inheres in the capacity to think relationally, to notice the difference, or the similarity, between past and present moments.

In the cold repetitions of Verdoux's intimate language – "Please. Please." – lies the fate of the film's public world, since Verdoux's time quite simply *is* social time, which is the deathly time of business and the state. This is clarified in the film's most compressed montage sequence, collapsing five years of world history into two minutes of screen time, and offering a parable of economic determinism. An obscene, if unwitting parody of Benjamin's utopian vision of Chaplin's mediated filmic body, the sequence intercuts banner headlines of Parisian newspapers ("Stocks Fall, Panic Ensues"; "Banks Fail, Riot Ensues") with exemplary shots of social devastation (anguish on the trading floor, suicides of the newly broke, bank riots), and personalized images of a distraught Verdoux, frantically pleading for more time on the phone as his bank threatens to foreclose on his mortgage: "Listen, give me ten minutes. Just ten minutes!" He begs for his domestic life: "You can't do that! My wife and child!" Granted a moment's reprieve, he calls his stockbroker, and tells him to sell everything he has at once. "Are you crazy?" his broker responds. "You were wiped out hours ago!" The relationship between the public world and Verdoux's private and psychic life in this sequence is a local example of the mechanical causal logic enacted by the headlines: there are only

actions and reactions in the monoxide world. Killed by the market before he knows it, Verdoux is thus a living anachronism, a zombie, a dead man walking. After a close-up of his stunned face, registering the news of his own death, he is inserted back into the hasty course of history, which, as the remaining montage clarifies, is heading towards its own, holocaustic finality. The newspapers keep rolling off the presses like the bills Verdoux counts with professional alacrity in one of the film's recurring sight gags. The headline "Crisis in Europe" introduces another rapid montage: now, of Europe's gathering crowds, of Hitler and Mussolini speaking, of assembling martial masses. The sequence ends by returning to the diegetic world of the film, with a close-up of a man holding a copy of *Le Figaro* where his face should be. The headline reads: "Nazis Bomb Spanish Loyalists. Thousands of Civilians Killed. War Imminent in Europe." The man lowers the paper. It is Verdoux, and he is now, evidently, an old man; bereft of his jaunty gait, he hobbles down the boulevard. His civilized exterior has crossed fully into decadence. The sequence, temporally efficient and itself ruthless, confirms that Verdoux's businesslike killing is the same pathology as the mass murder of war, and that his violence, like the swift institutional cruelty of the state that puts him to death, is but the satiric extrapolation of the fundamental – and fundamentally tautological – law of social relationships: "business is business."

As we return to Verdoux at the end of the montage that has been the death of him, Verdoux meets on the street a young girl (Marilyn Nash, credited only as "The Girl") whose life he had spared in a crucial sequence earlier in the film. There, having plucked this lost soul off the street for the purposes of testing one of his poisons, Verdoux – in a flash of compassion and mercy – decided, instead, to feed the girl, give her a little money to get by, and send her on her way. Before he does so, the serial killer (who is also a vegetarian) offers to adopt a kitten that the girl had herself rescued from the street. Verdoux's uncharacteristic fit of fellow feeling, we are led to believe, stemmed from a profound identification, for the girl was also "up against it," a victim of these tragic times. A Belgian war refugee (a prostitute in the original script), the girl had just been released from jail for pawning stolen goods; while in prison, she had lost her husband, an invalid like Verdoux's own wife. This reencounter proves decisive for the film's final movements, as it clarifies and transforms the curious condition in which we find Verdoux, while also recasting the mawkishness of their first meeting in a steely new tone that pervades the close of the film. The girl asks where Verdoux is going. "Nowhere," he replies. She explains that she has looked for Verdoux in the apartment where he had taken her earlier in the film. His answer? "I haven't been there in ages." Out of place and out of time, Verdoux struggles to remember the girl, and finally does: "Of course, your invalid husband . . . something I shall never forget." She now offers to take him to dinner to repay his earlier kindness. The scene thus neatly inverts the positions in the earlier economy of charity – she is now giver, he the recipient – but evacuates it of sentiment. There are no kittens in the backseat of her limousine, and as the pair are chauffeured to dinner at the Café Royale, both facing the camera, the girl explains her newfound fortune: "After I saw you, my luck changed, I met a munitions manufacturer." "Ah," Verdoux replies, "that is the business I should have been in." The girl, looks blankly ahead and replies, dispassionately: "Yes, it will be paying big dividends soon."

