Damian Maher

The Laugh of the Tramp

The first time the tramp laughs on screen, he chuckles to himself. Sozzled, he growls and yaps at a young woman rocking in a chair safely out of his cane's reach. An older woman bustles into the hotel foyer, her curled pompadour all a-jitter. She leans over the counter to ask for the manager: she has a complaint to make. The tramp's head swivels round like a compass needle finding north. His eyes lock onto her behind. He rises unsteadily to his feet and grabs her arm as she crosses the room. This isn't his first pass at her. He has already used her hip as an armrest, been brought to his feet by her buttocks, taken her arm, and been swatted away. This time, though, he manages to say something to her before her shock settles into outrage. He smiles. She smiles back and then laughs. She frees herself and bats him away, amused by his flattery, incorrigibility, or even his cheek. He laughs after her, pirouetting before giving the space she has just vacated a gleeful donkey kick.

The second time he laughs is at Mabel, whose 'strange predicament' gives this 1914 Keystone production its title. The strange predicament in question is that she has been locked out of her room in nothing but her underclothes. Drawn upstairs by the lure of another young woman's buttocks, the tramp is shocked to find that Mabel isn't decent. Startled, he stumbles back against a doorframe. Mortified, she turns her body away from him to face her locked door. She bids him not to look with one hand and pounds on the door with the other. He doffs his derby hat, turns away from her, snatches a glimpse at the camera, and lets loose a boy's tee-hee at the sight of a girl in her underclothes. He covers his mouth with his hand, looks away, and then peeks back over his shoulder at her. In less than ten seconds, he has gone from being on the trail of skirts to laughing at what lies beneath them. The butt of the joke does, however, have a nice butt. So, the tramp approaches. She tells him to go away. He shushes her and looks around; no one is coming. Eyes on the prize, he fixes his hat, slaps his cane a few times like a rider giddying a horse, and breaks into a lecherous laugh. He gives her a suggestive 'you up for it?' nod and waddles up to her.

Unlike 'The Great Stone Face', Buster Keaton, the tramp laughs a lot. Keaton keeps a straight face, either unfazed by the mad excesses

whizzing around him or seriously intent on maintaining his composure, nonchalance, respectability, or inscrutability, however excessive and ridiculous the work to do so might appear.[1] Deadpanning gets a laugh but leaves it to the audience to do the laughing. The tramp, by contrast, makes a great show of laughing. The causes, consequences, and varieties of his laughter are numerous, but the audience is invariably put in the strange position of watching laughter pre-staged and embodied on screen.

Sometimes, he laughs for money. In *A Film Johnnie*, the tramp hatches a plan to join Keystone Studio to meet his screen-begotten crush, the Keystone Girl. He catches two Keystone actors heading into the studio. He clowns about before them and just won't stop laughing. Their mild amusement stagnates and curdles into annoyance as they realize that they need to pay off this giggling hanger-on. They give him a coin, which he takes facing away from them, palm upturned, stretched out behind him, laughing all the while into his handkerchief. At other times, he laughs at people trying to pull off this same move. In another Keystone film, *His Favourite Pastime*, a shoeshiner and toilet attendant —portrayed by a white actor in blackface—adopts the same pose. He turns his back to the tramp, extends his palm, and laughs. The tramp (once again soused) lights a cigarette with a match and drops the lit match into the man's upturned palm. The man yelps and runs out; the tramp sniggers. The delight he takes in aggression may be troubling, but more troubling, perhaps, is the delight he takes in his own amusement.

The tramp laughs when his rivals get their comeuppance. He cackles just as hard when his sexual rival is rebuffed and boffed by a woman in *Between Showers* as he does when he knocks a foe's teeth out with a brick in *Laughing Gas*. Affronts to innocent bystanders like the attendant are no less amusing. Holding aloft an acrobatically uncooperative cooked chook, the tramp-as-waiter taps out an egg, which falls, with a splat, on the upturned diner's face. The tramp guffaws. He even turns the man's head away from the camera so he can get a better look and laughs even more. He laughs like a rascal at the sight of a victim 'besmirched', the money-shot (if you will) of mischief films, the key early film genre that, Tom Gunning declares, has a 'scatological origin, a sort of toilet-training reversal children inflict on adults.'[2]

