

# The Power of Sound in Creating Humor: Chaplin – a Pioneer of Audio-Gags and of Sound Design\*

Aner PREMINGER

The Film School, Sapir Academic  
College, Department of  
Communication, The Hebrew  
University, Jerusalem

**ABSTRACT.** This article examines Chaplin's innovations in the concepts of sound that, while overlooked, nonetheless contribute greatly to the cinematic language on sound. The article shows that in spite of the fact that Chaplin's important contribution to the transition to sound cinema is ignored in most of the literature dealing with his art, not only did he invent new ways of using sound as both a concept and a new technological tool of his cinematic art, but in many scenes he used sound for audio gags in similar ways to those he used props and sets in visual gags. This thesis first of all introduces three new categories that have been created to clarify the dichotomy between silent film and the talking film: *audio-silent film*, *talking-silent film*, and *filmed theatre*. Then it applies some important notions that Michel Chion had introduced in order to talk about cinematic sound utterance to explore a selection of audio-gags which best illustrate how Chaplin actually created an audio language that expands his repertoire of ways to create cinematic humor. Finally, it demonstrates how Chaplin's unique audio-gags that were ahead of his time, contributed to the evolution of sound design as it was used later during the 1950s and 1960s, according to Chion's arguments.

## KEYWORDS:

Chaplin, silent cinema, talkies, gag, soundtrack, audio-gag, *The Circus*, *City Lights*, *Modern Times*, *The Great Dictator*, *Limelight*, transition to sound cinema, audio-silent film, talking-silent film, filmed theatre, audiovisual illusion, gibberish, asynchronic sound, sync sound.

## 1. From Revolution to Evolution

Cinematic history accords Chaplin high prominence as a creator of silent films, but almost completely ignores him as a significant filmmaker in the era of the talkies. While many historians and critics extol Chaplin's uniqueness in some of his sound films, they approach them in much the same way as they approached his previous silent films.

\* This essay is a development of a Keynote speech that I gave at the GEECT Autumn Conference 2017 in Vilnius, organised by the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. It is based on a 15 years of research and publications that I am leading on Chaplin's cinema and especially on his unique use of sound. See, for example, my last publication regarding this issue in: "Charles Chaplin sings a silent requiem: Chaplin's films, 1928–1952, as cinematic statement on the transition from silent cinema to the talkies", eds. Lawrence, Caron and Click. 2013. *Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon Through Critical Lenses*, p. 163–185.

They virtually disregard his contribution to the language of cinema as a medium of both picture and soundtrack. David Robinson concisely and authoritatively expresses the prevailing attitude on this issue in his book *The History of World Cinema*: “Chaplin approached the new medium with great caution; and did not risk a full talking film until 1940. *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936) are really silent films with a greater or lesser degree of synchronized sound effects and music” (Robinson 1981: 168–170).

While I do not dispute the facts adduced by Robinson, I do interpret them rather differently. As Michel Chion puts it, “with the advent of synchronized sound cinema was now (1928) a phenomenon of *audiovisual illusion*”<sup>1</sup> (Chion 1994: 5). I submit that this notion of Chion’s precisely characterises Chaplin’s cinema as of 1928. Deploying Chion’s terminology, I argue that Chaplin invented original ways of utilising sound in *The Circus* (1928), *City Lights* (1931), *Modern Times* (1936), and *The Great Dictator* (1940). The fact that even Chion himself, in the numerous examples he cites from later prominent filmmakers in support of his case, ignores Chaplin’s singular use of sound, bears out the urgent need for an analysis of Chaplin’s audiovisual devices. Chaplin was not only an important innovator in the cinematic language of talkies, using sound in audio gags similarly to his use of props and body in his visual comedy. In all of the above-mentioned films, and later in *Limelight* (1952), he also subtly dealt with the *meaning* of sound, with the differences between silent and talking cinema, and with the implications of using sound technology in order to artistically represent truth and reality. I contend that in all his films during this period, Chaplin, in his own distinctive way, most deliberately and consistently wielded sound and the absence of sound with great precision and ingenuity.

In order to refine our concepts, we need to add three categories to the dichotomy between silent film and talking picture:

1. *Audio-silent film* is a motion picture in which the cinematic language and style are those of a silent film. There is use of sync sound effects and music, whether diegetic or extra-diegetic. The characters never speak in sync sound, and any dialogue, if it occurs, is represented by intertitles. Chaplin’s *City Lights* and René Clair’s *A Nous la Liberté* (1931) are examples of *audio-silent film*, which are considered in the literature of cinema as silent films.
2. *Talking-silent film* is an *audio-silent film* that sometimes includes sync sound dialogue. In these films, there may be a combination of real sync dialogue and intertitles between two close-ups in other dialogue scenes. Actors might perform the

1 The italics font is originally by Chion.

type of non-verbal communication associated with the style of the silent-era, in conjunction with sync sound effects and partial dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Examples of talking-silent films would be *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which is regarded as the first talkie in the literature, and *Modern Times*, which is considered a silent picture in literature. Chion uses the term “sonorized films” (Chion 1999: 12) when referring to such films, but he does not include them in his analysis of the contribution of sound to the *audiovisual illusion*.

