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Comic Irony in City Lights

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Abstract

This essay analyses Charles Chaplin's use of comic irony in *City Lights* to represent his interpretation of the society of the United States of America. The director's combination of melodrama and slapstick comedy in the film provides an ironic portrayal of the society on screen. I focused on the three main characters of *City Lights*, the Tramp, the millionaire and the blind flower girl, and established different levels of understanding of the events. The audience, being in a higher position of understanding than the characters, is able to comprehend Chaplin's intention to convey his political and social concerns. Charlie's impossibility to fit in and his friends' success to find their place in society conclude on a critique of this social order because Chaplin benefits from the spectator's identification with the Tramp, who is left out of civilisation at the end of the film.

Resumen

Este trabajo analiza el uso de ironía cómica por Charles Chaplin para reproducir su interpretación de la sociedad de Estados Unidos en *Luces de la ciudad*. La combinación de melodrama y comedia *slapstick* en *Luces de la ciudad* ofrece una representación irónica de la sociedad que se observa en pantalla. El trabajo se centra en los tres personajes principales, el vagabundo, el millonario y la florista ciega, y define

distintos niveles de comprensión de las escenas en las que aparecen. El público, al estar en una posición más elevada de comprensión que los personajes, es capaz de comprender la intención de Chaplin de mostrar sus preocupaciones políticas y sociales. La imposibilidad de Charlie de encajar en la sociedad y el éxito de sus amigos al encontrar su lugar en ésta, concluyen con una crítica de dicho orden social ya que Chaplin utiliza la identificación del espectador con Charlie, el Vagabundo, quién queda fuera de la sociedad al final de la película.

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Introduction

Charles Chaplin was one of the most important comic stars of the silent era of cinema. His famous character, Charlie, a sympathetic tramp with baggy clothes and a moustache, made the whole world laugh and cry. Chaplin often included his own political and social concerns in his slapstick comedies, and *City Lights* (1931) is a good example of this. This film proved to be the hardest and longest undertaking of Chaplin's career, as he took two years and eight months to complete it (Robinson, 2004). *City Lights* contains many of the features of Charles Chaplin's cinema: from slapstick and pantomime to emotions and sadness, from absurdity and irreverence to melodrama and social criticism.

City Lights is the story of a Tramp (Chaplin) who befriends a blind flower girl (Virginia Cherrill) and an alcoholic and suicidal millionaire (Harry Myers). The film uses an ironic structure formed by two opposing dramatic tensions: the melodramatic poignancy of Charlie's attempts to charm the blind flower girl and help her family pay the rent, and the traditional slapstick comedy of drunken men of mistaken identities best depicted by the eccentric millionaire. These two traditions complement *and* contradict each other, and both help the director, according to Clausius, to perfectly portray the United States' social order (1988, 116).

In this essay, I want to pay attention to the character of the Tramp and his friendships with the blind flower girl and the self-centred millionaire, whose respective “blindnesses” help them understand Charlie’s unselfish humanity and make him believe for most of the film that he is becoming part of society. I will explore Charles Chaplin’s use of comic irony in order to portray the Little Fellow’s impossibility to successfully participate in this social order as a pretext to criticise the hypocrisy that defines the upper classes and the authorities, and the abuses of capitalism on the individual.

Charles Chaplin

Charles Chaplin was an actor, filmmaker, and composer born in London in 1889. He is considered one of the most iconic figures of the silent era of classical Hollywood cinema not only for his use of slapstick comedy but also for his filmmaking and acting qualities. He made his debut when he was five years old, replacing his mother in a music-hall performance. By 1912, he had already worked with Fred Karno’s theatre company, which consequently allowed him to get a contract at Mack Sennet’s Keystone Studio in Hollywood. His screen persona, the Tramp, was developed in 1914, appearing in the film *Making a Living* and in the short films *Between Showers*, *Tango Tangles* and *A Film Johnnie*. By the late-1910s, he was directing most of his films, and was often in charge of their production and the composition of their music. In 1919, Chaplin co-founded the distribution company United Artists with Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith, which gave him complete control over his films. During this period, he released some of his most famous films: *The Kid* (1921), *A Woman of Paris* (1923), *The Gold Rush* (1925), and *The Circus* (1928).