The tramp laughs at couples. He emits the same hand-over-mouth, boyish chuckle at the sight of a couple kissing on a bench in *Twenty Minutes of Love*, one of his 'park comedies'. In imitation, he throws his arm around a tree and smooches it. After the fun of tree-snogging has run out, he sidles up to the couple and sits down on the bench. Locked

in an embrace, they are unaware of the tramp. He waits. He tries to get a look in. He taps the woman on the shoulder. The two come apart, and he hoots with laughter. He keeps elbowing the perplexed woman trying to nudge her into seeing the funny side. The nudges become pats, then petting, then palming her hand on her thigh and might quickly have turned into fondling had not the miffed man and woman switched places. The man threatens to boff the tramp and then turns back to her, crossing his legs to expose to the tramp a close-fitted thigh. A grin flickers across the tramp's face. Just as the man and woman are resuming, he taps the man on the shoulder and whispers something flirtatious in the man's ear, which brings forth another laugh, and, by the Newtonian laws of Chaplin's comedies, sees him bumped off the bench by the man. The tramp brings their scuffle to an end by tapping the man on the arm, shaking his head and offering a toothy 'I didn't mean nothing by it' laugh before donkey-kicking the man not once but twice on his way out.

He laughs when he gets his bum feather-dusted by an idling maid lolling on the stairs. He laughs even harder when he daubs her face with a wet paintbrush in return. He laughs when he loses his composure—here, a drunken hiccup, there, a watch slipping out of his waistcoat and dangling at crotch-level—and he laughs to regain it. He laughs when he gets into trouble with men. He tries to steal their girl, he sips up all their drink like a giant hummingbird, or he simply can't resist giving a bum a good kick. He offers a simpering laugh to get out of it. He laughs when he is too brazen with women, when he steals a kiss from them or, to their displeasure, he throws his legs over theirs. He laughs off the offence or the queerness of his attempt, and he tries to laugh his way back into their graces. He laughs sweetly, almost with relief, as the women break into applause and laughter of their own at his dinner-roll dance in *The Gold Rush* (1925), a dance first performed by Fatty Arbuckle in *The Rough House* (1917), who was also rewarded with the laugh of a maid. The tramp even laughs like a machine in *The Circus* (1928). To avoid being noticed by a police officer, he mimics the jerks and the jolts of an automaton. When the thief discovers him, the two mimic figurines in an automaton clock to once again avoid detection. The tramp whacks him on the head with a club, wheels round and lets loose an unhinged laugh (see Figure 1).

What's so funny? This 'nicely impossible' question, to quote Simon Critchley, has not lacked responses.[3] When the tramp sniggers at the sight of a rival getting his own back or cackles like a guttersnipe as he hurls a ream of paper at an incensed man with a broken leg before a crowd of amused women, he might be seen to take a mirthful pleasure

Figure 1 Laughing like an Automaton (*The Circus*, 1928)

in a sense of eminence otherwise hard to come by in the life of a tramp.[4] If laughter is the 'brain-body's snort of exultation', as Wyndham Lewis (who was not Chaplin's biggest fan) puts it, there is no funnier punch line than a punch and nothing funnier to a bum than kicking a bum.[5] Theodor Adorno likened Chaplin to a 'Vegetarian Bengal Tiger' because Chaplin imitates and takes down his prey ruthlessly, swiftly, yet bloodlessly. Adorno knew this first-hand. Chaplin had imitated Adorno stifling his surprise upon shaking Harold Russell's prosthetic hand. (Russell had lost both hands in the First World War.) 'All the laughter he brings about is so near cruelty,' a still smarting Adorno writes, 'solely in such proximity to cruelty does it find its legitimation and its element of the salvational.'[6]