3. *Filmed-theatre* is a talking picture that uses a soundtrack to record voice, music, and sound effects, yet its cinematic language is not distinctive and may even be regressive in comparison to the aesthetic achievements of the silent film. I would even venture to suggest that in the four years during the revolutionary transition from silent films to talking films, following *The Jazz Singer* and prior to *The Blue Angel* (*Der Blaue Engel*, 1930), the films that were produced were essentially either *audio-silent films* or *talking-silent films* or *filmed-theatre*, all of which far from exploiting the potential of the new medium.<sup>3</sup>

It is well known that many great silent filmmakers did not survive the invention of the talkies. A small number managed to adapt to the new medium after the sound innovations of *The Blue Angel*, and some of these filmmakers were even creative and original. Chaplin, however, never made *filmed-theatre*, and in his search for his own way into the talkies, he continued to make *silent*, *audio-silent* and *talking-silent* films. Even *The Great Dictator* (1940), as will be demonstrated, is a *talking-silent* film using the new introduced discourse, though it is considered to be his first talking picture. My view is rather that, for all the extraneous historical influences affecting Chaplin, the use of image and voice in *The Great Dictator* is the continuation of an immanent process that began much earlier in his filmmaking, and not in the form of a mere “compromise” but as an inevitable consequence of Chaplin’s fundamental attitude toward sound.

The following chronological examination of the films in question will trace the auteur’s evolution from master of silent film technique to creative innovator of cinematic language within talking pictures.

- 2 The use of this term requires a careful examination of the difference between a stylised talking-silent film and poor acting in a talking picture. Consistency and unit of style are key elements here, but this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 3 The concept of *filmed-theatre* was first introduced by Vsevolod Pudovkin in his writing about the problems and new challenges that film makers have to deal with while transforming from silent cinema to the new medium of sound cinema. See for example: Pudovkin, 1978 (1929), p. 183–193, 194–202.

## 2. *The Circus* (1928)

*The Circus* is a veritable requiem for the silent cinema.<sup>4</sup> Unlike his colleagues in Hollywood, who immediately sought to emulate the type of sound picture introduced by *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Chaplin did not hurry into the technological race. Rather, he seemed now to take his time and mourn silent cinema's death through artistic effort.

Two unique scenes in the film demonstrate Chaplin's keen awareness of the power of sound. Most of the gags in both scenes are based on the potentiality of sound. The possibility of sound is underlined by sound's conspicuous absence when it is visually dramatised. The scenes present sound as well as its production as the Tramp's enemy, and thus, by iconic association, as the enemy of Chaplin the artist. When the Tramp inadvertently finds himself in the lion's cage, hence at risk of death, as result of an accident related to the sound-producing organ – his mouth. The overseer instructs him to blow a pill into a sick horse's mouth through a plastic tube, the Tramp's mouth at one edge of the pipe and the horse's mouth at the other. The horse's blowing power – its sound-producing force – exceeds that of the Tramp's.<sup>5</sup> The Tramp, shocked by the pill stuck in his mouth, rushes in panic straight into the lion's cage. Once trapped in the cage, the Tramp's aim is to insure silence so as not to awaken the lion. Sound, here, is the source of horror, of mortal danger, and the expression of its destructive power is latent in the lion's roar, which is not heard. The Tramp walks about on tiptoe so as not to make any noise. When he opens the door of the neighboring cage and is terrified by the leopard there, he is alarmed again by the slamming of the gate between the two cages – again a sound that the spectator *sees* but does not hear. After this, the lion's water trough falls from the shelf and the Tramp catches it at the last moment, preventing it from hitting the floor and making a noise. The scene's climax occurs when a dog arrives and, instead of helping him, begins to bark fiercely at the Tramp, who is terrified that the lion will stir. The Tramp covers his ears to avoid hearing the dog's bark, a bark that we only *see*, as if he could thereby prevent its reaching the lion. This gesture represents Chaplin's self irony: despite the Tramp's attempting to shut his ears and silence the cinema's soundtrack, as it were, Chaplin is smart enough, we know, to understand that it is impossible to cover

4 Technically *The Circus* is a silent film accompanied by original music composed by Chaplin with him singing at the opening credit scene. During the entire film there isn't one moment of complete silence without music, as it used to be the common convention of screening silent movies during the silent era.

5 This gag is transformed into the Tramp's swallowing the whistle in *City Lights*; into the Tramp's stomach grumblings in *Modern Times* and into the Jewish barber swallowing the coins in *The Great Dictator*.

the audience's ears, and quite impossible to hold back the entrepreneurial producers of talkies, and technological progress.

In this scene, two things happen that distinguish it from the rest of the film, both relevant to our subject. Each one of the obstacles and dangers in the sequence hinges on sounds that the audience does not hear. For the first time Chaplin is working with pseudo-audio gags in a manner similar to the way he used visual jokes in the past. The second thing we notice is his choice not to use synchronous sound effects, even though by 1928, a year after *The Jazz Singer*, there was no technical reason not to. Conspicuously absent are the sounds of the Tramp's footsteps, the noise of the clanking door, the roars of the leopard and the lion, and of course the barking of the dog. The absence of these sounds is a consistent artistic choice that is dramatised by the Tramp's covering of his ears.

Here Chaplin is proposing a new way of using sound, namely, sound as a concept, rather than as a diegetic audio component of the soundtrack. He draws the audience's attention to the absence of the sound by silencing it. At this early stage of talking movies, Chaplin chooses not to apply the new technology, yet he is not ignoring it. Rather, his conscious refusal to diegetically deploy sound becomes the subject of (and the comic force behind) these gags. He magically performs the feat of "turning off" the sound, which in the films of other creators is already "on." This example is probably one of the first in cinematic history where sound is used in its punctuating function, in Chion's terminology, but in a privative, soundless, sense. Chion states that "Synchronous sound brought to the cinema not the principle of punctuation but increasingly subtle means of punctuating scenes without putting a strain on the acting or the editing" (Chion, 1994 (1990): 49).