The punchline earns no rimshot but rather the mournful strains of a tango, and we dissolve to wide shot of the ballroom inside the Café Royale, where the camera singles out and traces the movements of a lone pair of dancers, surrounded by appreciating patrons, as they cross the floor with sensual precision. The pair fills the screen, the man dips his partner and they both swiftly exit the frame to reveal Verdoux and the girl, ensconced in a verbal *pas de deux*. It is the burden of this conversation to imbue Verdoux with passion and purpose since, as the girl remarks, he has clearly lost his "zest for bitterness." Verdoux sharpens the point: for him there is "nothing," because soon after the crash, he "lost his wife and child," and now feels as if he has "awakened from a dream": "I was a bank clerk, my existence a monotonous rhythm, day in and day out, counting other people's money. Then something happened. I lost my position. What followed was a numbed confusion, a nightmare, in which I lived in a half-dream world, a horrible world. Now I have awakened. Sometimes I wonder if that world ever existed." Verdoux's speech would distinguish three temporalities: the time of business, the oneiric time of his career as a serial killer, and the waking time of recognition. But the film has born out that

this awakening is the stuff of false consciousness, since these are all the same dead time. The monotonous rhythm of the clerk is doubled by the “numbed” time of the serial killer and aesthete, its putative but finally compensatory outside. From this confused state, in which he murders (and creates) to maintain a fantasy of bourgeois domesticity, he awakens only to an existential state of despondency in which he is hermetically sealed, untouchable. Nothing, Verdoux explains, can “take hold” of him now, because “despair is a narcotic, it lulls the mind into indifference.” The girl responds by proposing *another* time:

Girl: But that’s giving up life.

Verdoux: We must all give it up sooner or later.

Girl: Yes, but not before our time.

Verdoux: Why?

Girl: Must you know the reason for everything?

Verdoux: It might help a little if we did.

Girl: Life is beyond reason. That’s why you must go on, if it’s only to fulfill your destiny.

Verdoux: Hmm . . . My destiny.

Here, the tango music stops. Like Verdoux’s telephonic wooing, the tango is a visual metaphor for passion tempered by form. But from here on out structured feeling will be tantamount to controlled anger – a restrained voice filled with ruth. In the emotional contours of the tango, Chaplin finds a match for the voice of critique, now poised to do violence to the hermetic repetitions of a reified public world by exaggerating its very efficiency, a subversive mimesis enacted in Verdoux’s telling utterance in this scene: “Business is a ruthless business, my dear.” It seems Verdoux is destined for satire, which like munitions manufacturing, is also ruthless work, but never dispassionate. And he formally accepts this destiny at the end of this scene, for also dining at the Café Royale are two members of the family of Thelma Couvais, who recognize Verdoux and summon the police. First eluding capture, Verdoux escorts the girl from the café to her car, and bids her adieu, proclaiming “I’m going to fulfill my destiny” and turning his gaze directly to the camera. He then walks back into the café and hands himself over to the police. Like the primitive weapons of the slasher, satiric speech is a tool of intimate violence – it needs proximity to its object to do its best work. For Verdoux, destiny means having to say you’re never sorry.