Saving salvation for later and setting raillery, ridicule, and exultation, as well as their differences aside, the tramp also finds great amusement and takes great pleasure in deranging and rearranging distinctions. Objects of satisfaction or convenience—an escalator, a seltzer bottle, a lampshade, a revolving door, a Murphy bed, a cob of corn speared on an ever-accelerating axle, a hearing trumpet—function and malfunction, exasperating and expediting the tramp as he pinballs around (and into) other obstacles, formalities, and stooges. Instrumentality and intimacy intermingle, such as when the tramp literally winds up Mr Stout with his cane in *The Rink* (1916). 'Humour takes place in the gap between being a body and having a body,' or as Critchley elsewhere quips, between our souls and arseholes.[7] Louis Aragon, James Agee, André Bazin, Beth Rae Gordon, Tom Gunning and William Paul

have variously described the gap when it comes to the tramp in terms of the Rabelaisian carnivalesque, the pathological, and the mechanical.[8] And what's so funny about that gap? The explanations, like every explanation of what makes a joke funny, could go on and on to the point of exhaustion. One could go to Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, who declare that comedy comes from toggling between relieving tension (as Sigmund Freud famously postulates) and stoking anxiety. One could then could go back to a scene in *His New Profession*, where the tramp laughs at a woman unwittingly touching his leg, and laughs even more when she then laughs at herself.[9] Or the mechanical stray hand might take one to Henri Bergson and how amusing he finds those automatic gestures to be.[10] Or, as a Rabelaisian reveller, the tramp might debag intimacy and ridicule what Adam Phillips calls our 'sociability', 'our wish to be together, our secret affinity for each other.'[11]

But the question is not, what's so funny, but what's the tramp laughing at, and why does Chaplin let him laugh? How does seeing him laugh on screen double, choke, stimulate or inflect the audience's laughter? What happens when the audience is exposed to laughter, whether it is our own or the tramp's, which, despite all the possible explanations, can still seem inexplicable and remote? Much of Chaplin's humour comes not from the gag itself but from what Agee names '*inflection*—the perfect, changeful shading of his physical and emotional attitude towards the gag.' His bout with the Murphy bed in *One A.M.* is funny; funnier still, Agee claims, are his 'glances of awe, expostulation and helpless, almost whimpering desire for vengeance.'[12] Laughter is a peculiarly self-reflexive inflection because a titter, a simper, a tee-hee makes the tramp both an actor in and a spectator of comedy. Beamed onto the screen is the very response comedians will do anything for: a laugh.

In certain films, Chaplin makes laughter into a laughing matter to celebrate it as an expression of great relief. In *A King in New York* (1957), the broke and deposed King Shadov, played by Chaplin, gets a facelift to appear fresh and youthful in television commercials. The botched facelift comes with a particular snag: he can't laugh any more or else he'll undo the 'pleats' of skin tucked behind his ears. 'Laugh naturally, laugh freely, don't be afraid,' encourages Ann Kay, a TV advertising specialist. The King tries to smile and lets out a stilted chortle. He retorts, 'There is very little to laugh at. In fact, there's nothing to laugh at.' He is quickly given something to laugh at when he and Ann Kay that evening go to see a live show reminiscent of Chaplin's early performances. A portly worker in the tramp's signature derby hat unwittingly splashes gooey wallpaper adhesive all over an audience member dressed

in a tuxedo. The tuxedo-wearer gets up on stage and follows the man around. The audience's laughter mounts as the oblivious worker lathers the tuxedo-wearer in foam. The King must contain his laughter. He must keep a straight face as the tuxedo-wearer splashes back, frothy frotting with paintbrushes ensues, and the audience laughs all around. The King finally blows (and splits his facelift) when the worker squishes his derby hat down on the other man's head ejaculating foam out the top. It may be that there's nothing like a gag about male climax to relieve a man, but the King's laughter also reassures the audience that we are in on the joke and that laughter provides a sweet, spumescent release.

Elsewhere, laughter is far more disconcerting. The laugh of the tramp, however inscrutable and multi-purpose it may be, often cuts the tramp loose from an interaction and expresses something like relief and grief at the separation. Whether embarrassing or encouraging, the tramp's laugh brings the audience face-to-face with our laughter and the separation it brings about—a separation that is essential to spectatorship. Recognising 'the object of laughter is the subject who laughs,' to quote Critchley once again, discomposes or alloys the supposed relief or redemption or freedom that laughter and comedy have been thought to offer.[13] That discomfort might be one reason why the tramp's laugh, silent though it may be, has gone unnoticed. More perturbing still, the laugh of the tramp achieves or marks the separation he and, in some sense, the medium of film want to overcome.