We can say that the non-existing barking sound effect of the on-screen barking dog suggests the notion of an *off sound-space* or maybe a *negative sound-space*. In other words, what is seen on screen has a distinctive sound: it is *seen* that the sound is there and heard by the characters, but *not heard* by the audience. It is the concrete availability of sound, which enables Chaplin to extend the semiotics of pantomimic indirect expression to the acoustic dimension.

Interestingly, from the present viewpoint that sees *The Circus* as a response to the advent of sound, it is remarkable that Chaplin began production of this movie in 1925, the year that AT&T had already started experimenting with sync sound (Allen and Douglas 1985: 91–104). It is not surprising that Chaplin, as a sensitive barometer of his times, should use his art to reflect innovations that were being explored in his own industry, even though he was in no hurry to immediately incorporate them. In this context, how can one fail to note that the source of the Tramp's mortal danger represented by the roaring lion recalls the famous MGM icon?

### 3. *City Lights* (1931)

By the time of Chaplin's next film, *City Lights* – made three years after *The Circus* – the sound revolution was technologically complete and some talkies, like *The Blue Angel* (1930), were successfully exploring the artistic potential of the new medium. Despite this potential, Chaplin was still pursuing his experimentation with sound in the formal framework of the silent movie. Released during the initial stages of the talkie, *The Circus* makes no direct statement about its being a silent film; *City Lights*, however, asserts in the intertitle: “A Romantic Comedy in Pantomime”, signaling to Chaplin's audience that he was still in the (*audio-*)*silent movie* business.

In the extensive commentary on *City Lights*, there is no mention of the allusion inherent in its plot to the dilemma of incorporating synchronised sound, which then engaged Chaplin. The film focuses on the Tramp's infatuation with a blind flower girl (Virginia Cherrill) whose sight would be restored if she could undergo a newly discovered and expensive operation. The Tramp who loves the poor girl obtains the money needed for the operation. The price they both have to pay for fulfilling this wish is his disappearance from her life, for the relationship between them is based on an illusion: the Tramp has falsely let her believe that he is wealthy. The girl, rejoicing in her restored sight, cannot understand why her benefactor has vanished, and she waits in vain for him to reappear.

By the end of the picture the Tramp, who has just come out of jail, materialises beside her new flower shop. He is excited to see her, but does not reveal himself to her. She treats him like a strange bum pursuing her. His appearance amuses her, and she even mocks him. In the end, pitying him, she offers him a coin. Now, by the touch of his hand, she realises that he is the man for whom she has been waiting. The film ends with alternating close-ups of the two of them, interspersed with the following intertitles of dialogue:

*The girl:* You?

*The Tramp:* You can see now?

*The girl:* Yes, I can see now.

The blind girl's situation represents – albeit inversely – the situation of the cinema audience embracing the coming of the talkies after having been deprived of synchronised sound in silent pictures. When she is blind, she perceives reality by means of either hearing or touch, depending on the context. Through the eye operation, the latest development in surgical technology, she acquires an additional sense, which radically transforms her perception of reality. The dear price, however, is the loss of love, or simply,

the disappearance of the Tramp from her life. The final scene actually casts doubt on the blessing inherent in this new ability. Sight only hinders the girl from correctly identifying the real person. She catalogues the Tramp according to external visual signs and classifies him according to social clichés. Only when she returns to the sense of touch, the original sense through which she has experienced life, does she discover that he is her benefactor.

In 1931, both the audience and the makers of talking films were in a situation similar to the experience of the former blind girl, if we swap “audio” for “visual.” Both cases deal with people switching from experiencing reality in a limited fashion through the loss of one sense, to accessing it both aurally and visually. Sound technology gave the film audience an additional means of experiencing a sense of realism when watching motion pictures. The addition of sight created a similar situation for the blind girl. However, as Chaplin sees it, cinema has only hindered its own authentic expression of inner experience by providing this added realism. According to his uses of it, sound can be powerful only if it does not enhance realism but rather provokes the imagination. Much later, in 1964, Chaplin articulated this idea in his autobiography, relating his being depressed at the time by a young critic’s remark that *City Lights* lacked realism: “Had I known what I do now, I could have told him that so-called realism is often artificial, phony, prosaic and dull; and that it is not reality that matters in a film but what the imagination can make of it” (Chaplin 1964: 382–383). When Chaplin says just before these words: “I found myself agreeing with him [with that critic]”, (ibid.), he also expresses his sober realisation and fear that sound might lead to the death of the love affair between himself and his audience. This fear was certainly understandable regarding the Tramp figure, but perhaps no less so regarding Chaplin the filmmaker.

The Tramp’s final sentence: “You can see now?” is highly fraught with meaning. Its plain sense is “was the operation a success”? The sub-text is “Now you can see that it’s me”, “Now you can see that I lied to you and that I’m not rich” and perhaps, “Now you can understand that you were mistaken when you mocked me”. On the symbolic and philosophical levels, however, its meaning is “Now you can see that this achievement came at a great price”, or in my discourse: “my presence is valid only in silent cinema”.