Promptly condemned to death, Verdoux will speak with a similar alacrity and violence. At nearly the same time, Adorno remarks in *Minima Moralia*: “If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty ‘to consider the evanescent itself as essential.’ They insist, in opposition to Hegel’s practice and yet in accordance with his thought, on negativity.”<sup>23</sup> The exemplary bourgeois’s unflappable cheer has vanished with the empty rhetoric of the sweet-talker. From monster of optimism to monster of aphorism – the condemned Verdoux is a maxim machine. Throughout the film, Chaplin has signaled Verdoux’s frenetic movement across the French countryside with a repeated low-angle shot of a train’s implacable wheels accompanied by the rising, seven-beat sonic pulse of violin strings that reaches, on the final beat, a nearly hysterical crescendo. The shot, and its sonic counterpart, appear with mounting frequency as the film progresses towards its own, inevitable end, and thus put Hollywood’s most durable signifier of progress on the same well-oiled track that ends with Verdoux’s swift, and state-sponsored, execution. As Bazin noted, the shot flattens time, “reaching almost a level of abstraction, so tightly does it condense time and events into a single image” (*MM*, 122). Perhaps

most striking about Verdoux's famous speechifying at the film's end is the way it calibrates its satiric manner to the temporal rhythms of this hasty world, producing a corresponding intensity. Consider Verdoux's statement on his own behalf at the trial: "As for being a mass killer, does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the soul purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and children to pieces? And done it very scientifically? Hm!" The rhetorical formulation is important: Verdoux's questions, ruthlessly collapsing his killing with statist violence under the rubric of "science," seethe with Chaplin's own indignation, and the moral passion that always throbs behind satiric *sang froid* erupts in Verdoux's disdainful sneer: "Hm!" What follows is, first, the condensed form of wit – "As a mass killer I'm an amateur by comparison" – and then meta-wit in the form of black humor: "However, I do not wish to lose my temper because very shortly I will lose my head." Verdoux has no time for the kind of gushing humanist encomium that ends *The Great Dictator*. He capitalizes, instead, on what Freud famously called the joke's "economy in the expenditure of affect."<sup>24</sup> He needs wit's very suddenness, its intensity, which is also – the trial speech clarifies – the imminence of judgment: "Nevertheless, upon leaving this spark of earthly existence, I have this to say: I shall see you all, very soon, very soon."

On death row, Verdoux is visited by a member of the press who comments on the cynicism of his speech. Verdoux responds with another masterpiece of verbal compression that is also a comment on the fate of the Chaplinesque: "To be idealistic at this moment would be incongruous." Let me unpack this explosive *mot* without defusing it. At first blush, this is a joke about one of the more intransigent theories of the comic, which holds that laughter is caused by the perception of incongruity, the temporal, social, and characterological disjunctiveness perfected by Chaplin's Tramp character. It is also, then, a comment on the death of temporal singularity – the spark of contingency, the free, unstructured "moment" as the outside of rationalized time. The hermetic time in *Monsieur Verdoux* is the punctual self-presence of a moment robbed of historicity. In Benjaminian terms, this is the modern temporality of *Erlebnis*, the fragmentation of experience into an empty series of instants devoid of memory. For the Benjamin of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939) and the Chaplin of *Verdoux*, such dehistoricized experience unites the isolate time of aestheticism and the shocked, unreflective immediacy – "the lived moment" – of everyday modernity, whose accumulation of empty instants are modeled in rushed rhythms of the press headlines: "Verdoux trial nearing end"; "Bluebeard Verdict Expected Today"; "Verdoux to be Guillotined." What's more, Verdoux's line reminds us of the lesson of Wainwright, the murderous aesthete whose style, for Wilde and Chaplin, repudiates "the essential incongruity between crime and culture" (Wilde, 90). Verdoux's speech, like Verdoux himself, is excessively congruent. When the pressman pleads, "Give me a break. A story with a moral to it. You, the tragic example of a life of crime," Verdoux responds melancholically, "I don't see how anyone could be an example in these criminal times." If Charlot was modernity's model person, Verdoux represents the death of exemplarity as such, which is to say, he perfectly enacts exemplarity's own deconstructive logic.<sup>25</sup> He exemplifies the collapse of the singularly violent person in a world where such violence is historical: "That's the history of many a big business. Wars, conflict. It's all business. One murder makes a villain, millions a hero. Numbers sanctify." The iciness of these two words issues from their mimetic proximity to the cruel locutions of the public world: "Stocks Fall. Panic Ensues."