The tramp laughs at the desire for presence and absence that David Trotter and Stanley Cavell find at the troubled heart of cinema and Chaplin's œuvre. The desire in question is the desire to 'really' connect with or apprehend reality, which requires overcoming subjectivity and absenting the human agent from reproduction. The camera, Cavell writes, is often thought to grant the wish to maintain 'the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it.'[14] Possession shall come through dispossession. Trotter and Cavell each celebrate Chaplin enacting and twitting this desire, but they do not see the tramp laughing at it. The laugh of the tramp is, in part, a disappointed recognition that he performs in the presence of others (on and before a screen), whom he cannot get close to, no matter how hard he gags, hams, waddles, coddles, flirts, helps, or mimics. Yet his laugh also catches the audience mid-laugh and troubles assurances that we can take pleasure from pain, can laugh off disappointments, and that the relief of detachment is, in fact, a relief. In two early films, *In the Park* (1915) and *Work* (1915), and during the final revelation in *City Lights* (1931), the laugh of the tramp exposes how troubled the release of laughter can be.

'The Biter Bit' from *In The Park* (1915), Chaplin's fourth film with Essanay, is one of the several bits Trotter identifies where Chaplin 'chose to dwell on, and to make a performance of, imitation itself.'[15] In *Cinema and Modernism* (2007), Trotter considers how film-makers and writers alike become increasingly pre-occupied with 'imitation to excess', which creates 'the effect not just of presence, of what is palpably *here*, *now*, in front of us, but of absence: of what had to appear and then disappear so that its palpable trace remains vividly for us.'[16] Imitation to excess is born of 'the double desire at once for presence to the world and for absence from it.'[17] Excess describes the degree of passion, the extravagant abnegations required to imitate, and the invariable superfluity of reproduction. The camera, along with all the other mechanical means for reproducing images then available, enabled writers and film-makers to stage the tension between immediacy and hypermediacy and expose the 'automatism within mimicry [and mimesis], not to dispel it, but to explore its (often fatal) attraction.'[18] Having examined the 'Wandering Rocks' episode in *Ulysses*, Tiresias as a remote observer in *The Wasteland*, and the constitutive absence of Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, Trotter focuses on 'The Biter Bit' to show how the tramp stages imitation to excess. Even though the bit ends with a laugh, Trotter does not consider how laughter then muddles presumed distinctions between disappointing and satisfying the desire.

In a park full of heterosexual couples eyeing and feeling each other up, the tramp stands alone playing with his cane like many single men are wont to do. An intertitle has just announced: 'The Biter Bit.' A thief comes up from behind and starts palming the tramp's breast pocket. The thief does not look at what he is doing. He does not face the tramp but stares squarely forward, almost eyeballing the camera. The tramp looks down and sees the thief's hand plucking out his handkerchief. He does not react. He stares vacantly at the camera. When the thief removes the handkerchief, the tramp takes it and blows his nose. He ingratiatingly smiles and chortles, gives the thief a nod of thanks, and returns the handkerchief to his pocket. The thief tries again and ferrets about in the tramp's back pocket. The tramp again looks down and sees what's going on. This time, he imitates the thief and plunges a hand into the thief's coat pocket. After much groping and a few furtive looks at the camera, the tramp pulls out a cigarette and then a match. He nods at the thief, and almost on cue, the two swap places before he lights the match on the back of the thief's neck.

Trotter coyly calls their double act a '*pas-de-deux*.' They 'imitate each other madly, in complicitous resistance, or resistant complicity.' Their dance, collaboration, or intimacy is no less intense, in Trotter's eyes,

for being nonchalant, transient and impersonal. Were the tramp to react aggressively or storm off, the two would not have had the pleasure of one another's company. Imitation, not desire, brings this pseudo-couple together: 'The biter gets bitten, that is, imitated,' and vice versa.[19] That Trotter distinguishes desire and imitation might seem strange given that his claims for imitation to excess are, at core, claims about a desire for presence and absence. The distinction might also appear untenable given that the thief and the tramp are imitating the heterosexual heavy petting going on, off-screen, all around them. They make robbery and cruising look one and the same. Part of the humour comes from their attempts to deny the close contact between swindling and stroking by avoiding eye contact and looking straight ahead. They enact a baby's logic: we aren't looking so there's nothing to see here. But Trotter clarifies and elaborates what he means by imitation as he draws attention to the subsequent scenes where the tramp is propelled by the inertia of imitation.