In *City Lights*, Chaplin makes use of the soundtrack in gags that are linked to the film’s theme. The blind girl first encounters the Tramp when he nonchalantly passes through the “obstacle” of a parked limousine. The girl hears the car doors opening and shutting and, obviously, judging by sound alone, she believes that he is a rich man who has just stepped out of the limousine. In contrast to other sound effects actually used by Chaplin in the film, this particular sound is conspicuous in its absence – just like the

one with the Tramp in the lion's cage. Their first encounter, in reverse analogy to their encounter at the end of the film, stems from an error on the realistic level, which arises from a perception of reality through hearing, but leads to a deeper inner truth, as we see later in the film.

In contrast to his strategy in *The Circus*, where real sound is salient through its absence in the soundtrack, Chaplin uses a form of stylised sound effect to draw attention to itself in *City Lights*. A distinct example of such a use occurs when the Tramp swallows a whistle, and its sound bursts out of his stomach during the party at the millionaire's house. Prominent in this scene is the prolonged contest between the synchronised music of the band, a conventional controlled synchronous sound, and the uncontrolled eruptions of the whistling from the depths of the Tramp's belly – Chaplin's new approach to the use of sound. Though sound is now associated with both the Tramp and the band, he is the odd man who will soon be out.

The film's opening scene already establishes some of the terms in which stylised sound is conjoined to the visual representation of sound, in the visual narrative. The Mayor (Henry Bergman) is giving a solemn speech at a fancy inauguration of a new sculpture. His speech sounds to us like gibberish, but the listeners' reaction indicates that to them it is quite intelligible. Technically, the Mayor's speech, and later the speech of the actress standing beside him, was produced by Chaplin speaking gibberish sprinkled with real words, very fast through a kazoo.<sup>6</sup> This technique is what Chion defines as "verbal chiaroscuro" (Chion 1994 (1990): 176). The strange speech is an audio gag that makes the characters look ridiculous and creates a cinematic equivalent of what in ordinary speech is called "nonsense". We are presented with a trenchant satire of politicians blabbering on at assemblies and ceremonies without saying anything. From a self-reflexive point of view, Chaplin is once again stating artistically that the aesthetic richness of the sound lies solely in the music, the acting, the tone, and not in the content of the speech, which he ridicules. It is interesting to mention that the Mayor's gibberish and the actress' gibberish are distinctively different, though both are performed by Chaplin himself, who thus proves to be a vocal-art virtuoso. Each one has its own music, color, and intonation. The actress' speech is high-pitched and very feminine, whereas the Mayor's is deep and masculine. This scene demonstrates that Chion's statement about "Chaplin's protest against the voice, under the name of the speech" (Chion 1994 (1990): 12), is not quite accurate. Actually, here Chaplin uses voice as material for his gags. In fact, he protests only against words as verbal information and against the realistic quality

<sup>6</sup> Chaplin writes that he created the soundtrack of this scene using his own voice and an instrument in his mouth (Chaplin 1974: 34).



that it lends to cinema. Nevertheless, Chion's terminology helps to bring out the importance of this scene, though he never once refers to it. The speech used by Chaplin in this scene is what Chion defines as *emanation speech*: "a speech which is not necessarily heard and understood fully and in any case is not intimately tied to the heart of what might be called the narrative action. [...] Emanation speech, while the most cinematic, is thus the rarest of the three types of speech, and, for complex reasons, the sound film has made very little use of it" (Chion 1994 (1990): 177). In the same way that Dziga Vertov experimented with slow motion and fast motion in the silent cinema era to produce images of distorted reality,<sup>7</sup> Chaplin experimented with the soundtrack to produce distorted sounds that make no attempt at realism, and they often satirise mimetic sound-film practices. Whereas Vertov's visual effects became part of the language of cinema, other filmmakers rarely adopted Chaplin's techniques in *City Lights* for parodying speech. But, as we've just learned from Chion, his techniques were important in the development of the cinematic utterance.

Unlike in *The Circus*, Chaplin experiments with diegetic sound in *City Lights*. Now the music is not external to the narrative or the plot – not a mere musical accompaniment for emotional manipulation; rather, the characters themselves hear it together with the movie audience. At the solemn moment of the inauguration, as the drape is removed from the monument, the Tramp is exposed sleeping peacefully on the huge stone figure. The Tramp embarrassingly attempts to climb off, but his clothes are hooked to the statue. The orchestra, having continued to play routinely, is now playing the National Anthem. The Tramp is unable to release himself and stand properly at attention. This need to stand at attention for the Anthem is utilised by Chaplin in further gags, emphasising the contrast between the pomposity of the dignified crowd and the authentic spontaneity of the Tramp. The characters thus respond to sound, similarly to the reaction of his characters to props and sets in his silent movies.

After 1931, the talkies completely captured the imagination of both audiences and filmmakers. The filmmakers, for their part, either embraced the new medium or dropped out (of whom Buster Keaton, David Griffith and Erich von Stroheim are outstanding examples). Chaplin produced no films for five years after *City Lights* until 1936, when he released *Modern Times*. This was his first *talking-silent film*, for in addition to sound effects and music, it also contained synchronised speech.

7 It is interesting to note that Pudovkin was the first one to systematically write about a similar approach towards the use of sound. See: Pudovkin, 1978 (1929), p. 194–202.