In the 1930s, Chaplin intentionally made two silent films, *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936), in spite of the advent of sound cinema in the late 1920s. Chaplin believed that his type of comedy based on pantomime and movement was incompatible with the spoken language (Clausius, 1988, 105). He became progressively interested in politics, and his next film, *The Great Dictator* (1940), was very controversial. His popularity declined rapidly as he was accused of being a Communist and was forced to leave the United States and live in exile in Switzerland. He abandoned the Tramp in his later films, which include *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), *Limelight* (1952), *A King in New York* (1957), and *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967). Near the end of his life in 1977, Chaplin was awarded an honorary Academy Award for “the incalculable effect he has had in making motion pictures the art form of this century” (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 1972).

Charles Chaplin’s Slapstick Comedy

Slapstick comedy is a physical type of comedy used in film and animation that flourished in Hollywood cinema, particularly in the silent period, but continued to exert a strong influence into the sound period. Slapstick had been used in low comedy and farce by clowns from Greek and Roman mime and pantomime as they entertained the audience through beatings and witty dialogues. In the Italian *commedia dell’arte*, actors often used the “battacio” that allowed actors to hit each other repeatedly producing a loud and comical ‘slap’, which became the basis of the origins of this term (King & Paulus, 2010, 12). Objects with the same characteristics were used by physical comedy actors in England and other parts of Europe in the Renaissance, which consecutively, were passed

down to film comedians of the 20th century. The motion pictures of classical Hollywood provided greater freedom for visual gags, and silent comedians introduced classic methods like the mad chase scene and pie throwing, regularly speeded up for comic purposes (Díaz, 2015). Since this type of comedy focuses on action rather than words, it became the ideal vehicle of silent comedy. Charles Chaplin became one of the masters of this type of comedy during the silent period of classical cinema.

Chaplin used slapstick comedy from his early silent short films. However, Chaplin's films, as in those of other silent comics, were not fully silent. His exaggerated mime is always accompanied by sound effects or music that generally emphasise the comical tone of the scene. The Tramp's animated facial expressions, mimic gestures and distinct gait make the spectator enjoy the comic situation that regularly exceeds the limits of common sense (Dixon, 2010, 22). His films are also characterised by spontaneity, not only because he usually improvised his stories from a basic script, but also because these slapstick comedies regularly offer unexpected violent scenes.

As with other examples of slapstick comedies, Chaplin's films are characterised by physical and visual violence. Mayhem and destruction are extremely attractive to the spectator, who is outside the disorganised fictional world represented on screen. The Tramp repeatedly found himself chased by other characters who wanted to harm him with fake objects. This violence makes the spectator laugh not only because it is not happening to them, but also because the fictionality of the situation guarantees that none of the characters on screen suffer real pain. His films include pratfalls, a very characteristic feature of slapstick comedies, which are often regarded as comical or humiliating. The spectator laughs at these because the person who falls generally feels

superior to the rest of the characters, to the Tramp for instance, with whom we regularly identify; and the pratfall concludes with the loss of their dignity (Clayton, 2007, 12). Nevertheless, we also find many examples in which Charlie himself falls on his buttocks and the spectator feels compassionate as s/he laughs at the unpredictability of the fall. Chaplin uses the spectator's identification and empathy towards the Tramp to reveal his political and social concerns.

The clowns of slapstick comedies regularly opposed the established values and hierarchies of taste of the culture to which they belonged, sometimes with a nostalgic tone. Chaplin cleverly combines exaggerated physical jokes and dramatic plots generally developed through improvisation to portray a specific social order that he often intends to criticise (Caron, 2006, 8). He also introduces humour to serious moments in order to cast an ironic look at the modern world or at characters that belong to a certain social class. The Tramp does not seem to fit in this disorganised fictional world, and yet, ironically, he always tries to be part of it.

Irony in Charles Chaplin's Slapstick Comedies

The term irony is generally used to refer to a sequence of events that produce a result that differs from the one expected, typically for a comic or emphatic effect (Merriam-Webster). We can find an interrelation between humour and irony in some of Charles Chaplin's slapstick comedies, especially in his later movies. However, Chaplin's comic irony allows for different interpretations. The comic pleasure that is derived from his irony can be related to a feeling of superiority of the ironic observer upon the ironised (Watson, 2015, p. 63). Egocentric and arrogant characters in his films, generally from the

upper classes or in positions of power and authority, are brought down to earth, literally and metaphorically, through comic devices like pratfalls or sound effects. Slapstick comedies are frequently intended to mock the nature of these characters and, as a consequence, the social and cultural values they represent. Moreover, these characters are often introduced to provide a contrast with generous characters like the Tramp.