The tramp walks off-screen and then backs into view in a new scene, where a policeman twirls a baton. The tramp repeats the performance, but this time he plays the thief. Eyes to the front, he grazes the policeman's hand and reaches up to find not a pocket but his badge. Undeterred, the hand trails down the row of buttons before his fingers brush against the baton, now cocked upwards. The truncheon surprises him, and he offers the cop a crooked grin. He pats the baton with the front and back of his hand once more before rubbing his fingers as if they were now dirty. The tramp is locked in imitation, which he repeats automatically until it either misfires or, as is the case elsewhere, he fulfills the wish to copycat a machine and so, with great exuberance and hyperactivity, he achieves a 'new and defining solitude.'[20] Trotter stops here. But at the end of each imitation, the tramp laughs. The laughter is a break clause. When he laughs at the thief, jounces his eyebrows, and backs away, he extricates himself from the performance. Laughter is ecstatic: he is beside himself and so becomes a spectator. Laughter disrupts other 'The Biter Bit' sequences and impinges on the release, the distance an audience achieves by laughing.

In *Floor Walker* (1916), his first film with Mutual, the tramp encounters his doppelgänger in an office on the upper level of a department store. His double is a shop assistant who has conspired with the store's manager to empty the safe. Having disposed of the manager, the assistant needs to make a quick getaway. The tramp is also on the run from the store detective due to some prior shenanigans. Standing face-to-face, the two mimic one another as though looking at a reflection. When their hands meet, they pull back. Fixated, they repeat the slow mechanical

arc with the other hand. The tramp's hand has a cane in it. The assistant carries the briefcase full of loot. When they notice the discrepancy, they split. They both tear out of the room only to realize that there is nowhere to go; the store detective is outside one door, and the knocked-out manager is outside the other. The two come back and take a closer look at one another. The assistant takes off the tramp's hat and pulls his face close. The tramp gives him a peck on the lips and then offers a sheepish laugh. Yes, it is the laugh of a trickster and a celebration of the power of touch over that of vision, but it is also the laugh of a performer capable of detaching himself from the performance (or the imitation) and disassociating himself from the other. *Pace* Bergson, he laughs at rupture, not *raideur*—the mechanical encrusted on the living.[21] The laugh is itself a rupture as well as an aesthetic judgment that distempers the scene.

The rupture comes at a cost. For the tramp annuls his involvement and automatism when he laughs. With them goes the hope for a mode of representation or action uninhibited and unmediated by self-consciousness or the human more generally.[22] In an enigmatic ending to his chapter, Trotter suggests that the humour of Chaplin's films comes from the tramp keeping up these stylised, automatic, excessive imitations, although they are futile, even or especially when they come off. He persists with a machine-like determination. The 'will-to-automatism', which Trotter sees driving Modernists and Surrealists, is already automatic.[23] These artists already enact or act out the aspiration they (wrongfully) suppose they are still struggling towards. Mechanisation is not brought about by machines under Fordist capitalism but is endemic in desire itself. That's the joke, according to Trotter. The laugh of the tramp turns the dial one degree further. If laughter relieves the tension or discharges the disappointment of this unsatisfiable desire, then it does so by making room. The tramp, particularly in *Work* and *City Lights*, displays or bares to the audience something like the grief of making and gauging that distance, which, after all, the desire to imitate is intent on closing, yet which comedy re-opens.

In *Work*, a two-reel film made with Essanay, the tramp works as an assistant to a painter and wallpaper hanger. He and his boss have been hired by the Ford family to redecorate their house, found on the corner of Easy Street and Hardluck Avenue. Running before a row of automobiles, possibly Ford Model Ts, the tramp, now a mule, hauls his boss and cart. In the house, as his boss busies himself preparing the room, the tramp notices a white statue on a table. He picks it up, sees that it is a naked woman, and doffs his hat to it. While the room is being rearranged around him, the tramp returns to the statue several times.