#### 4. *Modern Times* (1936)

*Modern Times* is about the wearing out of the “little man” in modern technological society; about the clash between the individual and his/her needs, and the alienated mass in industrial society, with its economic goals and its demand of efficiency. The simple man is the victim of this conflict. Personal and emotional relations between people have become a luxury one has to strive for. Happiness and liberty are attainable only in insanity or in prison; maybe art alone can enable grasping them. The shot in which we see the Tramp caught between the cogwheels of the monstrous machine gives a poetic, graphic expression to the film’s essence. We have here a visual metaphor of man caught and squashed by the wheels of the machine. On one obvious level Chaplin, who was very poor as a youth, is now the successful wealthy artist who identifies with the small man devoured by capitalist industry. However, there is also a clear sense in which Chaplin, the silent filmmaker, is contending here with sound technology. Metaphorically the machine that sucks up the Tramp and threatens his existence is the technology of the talkies that threatens Chaplin. The factory’s mad production line represents Hollywood’s production line; and the machine’s wheels could represent the wheels of the filming and projection apparatus.

The scene that strongly confirms this reading is the one in which the Tramp treats himself to a cigarette in the seclusion of the factory bathroom. Suddenly the tyrannical factory boss (Allan Garcia), the epitome of capitalist industry, appears on the screen in the form of a talking picture, “Big Brother” style.<sup>8</sup> From the imperious huge screen we see (and also hear!) a close-up of a man speaking and browbeating the small figure standing helplessly below – none other than Charles Chaplin, the silent actor, director of silent films, who works with props, décor, and acting, without words. Integral to Chaplin’s unique strategy for using sound throughout this film is the interplay between the in-sync speech coming from above and dramatising a virtual reality, and the speechlessness in the actual reality in the factory.

The director Chaplin intersperses speech conveyed by synchronised sound with speech communicated through intertitles and bodily gestures in the style of the silent film. When characters communicate interpersonally, Chaplin shoots scenes in silent cinema mode. He employs synchronised speech only to provide *impersonal* verbal information and conveys it through modern mechanical equipment: radio in the prison, a phonograph in the scene where the feeding machine is demonstrated, and the “visual

<sup>8</sup> The verbal term “Big Brother” comes originally from Orwell’s *1984*, published in 1949, but the origin of this image is probably in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926).

intercom” screen in the scenes where the manager gives orders to his workers through the screen. Implicit here is Chaplin’s view of the speaking voice in sound cinema. The voice is mechanical and alienating, suggesting a lack of communication. In these scenes, human contact is possible only in the absence of the voice. Furthermore, within this film, vocal speech represents power: it is not *speaking with* but rather *speaking at* the public, a theme fully developed in Chaplin’s next film, *The Great Dictator*.

Chaplin explicitly verbalises this idea later where the marvels of the automatic feeding machine are being demonstrated to the manager. The recorded instructions conclude with the words “Let us demonstrate with one of your workers, for actions speak louder than words”. “Actions speak louder than words” is said verbally by a talking machine (a talkie), where action is *acting*, as performed by Chaplin. Acting is not just more effective or efficient; it is louder, better heard.

Chaplin’s exploration of the expressive possibilities of stylised sound led to further innovations as seen in two of the prison scenes. In the first, the Tramp sits in his prison cell reading a newspaper about protests and riots performed by the hungry and unemployed located far beyond the prison walls, while in the background we hear the sound of birds chirping. Apart from the fact that the sound is not synchronous because we do not see the source of the sound, it is also mimetically paradoxical, because in prison no birds can be heard, not even off-screen. Chaplin uses sound that is non-synchronous and incongruous with the site of the action, in order to express cinematically and without words that although the Tramp is in prison, he is freer (and more fortunate) than the people outside. The disparity between the newspaper headlines and his own situation, as expressed in his actions, and by means of the soundtrack, creates a poetic gag that asks a philosophical question, one that recurs throughout the entire movie. What is the meaning of freedom and what is the connection between internal freedom and external freedom? This use of sound nicely illustrates what Chion calls *audiovisual dissonance* or *counterpoint*: “Audiovisual counterpoint will be noticed only if it sets up an opposition between sound and image on a precise point of meaning” (Chion 1994 (1990): 38).

In the scene that follows, between the Tramp and the minister’s wife (Mira McKinney), Chaplin creates a whole series of gags around obtrusive sound. The scene builds up an intimate situation in which the characters suffer from stomach rumblings; this time it is sound with no visible origin, though of course we know its source. Although the sound actually emitted by their stomachs is not loud, they are embarrassed, convinced that the others can hear it. Chaplin has chosen a sound as the source of the problem that distresses the characters, and, as usual, he amplifies and exaggerates it to unrealistic proportions. As a form of cinematic utterance, we may call what he does in this scene, an

audio close-up (or close-up in sound-space). If in the visual close-up the camera allows us to see details that realistically we would not be able to see with the naked eye, the close-up in sound-space allows us to hear things that realistically we would not be able to hear without cinematic sound equipment. Hence, just as Griffith created the close-up in space by means of the camera, and as Eisenstein created the close-up in time by means of the montage, so Chaplin created the close-up in sound-space. Here Chaplin also employs a variety of sound elements, all related to the gas theme, thus maintaining a unity of style throughout the soundtrack. The Tramp turns on the radio so that the sounds emitted by it may override the rumbles coming from his stomach. Much to his embarrassment, what comes on is a commercial for gastritis medication, which only further emphasises, through words rather than mere sound, what he was hoping to conceal, and he turns the radio off at once. Similarly, when the minister's wife wants to take a pill to calm her rumbling stomach, she pours herself some soda water from a siphon, which makes a big noise as the gas escapes from the bottle. This noise frightens the Tramp, who reacts disproportionately. Yet, the intensity of his reaction is consistent with the previous reactions to the stomach's weak grumbings. The synchronised sound of the barking of the minister's wife's dog plays an important role in this scene, compounding the characters' embarrassment and their feeling of inability to conceal their intimate secret. Sound, then, is both what needs to be concealed and what draws attention to itself. Unlike the scene in *The Circus*, in which a barking dog – seen but not heard by the audience of silent cinema – calls the lion's attention to the vulnerable Tramp, this embarrassing scene includes a dog whose audible barking in response to the Tramp's and the parson's wife's gurgling stomachs calls further attention to their social embarrassment.