The character most at home in this world of "fear and uncertainty" is not, finally, Verdoux, but his unkillable wife, Annabella Bonheur. In the repeatedly botched attempts by the vagrant seaman, Capitaine Bonheur (aka Verdoux), on Annabella's life, the film satirizes (while enjoying) aestheticism's misogynist disdain for the female as natural, sentimental, corporeal, and vulgar. "Woman," Baudelaire remarked infamously, "is *natural*, that is to say, abominable. Also she is vulgar, that is to say, the contrary of the dandy." Verdoux claims to love women, but not *admire* them, because "they are of the earth, realistic, dominated by physical facts."<sup>26</sup> This is especially true of the sublimely vulgar Annabella, a one-time showgirl who has found her fortune by winning the lottery. What she lacks in taste and discernment, which is a great deal, she makes up for in dumb luck. She is so lucky, a friend exclaims, that "if she fell on a banana peel with her neck out of joint, the fall would straighten it." This line is especially apt as it connects Annabella's luck to the corporeal unruliness and

tyrannical thingliness of slapstick performance. Bazin has observed that what remains of slapstick and beyond that, what remains of contingency, survives in the scenes with Annabella. But what kind of a survival is this? Annabella herself remarks to an incredulous Verdoux after one of her narrow escapes from murder, “Nothing affects me. I’m lucky.” Slapstick’s materiality depends upon *a body being affected*, upon the human’s sudden awareness of the indomitable intransigence of nature and thus, of its own temporal being, its changeability. Annabella’s luck, rather, borders on the transcendent: it is hermetic, oblivious to exteriority rather than its very pathway. Liberating contingency blurs with the violent arbitrariness of the market, which grants Annabella the same salvation as that erstwhile war refugee whose luck changed after she married the war profiteer: “You know the story, from rags to riches,” the girl explains. What is abominable in Annabella Bonheur (the death of slapstick) is what monstrous in this girl (the travesty of the rags to riches story, which is of course, Chaplin’s own): the fate of luck, reduced to a mirage of antebellum happiness.<sup>27</sup> Chaplin, like Verdoux, like Capitaine Bonheur, can never really go home again.

The film is cruel, but not entirely devoid of passion or hope because the site of contingency has shifted from Charlie’s instantaneous body to the critical externality of sound. The stochastic pulse of aurality is established in an odd series of sound gags in the film. In the first, Verdoux is seated at a grand piano, hammering out a forceful piece in celebration of the liquidation of Mme. Varnay. The camera is positioned at the back of the piano so that Verdoux’s body is locked in a triangle composed of the plane of the open piano, its lid, and its arm. Verdoux plays vigorously, stops, and hears a rapping sound, seeming to issue from the bowels of the instrument itself. He starts again and stops. Again he hears the steady rapping. He looks confusedly at the camera and opens the piano to look inside. He hears the sound one last time and we cut to a close-up of a maid, Louise, whose insistent knocking on the window pane outside the kitchen is revealed as the offscreen source of the sound, which disrupts Verdoux’s aesthetic self-enclosure. In the second episode, Verdoux (as Capitaine Bonheur) and Annabella go fishing on a remote lake. Just as Verdoux is about to murder Annabella (he has slipped a noose around her neck to model the proper technique for “lassoing” fish), his action is interrupted by a voice-off—here the stylings of a song. “What’s THAT?” asks Annabella? “A *yodeler*,” Verdoux responds. “That ruins everything!,” gripes Annabella. “It certainly does,” Verdoux quips. The third sonic interruption occurs on the day of Verdoux’s wedding to Marie Grosnay. Waiting for the ceremonies to begin, a group of guests remarks on the size of the event. A friend of Marie’s explains, “Yes, they both wanted a *quiet* affair, but you know how these things grow!” We hear another voice-off – now, an awful, braying noise. The startled group turns and looks to the left of the frame. “What’s THAT?,” one guest demands. The camera pans left to ascertain this sound’s material source, confirming what the viewer already knows: it is the inimitable, annoying laugh of Annabella Bonheur, who, unknown to the good Capitaine, has passed through Paris for a few days and has, by chance, been invited to the nuptials by one of Grosnay’s friends. Annabella’s odd comment, “I’m a stranger here,” confirms what is most important in all of these gags: their position of exteriority on the unfolding of dramatic scenes that they interrupt, and in so doing, change. Moments later, Verdoux arrives at the wedding and as he places a celebratory glass of champagne to his lips, hears another eruption of the same, coarse laugh. His astonished look of recognition is also unmistakable. The comedy of the rest of the episode stems from Verdoux’s attempts to extricate himself from his domestic entrapment. Hiding from Annabella under a table of food, Verdoux will ask for a sandwich whose inverted definition cruelly names his own tough spot: “a piece of white bread between two pieces of meat.” In a bind, Verdoux’s comic utterance estranges the sandwich.