Charles Chaplin's comic irony, even though it is related to a feeling of superiority on the part of the ironist, is not always at the expense of the ironised. The spectator can also see the ironised as a trapped victim of his or her environment (Watson, 2015, 48). The Tramp, clearly from a lower class, is always placed in a society that does not understand him and that he does not seem to comprehend either. This lack of understanding regularly leads to feelings of pathos or sympathy on the part of the observer. Chaplin often places the figure of the Tramp against certain social values and attitudes that he wants to criticise. But, at the same time, the Little Fellow consistently tries to be a part of that social order. This is a recurrent motif in Chaplin's cinema, as can be seen in *City Lights*.

City Lights

The Tramp in U.S. Society

The Tramp, also called Charlie or The Little Fellow, as Charles Chaplin himself called him, is the most memorable character portrayed by Chaplin during the silent era of cinema. This character was originated in January 1914, when Chaplin was working at Keystone Studio with Mack Sennett. However, Chaplin's character in these short films is very different from the one we find in his later comedies, where the protagonist is generally a good-hearted tramp portrayed as an outsider in the society in which he lives (Hutchinson, 2014). This characterisation can be seen in *City Lights*. As with other Charles Chaplin comedies, the opening scene of this film is crucial and it sets the ironic tone that the movie is going to develop from.

The first scene in *City Lights* introduces Chaplin's use of comic irony by establishing a double level: what apparently happens in the story and the way the other characters in the scene respond to the tramp's presence at the inauguration. This famous scene starts with a group of local dignitaries, symbolising U.S. values and hierarchies, proudly giving speeches with a heroic or even patriotic music playing to inaugurate, in front of a big crowd, a monument representing "Peace and Prosperity". Chaplin's ironic orchestration in this scene parodies the metallic sound of early talkies, but also

animalises the authorities by making them sound like ducks (Flom, 1997, 62). One of the dignitaries pulls down the curtain and one of the main gags of the film is introduced: Charlie is sleeping in the arms of the statue of “Prosperity”.



Figure 1. Prosperity inserts his sword in the Tramp.

The Tramp, who clearly does not represent prosperity, is shouted at by the crowd to get off the statue as he is “disrespecting” the monument, and therefore, the nation and the values it represents. He tries his best to get off but, clumsy as he is, his attempts turn out wrong and get him into further trouble. In his first attempt to leave, he gets his baggy pants caught in the “sword of peace”, a clear oxymoron used to metaphorically illustrate how those in power use the masses as puppets for their own desires (fig. 1). The irony here lies in the fact that Chaplin introduces sexual references and funny music to a humiliating moment for the Tramp to criticise the crowd’s response to the Tramp’s good intentions. This critique is emphasised by the fact that the mob paradoxically uses violence gestures to defend a symbol of peace. The Tramp’s situation gets even worse when the U.S. national anthem starts playing and he tries his best to imitate the rest of the crowd and stand to attention.

The mass stops screaming at the Little Fellow to stand to attention, but this patriotic feeling is condemned by Chaplin because as soon as the “Star-Spangled Banner” is over, the crowd go back to their old ways and again start screaming angrily at the Little Fellow. This scene also makes fun of the splendour that this community wants to show off by including more sexual references. The Tramp gets his baggy pants ripped and feels his buttocks because the sword has hurt him, just like society is hurting him literally and metaphorically. When he is walking down, he steps on the private parts of the statue of “peace”, as if it was an act of revenge to the monument and to what it represents. Charlie naively apologises to the statue, which illustrates his lack of understanding of the situation, as he is just doing what society wants him to do. The Tramp’s ignorance contrasts with the spectators understanding of the director’s intention: through the comic antics of the clown and their implied social critique, we as spectators understand what Chaplin wanted to convey through irony, and our laughter immediately becomes socially-conscious. Through gags, the film invites the spectator to adopt a critical stance towards the society represented by the mass. At the end of the scene, Charlie sits on the hand of the third statue because he is tired of all his attempts to get off the monument.