Towards the film's end, we get an exciting surprise – actually one that Chaplin's public had been awaiting for eight years since *The Circus*. Chaplin was approaching a critical turning point in the evolution of the Tramp, as well as in his *audiovisual* articulation. Thus, upon his release from jail one last time, the Tramp finds the girl he saved (Paulette Goddard) waiting for him. She tells him that she has found work as a dancer in a restaurant. The girl introduces him to the owner, who offers him a job as a waiter, but asks him a critical question: (It is all in intertitles of course) “Can you sing?” The Tramp's answer is very hesitant. The boss offers him a trial. The Tramp gestures to his girlfriend that he cannot sing at all. In order to understand the magnitude of this moment, we have to consider the attitude of cinema viewers in 1936, nine years after *The Jazz Singer*. They have already seen two (*audio-*)*silent* films by Chaplin, and are now almost at the end of his third, but this virtuoso actor has not yet opened his mouth to produce synchronised sound. The restaurant owner who asks him if he can sing is asking this question

on behalf of millions of viewers of Chaplin's films, as well as his colleagues in Hollywood. Chaplin talks about this moment in his autobiography where he tells of the theatre manager's response to the disastrous preview of *City Lights*: "Now I want to see you make a talkie, Charlie – that's what the whole world is waiting for" (Chaplin 1964: 329). The interesting fact of the above interpretation is that this insight, which Chaplin articulated in 1964, he had already dramatised 28 years earlier in *Modern Times*.

The Tramp's anxiety centres on remembering the words to the song, and when he forgets them, he must improvise. He starts his show, which is a mixture of dance, pantomime and gibberish singing. Here Chaplin does open his mouth and formally does not disappoint his contemporary audience's expectations. He produces a voice, but ironically, his nonsense syllables are hardly what they were expecting. He shows that he can delight his audience with his unusual song in gibberish – his *emanation song*, to extend Chion's terminology. Again, he has proven to his audience that acting, dance, pantomime, and music can tell a story better than voiced words. Once again, Chaplin, faithful to his artistic vision, succeeds in expressing his deep doubt about the artistic quality of the new talking medium, given the effectiveness of his old style upgraded by the new technology of the talking medium.

At the end of this film, after the Tramp has opened his mouth for the first time, there is no way back. Chaplin goes on grappling with the role of speech in cinema through experiments that explore sound as a means of cinematic utterance. The result that hits the screens four years later is *The Great Dictator* (1940).

## 5. *The Great Dictator* (1940)

Although *The Great Dictator* is considered a "talkie" – Chaplin's first full dialogue picture – I perceive it as a *talking-silent film* that is transformed, during its final scene, into a real talking picture. True, the characters speak without the use of intertitles throughout the movie, but this film more often than not employs the cinematic language of Chaplin's silent ones. Moreover, Chaplin constructs the two characters that he plays – the Jewish barber and the dictator Hynkel – In a sense, as two opposite variations of the figure of his Tramp. In the final sequence, the two characters merge into one. The latter composite character, in turn, separates himself from the Tramp, and transforms into Chaplin, the man. He talks the way Chaplin spoke and much like the way other people sometimes spoke in the talking pictures of the era. Whereas both Hynkel and the barber suffer from speech impediments, the new superimposed personality is verbally articulate. The Jewish barber is timid and barely speaks during much of the film. Hynkel, himself

emits various strange sounds, yet they are mostly shouts, shrieks, beastly roars, childish wails, and gibberish spiced with a few intelligible, sometimes English or German words. Furthermore, when he has to speak one-on-one or on the telephone with Napaloni (Jack Oakie), Hynkel becomes tongue-tied and desperately needs the assistance of his verbally articulate propaganda minister, Garbitsch (Henry Daniell), who is always at his side.

In many scenes, Chaplin's soundtrack continues his experimentation with audio gags and his quest for the right cinematic grammar. At the beginning of the film, in the scene where the cannon fires, before the shell bursts forth, we hear a human sound much like someone clearing his throat. After that the cannon fires a dud shell. Here Chaplin personifies the cannon, by means of the soundtrack, as "diseased" or ineffective. The sound is diegetic though not realistic. Just as in his silent films, where Chaplin created montages with visual elements that do not connect with one another realistically, here he fashions an "inappropriate" soundtrack by juxtaposing the sound of the throat clearing with the picture of the cannon misfiring. Chaplin is thus expanding the audio-aesthetics he developed in his earlier work.

The firing of the cannon by the Jewish barber marks Chaplin's first appearance in this film. With his left hand, he prepares to pull the string that will fire the cannon, and with his right he covers his ear to protect himself from the noise – as futile a gesture as it was for the Tramp in the lion's cage in *The Circus*. In other words, Chaplin is still trying to shut his ears to the threat of sound, even though he has reconciled himself to the need to open his mouth.