When his boss orders him to go fetch something, he casts the statue a look over his shoulder. Back in the room, the tramp picks up the statue and lights a match on its base. The tramp must then balance a wooden plank on his shoulder so the painter can work on the wall. A title card appears: 'The Hypocrite.' The scene cuts to a medium close-up of the tramp leaning against the table. He looks down at the statue before staring directly at the camera and offering the audience a knowing smirk (see Figure 2). He takes a small, fringed lampshade and places it on the statue. Amused, he jostles the lampshade so it gyrates about the statue. He tosses the audience some waggish glances and whistles to himself. He picks up the statue, and, after a bit of back-and-forth, raises it high up so he can peek under the shade. He laughs and brings the scene to an end.

This twenty-second scene might appear slight. It has the feel of Chaplin horsing around off the clock, behind the scenes. But it is a gag about the apparent insight the film camera could offer as well as a reflection on comedic relief. The scene would have been particularly funny to an audience in 1915 because the title card, 'The Hypocrite', alludes to Lois Weber's controversial film, *Hypocrites*, released in January of that year, some 6 months before *Work*. *Hypocrites* reportedly features the first full frontal nudity in a non-pornographic film. Gabriel, a monk, carves a sculpture of the naked truth, which is (of course) a naked woman not unlike this small white statue. He reveals this sculpture to the people, who are so shocked by the nakedness of the truth that they veil the statue and kill him. A modern-day minister (played by the same actor) delivers a sermon on hypocrisy. He then has a vision, in which he is led to see the

Figure 2 'The Hypocrite' (*Work*, 1915)

truth of his contemporary society by a naked woman. She holds a mirror up to the townsfolk and reveals their true intentions. Where a family or a couple played, the audience now sees SEX and INDULGENCE, in all-caps, through the mirror lens (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3 The Naked Truth (*Work*, 1915) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Figure 4 The Truth Uncovered (*Work*, 1915) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The tramp makes a gag out of what it is to cover up. He covers up the woman in the name of propriety. His teasing looks accuse the audience of having been titillated (as he was) by the naked woman. The joke is on those who would have also enjoyed seeing a naked woman mist about on screen under the moral cover granted by *Hypocrites*. But the cover-up with the shade proves to be as, if not more, indecent, tantalizing, and revealing as the nudity. Peeking up under the shade-*cum*-skirt makes for another good laugh at the expense of the X-Ray vision in *Hypocrites*. The lens of truth, this inhuman device, pretends to uncover the nakedness of the town and its people. The tramp winkingly implies you might glimpse more of the truth by watching a man try to sneak a peek up a skirt.

Performing the gag knowingly, the tramp appears to take great pleasure in rankling his audience and amusing himself on the side of his job. Cavell equates such amusement with happiness. 'Chaplin and Keaton make a comedy of the fact that such a creature as a human being is fated to pursue happiness.' The comedy does not come from sweetening the bitter realisation that, fated as they may be to pursue it, human beings are unhappy, but, instead, from realising that they are, 'to a certain extent, under very exacting conditions, capable of happiness.' Cavell defines those conditions as acts of 'free imagination' such as these, which give 'habitation to his ecstasy and his grief.'[24] That is, Chaplin's imagination offers him ways to be content with his ill-fit in the world since ecstasy and grief are two contrasting attitudes towards being somewhat out of the world. The scene does end with a pleased, or perhaps relieved, laugh from the tramp. But his laughter is hard to watch. It seems impossible to say that an audience could share this laughter because there, on the screen, he does not just appear as far off as a lone child playing with his toys, but wryly conscious of the remoteness of performing and the detachment of amusement. 'Enjoyment is not always, hardly ever, unmixed,' write Ngai and Berlant, 'but in the moment, the feeling of freedom exists with its costliness. There's a relation between the grin and chagrin.'[25]

City Lights ends with a grin and much chagrin. For all the extended commentaries of this drama of recognition—where the blind girl, who has regained her sight thanks to the tramp, sees the tramp for the first time—no critic has noted that the film ends on the tramp's twinkly-eyed chuckle (see Figure 5).[26] As incredulity, pity, and mortification bring her to tears, the tramp bites his finger and emits a small laugh, which settles into a wide, nervous smile before the film fades to black. The laugh could well be interpreted psychologically: here is a nervous laugh that withdraws the tramp from the pain of her look and discharges the pain