The Tramp is tired of trying to find his place in the statue, and therefore, in society, as he has been trying to succeed many times in Chaplin’s comedies. However, in spite of all his failed attempts, Charlie never gives up. At the beginning of the film, we find yet another example of how Charlie will try to get rid of this characterisation as “outsider”. The Tramp suddenly stops in front of a store window to stare at a female nude, which introduces the sophisticated persona that Charlie will pretend to be

throughout the film (fig. 2). Here, irony falls on the protagonist, as *City Lights* makes a distinction between what Charlie sees and what the spectator understands. The Little Fellow pretends to be an art expert, but the spectator comprehends that he is just trying to disguise his childish interest in sexuality. This scene expects us to laugh at his very poor performance and, as we understand and sympathise with the protagonist, to laugh at our weak attempts at socialising basic instincts. His refined behaviour is soon frustrated through comic devices, like the funny music, the manhole, and his confrontation with a heavy man. This contrast between what the protagonist and the spectator feel towards the events is emphasised by Charlie's following attempts to work.



Figure 2. Charlie “sizing up” the female nude.

Chaplin will once again induce Charlie to find a job in *City Lights* to show how this character is still a stranger to the U.S. social order (Caron, 2006, 15). The film quickly shows that the Little Fellow will fail to keep his first job as a comic melody presents him working as a street cleaner. The Tramp clearly does not like his job, and gets upset when he sees horses and an elephant strolling around, as he knows that he will have to clean the dirt that these animals leave in the streets (figs. 3 and 4). The spectator might perceive a hidden message in this scene. These two animals can be associated to

the two different political parties in the United States, as the elephant is the symbol of the Republican Party; and the donkey, similar to a horse, is that of the Democratic Party (Nix, 2015). His annoyed reaction illustrates how the working classes often suffer the trouble created by politicians. The latter often make their decisions not taking into account the necessities and desires of the masses, especially those of the working classes. As a consequence, the working classes have to witness how their living and working conditions keep on getting worse with no remaining hope of changing their situation. In spite of his perseverance to keep this job, he ends up being fired after he goes to visit the blind flower girl during his lunch hour and is late for work.



Figures 3 and 4. Charlie bumping into horses and an elephant while working.

The Little Fellow rapidly acquires a completely different job as a boxer. Chaplin establishes again two different levels through the use of comic irony: these contrast the characters' unaware perspective and the spectator's conscious judgement. In the first level, we also find a contrast between Charlie's lack of understanding of the events and the rest of the characters' incomprehension of the protagonist's behaviour. At the locker room, the Little Fellow is evidently out of place because he has put each boxing glove in the wrong hand. Moreover, he has agreed to lose the fight to his rival in exchange for

splitting the prize, which illustrates his lack of understanding of the boxing game. This “easy money” ironically becomes difficult to earn when a new adversary enters the scene. When Charlie tries to convince his new rival of splitting the prize, his sweet gestures make his adversary believe that he is flirting and the latter hides behind a curtain to change his clothes. This misunderstanding of Chaplin’s behaviour is emphasised in the following scene, when the Little Fellow generously helps everybody into the ring and shakes hands with them, surprising his rivals with his attitude (fig. 5). A very comical fight illustrates the Tramp’s ignorance about the game as he hides behind the referee for most of the fight. Moreover, his adversary’s response demonstrates how society generally does not understand Charlie’s behaviour.



Figure 5. Charlie and his rival shake hands before the fight.

The conclusion that can be derived from these scenes is that the spectator achieves a comic pleasure because of his superior level of understanding with respect to the characters that are the butt of the irony. Charlie’s ignorance of the boxing game illustrates how the Tramp is forced to apply for jobs that he does not know what to do just to earn some money. We are able to interrelate this ignorance about boxing with his lack of understanding of the social order in which he lives, which complicates his

participation in it. Moreover, his rival's decision of not splitting the prize is taken at the expense of Charlie's safety, which exemplifies the abuses of capitalism and of those that are part of such social order on the Tramp and on the social class he represents. These events also confirm that Charlie is incapable of facing the injustice and inequality that characterise this society.

Chaplin's use of comic irony in *City Lights* establishes a contrast between what appears on screen and what the spectator understands. This combination of comic gags and irony makes the spectator laugh and forces him/her to judge the events and characters that they see on the screen. Through character identification, Chaplin makes us take a critical attitude towards the society that harms and represses the protagonist. Even though the Tramp is clearly incapable of taking part in this hierarchical society on his own, *City Lights* will provide Charlie with a fake optimism. The protagonist will come close to becoming part of this social order because of his friendships with the blind flower girl and the millionaire. The Tramp will briefly enjoy the life of a gentleman after he saves the life of the suicidal millionaire and is able to fulfil the girl's fantasy with money borrowed from the millionaire.