The interruptive force of sound in these scenes issues from the aleatory throb of the outside to flummox the hermetic self-containment of art, murder, and marriage, all subsidiaries of same deadly bourgeois enterprise in *Verdoux*. Traditionally, the voice-off, the sound technique in which we hear the voice of a character not visible within the frame, is used to secure the homogeneity of the depicted space, affirming the unity of the diegesis by stitching together the space beyond the frame with the space we do see, anchoring sound in a body. And yet, as Mary Anne Doane points out, “there is always something uncanny about a voice which emanates from a source outside the frame.”<sup>28</sup>

Whenever sound is detached from its source in a body, the voice-off runs the risk of "exposing the material heterogeneity of the cinema" (378). Chaplin's film insists on the dissonant materiality of the voice-offs, underscoring their indiscernability (What's THAT?), and their uncanny interruptive power. This dissonance is, we might say, citational: bursting from an *other* scene, it changes the situation, and thus breaks from the masturbatory sonic circuit of Verdoux's telephonic wooing.<sup>29</sup> These voice-off gags sound the position of passionate externality that is the displaced home of satire. In this sense, the film's laughter is irreducible to the sensibility of black humor, which would produce a ruth-less voice, stripped of suffering, memory, and pain. As André Breton explains, quoting Freud's late essay "Humour" (1928), what is "fine about [humour] is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's virtuous assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to the wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure."<sup>30</sup> A Freudian version of romantic irony, black humor is a technology of distance from the traumas and injustices of the objective world, which the humorist turns into sources of subversive *jouissance*. The comedy of Chaplin's satire in *Verdoux*, by contrast, is urgent and atonal, pained and implicated in the world. Cruel and melancholic, this passion is more reminiscent of the comic nihilist Benjamin once dubbed the "destructive character," who has the "consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong."<sup>31</sup> Benjamin himself associated this sensibility with satire, and specifically with the "mimetic genius" of Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, who "imitating while he glosses, pulling faces in the midst of polemics," is forever mired in the empty language of his fellow men by the prosaic context of citational violence: "His passion for imitating them is at the same time the expression of and the struggle against this implication, and also the cause and result of that ever-watchful guilty conscience in which alone the demon is in his element." In "the lightning flashes of improvisation," the incoherent voice of the satirist "tries out the abundance of personae inhabiting the performer ('per-sona': that through which sound passes), and about the fingers dart the gestures of the fingers populating his voice."<sup>32</sup>