Unlike the situation in *The Circus*, this time he is not the victim of external factors producing the dangerous sound. Here he fully collaborates, being the one producing the menacing sound. He "carried talking pictures with one hand and protected himself from them with the other".<sup>9</sup>

Immediately after the firing of the shell, the Jewish barber falls flat on the ground, shocked by the power of the sound. When he rises, he picks up his binoculars to watch the flight of the shell. The common practice in films during this period was to juxtapose the image of the person using the binoculars pointing off-screen, with a shot of this character's point of view framed through the contours of a binocular shaped mask. Chaplin changes this pattern for a non-realistic "audio point of view". The camera shows the distant landscape in a long shot without the binocular mask effect, and with no framing of the flying shell. On the soundtrack, however, we hear the whistling of

9 Paraphrasing Nehemiah 4,11.

the shell as it cuts through the air. Actually, it is only by means of the soundtrack that the audience understands that the shell is indeed in flight towards its destination. The shrieking of the shell is heard only while the binoculars are pressed to the gunner's eyes, and ceases the moment he lowers this viewing device from his face. This technique allows the soundtrack to establish an audio point of view in a non-realistic way. According to Chaplin's audio-cinematics, synchronous sound, which imitates reality, weakens cinema's power, while merely suggested unheard sound or heard sound from unseen sources, enhances it.

Chaplin further develops the use of close-up in sound space as in the scene when the Jews hide a coin in a single muffin as a way of drawing lots to determine who will go on the suicide mission to assassinate Hynkel. Hannah (Paulette Goddard) believes the plot is ridiculous, and decides to thwart the scheme by hiding coins in all the muffins without their knowing it. In this amusing scene, each of the characters secretly passes his coin to someone else, with the eventual result that the Jewish barber receives all of them. Each time the barber finds another coin in his muffin, he swallows it. Chaplin treats us to a laugh at the barber's discomfort through the soundtrack, when we hear the coins clinking against one another as they meet in his stomach. As in *Modern Times*, Chaplin uses a non-realistic sound close-up here to create a funny gag that also advances the film's plot through the non-verbal information that it conveys.

Chaplin also uses music differently from the usual practice in cinema. The national anthem at the opening of *City Lights* is such an example (see p. 33 above). In *The Great Dictator*, however, there is a special use of music in the scene of the barber giving someone a shave. The radio plays Brahms' *Fifth Hungarian Rhapsody* – a rare occasion, along with his use of the Prelude to Act I of Wagner's *Lohengrin* to accompany Hynkel's globe ballet, in which Chaplin uses music other than his own – and the barber matches his shaving motions to the music. The usual practice in cinema is to fit the music to the given scene, in order to add an emotional dimension to what is seen. In this case, however, Chaplin switches the order, and fits the barber's functional movements to given music, thus producing a kind of modern ballet choreography. Once again, Chaplin is proposing alternative codes for connecting picture and music – codes that are particularly suitable to Chaplin's cinematic language, because his cinema is often closer to dance and music than to theatrical drama.

One of the most notable examples of Chaplin's distinctive use of a soundtrack in this film occurs in the first scene where Hynkel makes a speech in front of an aroused and cheering crowd. Hynkel's gibberish, especially in its hysterical menacing intonation, chillingly reflects the threat of violence inherent in the distorted charisma of the dictator.

Like the Mayor in *City Lights*, much of his gabble is meaningless. This time the effect is not only ludicrous but also horrifying, since Hynkel is using his rhetorical skills, conveyed to us through “tone, cadence, and accent” (Daub 2010: 451–452), as well as gesticulation, to spread hate. This device artistically exposes the mechanism of totalitarian demagoguery at its most effective. When we compare this scene, which seems to us absurd and ridiculous, with contemporary newsreels of Hitler’s speeches, we can see astonishing parallels between the actual and parodied dictator’s performance styles.

In this scene, Chaplin also expresses his attitude to cinematic sound as a conveyor of information. A radio announcer relates the content of Hynkel’s speech to listeners throughout the world. His text is not a straightforward translation of the gibberish, but a prepared in advance false description of what we see and hear, rendering it more genial. The conspicuous comical contrast in tone between the seen speech for internal consumption, and the parallel “running commentary” for public relations and propaganda purposes, vividly dramatises the vicious deceitfulness of Hynkel’s message. Thus, Hynkel’s supposedly translated text turns into Chaplin’s meta-text that gives a richer interpretation to the performance that we see and hear. It is also illuminating as to what happens in the transposition from one medium (audio-visual) to the other (verbal), and vice versa, a point that Chaplin never fails to drive home.

In the dictator’s speech, the humanised microphones bend back in reaction to the mounting aggressiveness of his delivery, and then snap back at him. It appears that not only language rejects his speech, but also the public address system cannot contain it. Here the machine is humanised, as opposed to the feeding robot in *Modern Times* that is ultimately a dumb machine. This audiovisual gag is also a unique plastic expression of the rivalry and hostility between the Dictator and the media, when they fail to yield to his every whim. It furthermore reflects Chaplin’s thirteen-year struggle with the soundtrack.