Alcohol and Social Class

The Tramp's friendship with the eccentric millionaire will provide some of the funniest scenes of *City Lights*. The spectator laughs at these because s/he is aware of the director's intention. Chaplin plays with sobriety and inebriety to provide an ironic presentation of the millionaire. In their first scene together, Chaplin establishes two different levels of comic irony: what can be seen on screen and what the spectator infers

from it. In the first level, we focus on the characters' feelings and understanding of the situation, which will set up a contrast between the Tramp's personality and the millionaire's. This contrast will shape the spectator's opinion of the millionaire, and s/he will be able to critically judge his character and the values he represents.



Figure 6. The millionaire putting the knot around both of their heads.

The millionaire's first appearance combines comic and melodramatic elements, something typical of Chaplin's films. The millionaire is tying a knot to commit suicide near the river, when Charlie, accompanied by comic music, enters the scene. The Tramp stops the millionaire from jumping to the river and tries to convince him of how worth living life is, but the millionaire is struggling to remain conscious during his passionate speech. Charlie's natural kindness gets him into trouble when he falls in the river several times after the millionaire mistakenly puts the knot around his neck (fig. 6). When he falls, the millionaire seems to be ready to jump in the river to save the Tramp. However, he first takes off his jacket and shoes so they do not get spoiled, something that he did not care about when he was willing to commit suicide. Here, the millionaire definitely prioritises his expensive clothes over the life of the protagonist, and yet, ironically, he ends up in the water, as if it was a punishment for his behaviour.

Even though this introductory scene is presented in a comic way, the spectator is able to understand the critique that lies in the events. The contrast between the Tramp's optimism and the millionaire's pessimism suggests that wealth does not provide happiness, as the poor character is the happier at the moment. Moreover, we find, later on, that the millionaire is getting a divorce, and therefore, lacks any romantic companion in his life, something that the Tramp seems to have found. The irony lies in the fact that, beneath the things that the millionaire owns and can afford to enjoy, his life is empty. Additionally, the spectator might have sympathised with the millionaire at the beginning of the scene, when he was willing to commit suicide to end his pain. However, this compassion soon fades away when he worries more about his fancy clothes than the life of another human being. With this choice, *City Lights* introduces Chaplin's main concern: to criticise the hypocrisy of the upper classes to which the millionaire belongs and of its values.

After saving his life, the millionaire states that Charlie will be "[his] friend for life", but the development of the film will prove otherwise. The excess or the lack of alcohol will affect the millionaire's opinion about the Tramp (Cruz-Tan, 2013). Alcohol abuse is clearly harmful for the millionaire's health, but the excess of it has ironically a positive impact on his personality. Chaplin's irony regarding the character of the millionaire lies in the fact the use of alcohol "blinds" *and* gives him sight at the same time. When the millionaire is sober, his aristocratic values "forbid" him to be in contact with someone from the lower classes. On the contrary, inebriety makes him forget about said values and enables him to perceive the Tramp's generous and innocent character without caring about his social class.

The Tramp and the millionaire's friendship is very solid when the latter is drunk and both go to different social gatherings, like a restaurant and a party at the millionaire's house. There is a contrast between Charlie's understanding of his friendship with the millionaire and the audience's. The millionaire becomes a very generous man when he drinks, as he lends the Tramp some of his expensive clothes to go to the restaurant and some money to buy flowers and to help the blind flower girl to pay the rent. Additionally, the millionaire gifts Charlie his car the morning after their night out. The Little Fellow considers the millionaire a true friend and cares for his well-being throughout the whole film. The millionaire seems to be a good person under the effects of alcohol, but his behaviour includes an implicit social critique.

The millionaire's generosity can be seen as a critique towards capitalism, because the millionaire easily lends Charlie the money and properties that he owns, which illustrates how little he cares about his wealth. This provides a contrast with Charlie's situation and that of the lower classes, that often have to witness how wealth remains in the hands of the few — the upper classes. This excess of the upper classes is emphasised by the millionaire's house party. In this scenario, we find again a contrast between Charlie's response to the events taking place and that of the aristocrats. Both of these reactions differ from that of the audience, who reject the upper classes' pretence.