Neither the romantic ground of sensation, nor the unified expression of a self, the dislocated voice of Chaplin's satire just sounds *off*, funny, improper. Disoriented and disorienting, obscure but obstinately signifying, this grainy voice is heard whenever Chaplin, modernity's most famous mime, rolls his cultivated English r's in a queer French body, or in Verdoux's repeated, and repeatedly absurd, locution that would stand in, impossibly, for the mother tongue: "Ooh, Lah, Lah!"<sup>33</sup> It is, I would suggest, the doubled voice of Chaplin the melancholic, for whom the Chaplinesque ego itself becomes the lost object. And it is the alienated voice of Chaplin the political exile, who speaks bereft of home and country, and whose mournful dislocation we hear in the film's inaugural voiceover, its dissonant voice-offs, and in Verdoux's last, biting speeches. *Verdoux's* noisy satire is as particular as Chaplin's silent clowning was putatively universal because it is founded in the funniness of the foreigner, who provokes laughter through obtrusive exteriority, comedy through dissent, and dissent through the excessive congruence of satire. The more *Monsieur Verdoux* is on time, the more untimely is the film's critique, and the less Chaplin's laughter is at home in modernity.

#### IV

##### Displaced Time

From slapstick idiosyncrasy to satiric asynchronicity. Within the film, the death of eccentric feeling follows from the putting-to-death of the Tramp's temporal being, the swallowing of undomesticated contingency by the flow of rationalized time. But, as I have also suggested, the film's satire, speaking from a position inside and outside the world of the film, also speaks to other, and less instrumental, models of publicness. This publicness is performative, and evident in the film's enactment of temporal anachrony, its explicit production of disjunctive time. When the film debuted in 1947, capitalism – which had manifestly failed to deliver on its promises in the 1930s – had found its time again, and its

triumphant abode in America's post-war liberal consensus. The temporal setting of *Verdoux* in the years leading up to the Depression and World War II is thus not a retrospective sealing of America's nationalistic time as destiny, but a satiric mimesis of the social that returns to the past to plead for its recognition in the present, a repetition ("Please, Please") that hopes to disrupt history's seeming inevitability. This disjunctive time (what Benjamin might call the *Jetztzeit*, or "now-time"), brings the past and the present into forceful – and previously unrecognizable – constellation, opening the images of *Verdoux's* past, perhaps, to a different future. This eventful turning of history into historicity is performed in the ambiguous temporality enacted by Verdoux's initial voiceover: "What follows is history."

In fact, this aggressive enactment of *Verdoux's* radical untimeliness in the America of 1947 was built into the changes to the film's marketing strategy. The picture's failed initial run in New York in April was presaged at the infamous press conference at the Gotham Hotel that followed its premiere on April 11. Chaplin began the questioning by thanking the press for attending: "I am not going to waste your time. I should say – proceed with the butchery." And it was a bloodbath: Was Chaplin a "Communist sympathizer" and could he "define his present political beliefs"? Was he "a personal friend" of Hanns Eisler, and did he think the composer a Communist? Why had he never become an American citizen? Had he "no patriotic feelings about this country or any other country?" Did he intend to create sympathy for Verdoux, and does he "attach any significance to the release of a depression picture *at this time*?" Chaplin's responses – that he sympathized with Russia during the war, that he had no "political persuasions whatsoever," that he was not nationalistic but rather considered himself a "citizen of the world," that Verdoux was a tragic symptom of the "cancerous conditions" of nation in times of the catastrophe, and that these catastrophes are systemic – fell on largely unsympathetic ears.<sup>34</sup> And Chaplin so responded with his own violence, aggressively marketing the national release of the film with the publicity slogan, "Chaplin Changes! Can You?," a formulation that insists on the temporal incommensurability of the film and its public.



"Chaplin Changes!"

What's more, he timed the film's national release date in Washington, D.C. for September 26, the day following Chaplin's scheduled testimony before HUAC, and sent the following statement to the press:

It is no ironical coincidence that my comedy also opened in the nation's capital less than 24 hours after representative [sic] J. Parnell Thomas begins his probe into asserted communistic activities . . . I have no better harbinger than my comedy *Monsieur Verdoux*. Also, if I am summoned to make personal appearances in the daytime in the House of Representatives I might just as well make a few such appearances in the evenings with my picture at the Capital Theater.<sup>35</sup>