Figure 5 A Smile in Recognition (*City Lights*, 1931)

into pleasure. Instead of the tears of a clown, here is the laugh of the tramp. The smile-laugh could provoke the audience to pity him: poor thing, he still doesn't see what's coming. Or it could be touching, he still loves her even though he sees how she now sees him. The tramp laughs not just before the blind girl, but before the audience. Chaplin thereby draws a disquieting parallel between her and the audience's recognition. Seeing his smile is both heartening and heartbreaking. Coming at the end of a comedy that does not end in marriage, the smile-laugh is not quite a substitute, not merely a defence. It is very hard to tell whether it is a testament to or an exposé of comedy and laughter, or whether he smiles accepting what a camera can disclose or smiles in refusal. The smile expresses or induces, perhaps, a certain anxiety about the limits of comedy. Does a laugh deflect or acknowledge the pleasure and pain that's there, intractable and otherwise unacceptable, before the tramp's and the audience's eyes? Can a laugh alleviate the anxiety that comedy takes place not in opposition to tragedy, but in the failure of tragedy and therefore nigh indistinguishably from unfunny, everyday plights? Can one laugh or smile in the face of such a sad laugh? In Samuel Beckett's *Watt*, Arsene presents 'the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy.'[27] Part of the Chaplinish, part of the ingenuousness of the tramp, is that he gets a kick (and not a painless one) out of exposing how strange, sad, lonely, and

wonderful this laughter can be. Seeing him almost laughing at the end of *City Lights*, what else can we do but smile in disbelief?

Notes

1 Sarah Balkin, 'Theory: Deadpan and Comedy Theory', in *A Cultural History of Comedy in the Age of Empire*, ed. Matthew Kaiser (Bloomsbury, 2020), 5:43–44.

2 Tom Gunning, 'Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy', in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1995), 91.

3 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Routledge, 2002), 2.

4 John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 4.

5 Wyndham Lewis, *The Wild Body* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927), 238; For a description of Lewis on Chaplin, see David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 183–84.

6 Theodor Adorno, 'Chaplin Times Two', trans. John Mackay, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996): 60.

7 Critchley, *On Humour*, 44.

8 Louis Aragon, 'On Decor', in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema*, 3rd ed., ed. Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2000), 52; André Bazin, *Charlie Chaplin*, ed. François Truffaut (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2000), 17; James Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, ed. Michael Sragow (New York: Library of America, 2005), 18; Tom Gunning, 'Chaplin and the Body of Modernity', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8, no. 3 (2010): 238, 241; Rae Beth Gordon, 'From Charcot to Charlot: Unconscious Imitation and Spectatorship in French Cabaret and Early Cinema', *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 3 (2001): 515–49; William Paul, 'Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality', in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew Horton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 109–30.

9 Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant, 'Comedy Has Issues', *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 233–49.

10 Henri Bergson, *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1900), 17; On the incongruity theory, see Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 15–19.

11 Adam Phillips, 'What's So Funny? On Being Laughed At', in *The Anatomy of Laughter*, ed. Toby Garfitt et al. (London: Routledge, 2005), 130.

12 Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 19.

13 Critchley, *On Humour*, 49.

14 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), 23.

15 Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 184.

16 Ibid, 181.

17 When speaking of presence and absence, both Trotter and Cavell explicitly develop and dissent from Bazin's account in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image.' Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 11.
18 Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 182.
19 Ibid, 185–86.
20 Ibid, 191. Sianne Ngai bases her claims for the humour of zaniness on excess. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 178–88.
21 Bergson, *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique*, 17.
22 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 153.
23 Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 198.
24 Stanley Cavell, 'What Becomes of Things on Film?', *Philosophy and Literature* 2, no. 2 (1978): 251.
25 Ngai and Berlant, 'Comedy Has Issues', 248.
26 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1–29; Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 19.
27 Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder, 1963), 48.

Author Biography

Damian Maher is an Examination Fellow at All Souls College, the University of Oxford. He is currently working on his first monograph, tentatively entitled *Reading to Perfection: Henry James Among the Moral Philosophers*. He has work published or forthcoming in *Critical Quarterly*, *the Review of English Studies*, *Essays in Criticism* and *The Henry James Review*, as well as public venues such as *The Times Literary Supplement, The Sydney Review of Books* and *The Australian Book Review*