The Tramp is clearly presented as an outsider in this party, but he always remains the centre of attention (Flom, 1997, 62). He is somehow invisible at the beginning of the party because he is wearing the same elegant clothes as the rest of the guests. However, his presence soon starts to bother the aristocrats after he confuses the bald head of one of them with a dessert and unexpectedly swallows a whistle. The swallowing of the whistle

causes Charlie to develop hiccup. In spite of his constant attempts to stop whistling, he prevents one of the visitors from singing a song as everybody stare at him bitterly (fig. 7). Our protagonist, ashamed, leaves the house and his whistling calls the attention of several street dogs. These street dogs seem to enjoy Charlie's company more than the aristocratic guests, which illustrates how the Tramp himself clearly belongs in the streets with them.



Figure 7. Upper class guests disturbed by Charlie's hiccup.

The aristocrats in the room clearly misunderstand Charlie's behaviour and consequently reject his presence there. However, Chaplin's irony falls on them. The spectator sees that the Tramp actually swallowed the hiccup that caused all the trouble because of one of the aristocrats, consequently, the fault lies on them. Moreover, as we sympathise with the Little Fellow, we repudiate the upper classes' response to his unintentional mistakes. This critique on the upper classes is stressed by the millionaire's attitude when the alcohol dries off his body, as he is the one who represents the aristocrats in *City Lights*. When the millionaire is sober, his behaviour towards the Tramp changes drastically. The "sober dawn awakens a different man", and now, the millionaire does not recognise his "friend for life" Charlie.

After their night out, Charlie is excited to arrive at his friend's house, but the millionaire is shocked to see a tramp sitting in his car. He sits in his car and drives away from the protagonist. Moreover, after the party, Charlie and the millionaire sleep together in the same bed, but when the millionaire wakes up, he again has forgotten who the Tramp is (fig. 8). The millionaire asks his butler, who rejected the Tramp since the very beginning, to force the protagonist out of the house. These events are not understood by the Tramp, who considered the millionaire a true friend of his. However, the audience is again at a superior position of understanding to the protagonist and comprehends the reasons for such attitude.



Figure 8. The millionaire is shocked to see the tramp in his bed.

The spectator realises that, for the first time, the millionaire has perceived Charlie's physical appearance and has related it to the lower classes. As soon as the alcohol has dried off his body, the millionaire forgets or chooses to forget Charlie's kind and honest personality and is only able to see his position in society. Here, the millionaire rejects to be seen with a member of the lowest class. With this behaviour, the millionaire prioritises his aristocratic values over human kindness and friendship.

The funny scenes shared by the millionaire and the Tramp make spectators laugh but also wake up in them a socially-conscious feeling. The millionaire's alcoholism ironically enables him to understand Charlie's generosity and integrity in *City Lights*. However, this considerate personality wears off at the same time as the alcohol in his veins does. These two opposing attitudes are used by Chaplin to criticise the hypocritical upper classes, and as a consequence, the social order in which they are at the head. Even though Chaplin clearly criticises the millionaire and the social class he represents through comic irony, the spectator must keep in mind that his generosity, whether sincere or devious, enables the protagonist to attain the blind girl's interest.

The Flower Girl's Blindness

From the beginning, Chaplin knew that *City Lights* would be about blindness. He soon discarded the plot involving a blind circus clown, and settled down for the romantic story between the Tramp and the blind flower girl. The director worried a lot about the first meeting of these two characters, as he did not know how to introduce the topic of blindness (Demain, 2012). Comic irony is quickly introduced in the first scene of the blind flower girl and the Tramp together. This scene can be understood from the perspective of each of these two characters, and the contrast between both leads the spectator to draw a critical conclusion about their relationship and society.

In this first scene, the blind girl is sitting selling flowers to pedestrians and three cars stop in front of her. Then, Charlie crosses the street and passes through one of them. When the blind flower girl hears a car's door closing, she offers the person coming out a flower. Charlie chooses one flower, but the girl picks up the wrong one. Charlie buys the

flower at the precise moment that the real owner of the car leaves in it. The blind flower girl mistakenly tells him that he forgot his change, and Charlie, still there, does not correct her mistake (fig. 9). This confusion makes the flower girl think that his customer is a rich man, something that the Little Fellow obviously is not.



Figure 9. Charlie correcting the blind girl.

Both of these characters belong to the lower classes and are unable to hold a respectable job. The girl's blindness parallels the Tramp's lack of understanding of the social order, because these inabilities stop them from fitting in. Even though they are equals at this point of the film because both are outsiders, the spectator soon realises that their relationship is not meant to be. Charlie takes advantage of the girl's mistake to conquer her love, and this makes their relationship begin on a lie. In spite of this, the Tramp's morality is not put into question. The spectator and the Little Fellow himself understand that he probably wouldn't have a chance with the girl if she were aware of his life as a tramp. He clearly benefits from the gifted car and the expensive clothes borrowed from the millionaire, but also displays his best charms to conquer her. The film, once again, separates the Little Fellow's understanding of their relationship and the spectator's.