Capitalizing on idiosyncrasy, Chaplin enacts his untimely political sentiments by, paradoxically, insisting on the coincidence of his public persona and his personal politics, which here merge vertiginously. In a biting telegram to Thomas, inflected with *Verdoux's* own sensibility, Chaplin clarifies that in his mimesis of national politics, as in humor, timing is everything: "In order that you may be completely up-to-date on my thinking, I suggest you view carefully my latest production, *Monsieur Verdoux*. It is against war and the futile slaughter of our youth. I trust you will not find its humane message distasteful."<sup>36</sup> Doubling *Verdoux's* own work of imitative excess, his proximity to a reified and instrumental social world, Chaplin's mimesis effects a critical estrangement. His timing is uncanny. For the more stridently he claims, effectively, "my cinematic body is me," and the more he insists on his punctuality, his very timeliness, the noisier his voice of dissent. The more vehemently he yokes together his public and private person in one unified identity, the more he enacts his temporal displacement from prevailing current of patriotic sentiment. It is hardly a coincidence that Chaplin performs his political disidentification with America's emerging Cold War consensus in a film about a character who himself experiences the blurring between total publicity and homelessness. For just as *Verdoux* builds his private life on public time, and finds himself uncannily doubled, so too does Chaplin's aggressive performance of public timing find the comedian nowhere at home. In its satiric poetics of displacement, *Verdoux* is, finally, a work of exilic feeling, imbued with an affective complex of political alienation, critical melancholy, and the mournful deprivation of privacy by public life. It is *Monsieur Verdoux*, and not *A King in New York* (1957), that is Chaplin's first and best film of exile. *Verdoux's* oft-remarked but undefined "funniness," like his ill-tuned voice, is that of the foreigner, the internal alien. Chaplin was, remember, a fellow traveler in the diasporic community of leftist Jewish émigrés in Hollywood in the 1940s. One of them, Theodor Adorno, whose contemporary *Dialectic of Enlightenment* thesis *Verdoux* in so many ways doubles, saw in Chaplin's mimetic personality not the stable features of the clown but a virtuosic kind of featurelessness, the "pure possibility" of the juggler: "Incessant and spontaneous change in Chaplin: this is the utopia of an existence that would be free of the burden of being-one's-self. His lady killer was schizophrenic."<sup>37</sup> The laughter provoked by Chaplin's strategic depersonalization in *Monsieur Verdoux* is modern insofar as it shares what we might call the ambiguity of modernist ecstasy, where the self's incessant untimeliness always courts both madness and liberation. It is, Adorno adds, in this laughter's "proximity to cruelty" that it "finds its legitimation and its element of the salvational" (59-60). The case of *Verdoux* suggests that the affects of modern privation need time to find their publics, and that this publicness, whatever its potential, best not be confused with the illusion of a first or final home.

## Notes

Many thanks to Jen Fay, Scott Juengel, Tyrus Miller, Karl Schoonover, and Sarah Wohlford, whose insightful comments on earlier versions of this essay contributed decisively to its final form.

All images courtesy of the Roy Export Company.

<sup>1</sup> See especially Miriam Hansen's rich comments on the concept of innervation in "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25. 2 (Winter 1999): 306-43.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: The Second Version," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 117. Hereafter abbreviated as *WA* and cited parenthetically in the main body of the text.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938*, 94-95. Hereafter abbreviated as *DS* and cited parenthetically in the main body of the text.

<sup>4</sup> See Adorno's letter to Benjamin of March 18, 1936, cited in Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92. 1 (Winter 1993), 32.