Charlie drives her home in the millionaire's car, and kindly thanks her for her company. He kisses her hand and smiles at her as he waits for her to safely enter her house. This behaviour pleases the girl, and he has succeeded in attaining her interest. However, a flower pot falls on the protagonist's head when he is sighing in love. This accident reminds the spectator of the impossibility of such a relationship. Nevertheless, the Tramp never gives up trying. When he finds out about the girl's health and economic problems, he starts to work to earn some money for her. The Tramp seems to be unaware of the fact that, if the girl restores her sight, she will find out that he is not a millionaire. The spectator knows that this mistake was the basis of their relationship, and finding out the truth could mean the end of it. Moreover, both characters started as outsiders in society and this was the only element that made their relationship plausible. The only thing that actually stopped the girl from fitting in was her blindness. Therefore, the moment she has her sight restored, she will be able to find her place in society, something that the Tramp has failed to do in many of Chaplin's comedies.

During his lunchtime as a street cleaner, the Tramp visits the girl at her house and brings her some food. A second accident takes place, which emphasises their love's hopelessness. Charlie kindly avoids the girl any embarrassment when she mistakenly takes the thread of his pants (fig. 10). The irony lies in the fact that, every time things are working out for the Tramp, an unexpected comic gag is introduced in *City Lights*. The thread accident leaves the Tramp with even less than he had before, as he has lost his pants and money in that house (Clausius, 1988, 113). This scene anticipates the film's ending. As we will see, the Little Fellow will be left with nothing after he is freed from prison because he was wrongly accused of stealing money from the millionaire.



Figure 10. Charlie finding out the girl took the thread from his pants.

Around ten months have passed, and we see that the blind flower girl has opened a flower shop with her grandmother. Therefore, the money that sent Charlie to jail has ironically opened multiple windows for her: she has had her sight restored and she has become a self-employed worker with her grandmother. Nevertheless, the film soon reminds the spectator of the negative consequences that such personal fulfilment has had for the Tramp. We see Charlie arriving at the street where the girl's flower shop is. He bumps into some newspaper boys, who make fun of his weathered and broken clothes. The Tramp does not seem to be the optimistic little fellow that he always is, and his appearance here is quiet depressing. Charlie does not react to the teasing of these two boys, who he faced at the beginning of the film, and keeps on walking.

The spectator is able to see beyond what is on screen and takes a critical stance to compare the situation of both of these characters. This scene shows that the Little Fellow has stopped worrying about his appearance and dignity, and the system is to blame because he was wrongly accused. The protagonist looks exhausted as he dramatically wanders around the streets with no place to go, which suggests that Charlie has lost all hope to find his place in this hypocritical society. The Tramp has not only been abused by the capitalist system, but also by the people that belong to it, like the flower girl. Charlie

clearly decided on his own to help the girl, but *City Lights* condemns the fact that the girl's success was at the expense of the Tramp's failure. The girl and her grandmother have finally found their place in the United States by holding a respectable job, and have succeeded in attaining the American Dream. Nevertheless, the film seems to transmit that their rags-to-riches lifestyle was not achieved by working hard, but by taking advantage of others. To achieve such a happy life, the Tramp had to go to prison. When he leaves prison, the only thing that Charlie has is his weathered outfit, but he is going to be left with even less when the previous newspaper boys pull from his broken underwear.

The final encounter between the flower girl and the Tramp can only be analysed on two different levels, from the Little Fellow's perspective and from the spectator's, because the girl's feelings are quite ambivalent in the final scene. Previously in the film, she had a crucial conversation with her grandmother about Charlie, in which the first words we "hear" her say are "— and then he brought me home in his car". This sentence and her grandmother's response ("He must be wealthy") seem to convey that both characters only care about the material objects that Charlie owns. However, the young girl answers "yes, but he's more than that" and her emotional expression seems to reveal that she is truly in love with the protagonist. Moreover, we see that she has been waiting for the man who helped her appear in her newly-opened store. This ambivalence is problematic because it contrasts with the Tramp's assertion of his love for her. This contrast adds yet another element of disharmony in their relationship, which leads to the impossibility of it.

The first way to evaluate the possibility of their love is from the Little Fellow's understanding of the scene. After the humiliating situation, the Tramp turns around to

keep on walking but he sees the flower girl behind a store's window. A romantic song starts playing when Charlie happily smiles at the girl. As soon as the girl stands up to give him a flower and a coin, Charlie tries to escape, as he knows that she has not recognised him yet. But when the girl touches the Tramp's hand, she recognises him due to her highly developed sense of touch. Her reaction remains static, but she seems to be thankful for what the Tramp did for her. This level of irony would lead the spectator to think that this film provides a happy ending. However, this scene also offers a second conclusion to their relationship.



Figure 11. The blind girl and her grandmother laughing at Charlie.

In the second level of irony, the spectator is able to see beyond Charlie's understanding. The flower girl laughed at the previous humiliating scene, as can be seen in figure 11. The film is detaching itself from her for laughing because the scene is not presented in a comic way, as it is accompanied by dramatic music and Charlie's ashamed and heartbreaking expression. When she sees a tramp smiling at her, she says laughing that she has "made a conquest". The blind girl's laugh seems to convey that such a man does not have a chance of dating her because his social position and his worn-out appearance make him not good enough for her. The girl displays a condescending

attitude as she stands up to give Charlie another flower and a coin, which he never asked for. When she finally recognises him, the spectator may expect a reaction of excitement but she remains static (fig. 12). Additionally, Chaplin's movies often end with the romantic couple living happily together (Clausius, 1988, 118). The fact that *City Lights* is an exception to this ending could point to the hopelessness of their relationship.



Figure 12. The flower girl recognises Charlie.

This open ending does not provide definite closure to the relationship of these characters. However, the use of irony in their scenes together may lead the spectator to conclude a critique of the United States. The girl's inability made her truly appreciate Charlie's kindness and unselfishness throughout the film, as she was unable to perceive his social class in his physical appearance. However, the moment the blind flower girl has her sight restored, she finds her place in society and their relationship does not seem to be as plausible as before. Their story could end with the only character that sincerely enjoyed Charlie's company rejecting him as the rest of the characters. This would lead to a critique of a hierarchical and hypocritical society that chooses appearance and wealth over morality.

Conclusion

City Lights portrays Charles Chaplin's conception of U.S. capitalist society through comic irony. The film introduces gags and comic elements in serious scenes to cast an ironic look at the world that can be seen on screen and to ridicule the personality of some of his characters (Mast, 1973, 23). The main objective of slapstick comedies is of course to entertain and make the spectator laugh. However, in Chaplin's comedies, these comic elements awaken the spectator's moral sense. The audience, being in a higher position of understanding, is able to understand beyond the characters' perspective and provides a critical analysis to the events on screen. In this essay, I have evaluated the portrayal of each of the main characters through irony to conclude on Chaplin's rejection of U.S. hierarchical society.

As with other Chaplin slapstick comedies, the Tramp is presented as an outsider in this social order due to his low social class and natural kindness not corrupted by social norms. The society in which he lives clearly does not understand his unselfish and generous nature, but the Tramp does not comprehend social hierarchies and rules either. His lack of understanding of the structure of this society stops him from becoming part of the social order. However, the other two main characters, the millionaire and the blind flower girl, find their place in society at the end of the film.

Throughout the film, the millionaire's inebriety has revealed his uncorrupted essence as alcohol made him forget about social hierarchies and he befriended a member of the lower classes. However, his morality is put into question as he rejects his friendship with the Tramp when he is sober. This ambivalence about his character is used by Chaplin to criticise the upper classes' hypocrisy. We can also conclude that the blind flower girl is an ambivalent character. Both the Tramp and the flower girl were naive and outsiders at the beginning of the film, but her static expression in the final scene might suggest that her kind nature was polluted when she "surrendered" to capitalism and became a self-employed worker.

Chaplin uses the "blindnesses" of the millionaire and the flower girl as an ironic vehicle to convey his political and social concerns (Caron, 2006, 5). In spite of these two characters' controversial morality, they both participate in the American social order, and therefore, are granted their happy ending. Charlie still remains an outsider at the end of the film, and *City Lights* seems to convey that those who do not conform to capitalism cannot have a happy ending. Chaplin benefits from the spectator's identification with the Tramp to make us reject this social order, which, in the film, punishes the weakest character, yet the most moral one.

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