<sup>5</sup> On the post-war Parisian avant-garde's reception of "Charlot" as a figure of modern, cinematic beauty, see Louis Dulluc, "Beauty in the Cinema" (1917), and Louis Aragon, "On Decor" (1918) in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: Volume 1: 1907-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 137-139; 168-168. See also Sabine Hake, "Chaplin's Reception in Weimar Germany," *New German Critique* 51 (Autumn 1990): 87-111. On Chaplin's role in modernism's comic and corporeal poetics, see Susan McCabe, "Delight in Dislocation: The Cinematic Modernism of Stein, Chaplin, and Man Ray," *Modernism / Modernity* 8. 3 (September 2001): 429-452; see especially Hart Crane's poem, "Chaplinesque," in *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (New York: Liverwright Publishing, 1966). In a recently rediscovered, unproduced screenplay, James Agee would literalize the relationship between Chaplin and modern apocalypse. His stunning script casts Chaplin's Tramp as one of the lone survivors of a nuclear holocaust, from whose anarchic humanism mankind will attempt, and fail, to start again. The screenplay has recently been published as part of John Wranovics' study, *Chaplin and Agee: The Untold Story of the Tramp, the Writer, and the Lost Screenplay* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Negative Expressionism," cited in Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory, and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002), 16.

<sup>7</sup> See Siegfried Kracauer's review of *The Gold Rush* (1926), cited in Hake, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Burke, cited in Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 171.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>11</sup> André Bazin, "Charlie Chaplin," in *What is Cinema?: Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 149. Hereafter abbreviated as *CC* and cited parenthetically in the main body of the text.

<sup>12</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 64. Hereafter abbreviated as *TWM* and cited parenthetically in the main body of the text.

<sup>13</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, "Charlie the Kid," in *Film Essays* (London: Dennis Dobson), 109-139. Hereafter abbreviated as *CK* and cited parenthetically in the main body of the text.

<sup>14</sup> See the chapter, "Eisenstein's Eccentric Types" in my study, *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricities of Public Life* (forthcoming, University of Illinois Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 101.

<sup>16</sup> The remarks of the prosecuting attorney in the case, Joseph Scott, are reproduced in D. William Davis, "A Tale of Two Movies: Charlie Chaplin, United Artists, and the Red Scare," *Cinema Journal* 27. 1 (Fall 1987), 48.

<sup>17</sup> On the surrealist investment in Landru, see Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> André Bazin, "The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux," in *What is Cinema: Volume 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 106. Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *MM* and cited parenthetically in the main body of the text.

<sup>19</sup> Oscar Wilde, "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," in *Intentions* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930), 65.

<sup>20</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>21</sup> See Arnaud D'Usseau's "Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*" in the Communist journal *Mainstream* 1 (Summer 1947), 309.

<sup>22</sup> James Agee, "*Monsieur Verdoux*, Part II," *Agee on Film: Volume 1* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1959), 259.

<sup>23</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Mimima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2002), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1960), 228-229.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Giorgio Agamben's formulation: "In any context where it exerts its force, the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type, and at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all. On one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity. Neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that *shows* its singularity." *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 10-11.

<sup>26</sup> Baudelaire as cited in Felski, 112.

<sup>27</sup> For a contemporaneous argument about the ideology of luck and chance as one of the monstrosities of rationalization, recall Adorno and Horkheimer's argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947): "But at the same time [spectators] are given the hint that effort would not help them in any case,

because even bourgeois success no longer has any connection to the calculable effect of their work. They take the hint. Fundamentally, everyone recognizes chance, by which someone is lucky, as the other side of planning . . . . Chance itself is planned; not in the sense that it will effect this or that particular individual but in that people believe in its control." Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 117.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Anne Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 378.

<sup>29</sup> On the function of humor as a phenomenology of change, see Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), xviii.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Destructive Character" (1931), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 542.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus" (1931), *Selected Writings, Vol. 2*, 442.

<sup>33</sup> I am indebted here to Barthes' distinction between culturally overwritten, romantic expressivism and the doubled, material, non-expressivist "grain of the voice," that "voluptuous pleasure of the signifier-sound." See "The Grain of the Voice," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 271.

<sup>34</sup> George Wallach's recording of "Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* Press Conference" has been recently reprinted in *Charlie Chaplin Interviews*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 103-118.

<sup>35</sup> Chaplin, cited in Davis, 53. For a detailed account of this press campaign, see also Charles Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>36</sup> Chaplin, cited in Davis, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Chaplin Times Two," trans. John MacKay, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9. 1 (1996), 59.