Also in this scene, Chaplin breaks accepted codes of soundtrack editing in order to enrich the cinematic articulation. When Hynkel raises his hand as a sign to his audience to applaud, the sound of clapping immediately reaches top volume, without the customary gradual amplification of a fade-in. In the same way, the sound ceases immediately when Hynkel gestures that it should stop, without any gradual fade-out. This non-realistic control of the volume of the sound, which also works as an audio gag, uses the soundtrack to emphasise the dictator’s absolute control over his audience. It also inverts the humanisation of the microphones, this time rendering the human-crowd a veritable machine. We have here another example of the unconventional way in which Chaplin plays with the rules of soundtrack editing, extends the boundaries of



the language of vocal utterance, and creates a language of his own that suits the theme of his film and his artistic style.

This speech is no mere conventional gibberish, but a sophisticated variation on the *emanation speech*. Chaplin's sophisticated use of words, both in English and in German, illustrates what Chion classifies as *loss of intelligibility* speech (Chion 1994 (1990): 177). The characters' names are used as a means of enriching the statement. The Führer Adolf Hitler is transmuted by the radio voice-over into the Phooey, Adenoid Hynkel. Chaplin plays with the sound similarities and with the connotations of phooey and adenoid (polyp). Herman Göring is called Herring – a montage of “Her” from Herman and “ring” from Göring; it sounds similar and it suggests a bad smell. Joseph Goebbels is called Garbitsch, i.e., trash. These last meanings are consolidated in a verbal fragment of Hynkel's gibberish speech, when he says: “Oh, Herring shouldn't smelten fine from garbitsch und Garbitsch shouldn't smelten fine from herring”. This part of the speech, like other parts that are not pure gibberish, is highly effective as satire. Chaplin contrives new ways of producing meaning from words, unrelated to their informational import. He speaks macaronically, acting out language in general, as it were. Thus, Benito Mussolini is re-christened Benzino Napaloni: a montage of Benito, Napoleon, Mussolini and polony (sausage); Italy is Bacteria – a montage of Bactria of Alexander's empire and the microorganism. Austria becomes Osterlich, which alludes to the bird ostrich, and echoes Austerlitz, the famous Austrian defeat to Napoleon.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the “double cross,” substituting for the swastika, obviously connotes betrayal (double crossing). The satirical distortion of names in itself is more literary than cinematic; nevertheless, here these names punctuate the gibberish, as do the few real language words sprinkled here and there. Thus, we can see that although the scene is more similar in its character to silent cinema than to the talkies, its soundtrack is rich and innovative in its use of sound, vocabulary, and cinematic grammar.

The second time that Hynkel makes a speech, again in gibberish, occurs mostly “off-camera.” That is, we hear the dictator's roars of gibberish, but we *see* a close-up of the loudspeaker – the mechanical mediator – through which the speech is being transmitted, and the hysterical responses of the Jews in the ghetto. Conspicuous is the response of the Jewish barber, who jumps in horror head first into a barrel. Besides being a developed variation on the barber blocking his ear in the cannon scene earlier in the film, this ostrich-like image recalls Chaplin's self-irony projected in the lion cage scene in

10 This observation I owe to Odeya Kohen-Raz (Kohen-Raz 2011: 167).

*The Circus*. In this specific context, it is also suggestive of the world's reaction to Hitler's speeches – figuratively burying its head in the ground.

At a critical moment towards the film conclusion, Chaplin sheds his disguises – the disguises of Hynkel, of the Jewish barber, of the Tramp, and of an actor. Simultaneously, he finally discards the last barrier to sound from himself as artist. Chaplin gives his own monologue. He is shown in close up, without his traditional Tramp makeup – his gray hair and his wrinkles giving away his true age (51). He sends the world an unequivocal message, the absolute opposite of gibberish, the complete and crystalline, universal and humanistic worldview of Chaplin, the man. This speech is well articulated. He speaks in favor of resistance to tyranny, and of refusal to obey arbitrary orders opposed to basic human laws, orders that serve unjust people and allow humans to rule and trample over one another. This speech affirms freedom, human solidarity, love, and tolerance. If at the end of *Modern Times* Chaplin had surrendered to the need to use his voice to show us that he could also sing, at the end of *The Great Dictator* he surrenders to the need to use meaningful words.

Having thoroughly mastered the cinematic meaning of sound, and having explored the creative possibilities of a nonverbal soundtrack for 13 years in four films, Chaplin now articulately uses words with great ease, and permits himself an especially long monologue, which is not customary in cinema. This extraordinary monologue, transcending the fictional confines of the film, serves to convey the extreme urgency of the message. It emphasises the importance of the issues and the feeling that in order to stop Hitler it is necessary to make use of every means available, including words, which until now have not been among his artistic means of expression.

## 6. Conclusion

Indeed, Chaplin's next film arrives seven years later, and this time it is talking cinema in every sense: *Monsieur Verdoux* (1948). Here, it seems that Chaplin has fully mastered the new medium of *audiovisual illusion*. He has fully assimilated the new medium, no longer struggling with verbal communication. He has finally adopted the conventional language of talking cinema. His new products constitute a synthesis between his unique artistic language and the prevailing codes of talkies. In this sense, his first "conventional" realistic talking film lends appropriate perspective to his long experimentation with and development of sound in cinema. Close examination of *Monsieur Verdoux's* audio track and its relationship to the film's visual proves in different scenes that Chaplin's unique way of using sound during all his preceding films is applicable

and can be a powerful tool in a conventional talking film, which was much more realistic in its style.

Four years later, in *Limelight* (1952), Chaplin reverts to the subject that had never ceased to engage him since 1928. If we said that *The Circus* is a requiem for the clown – a film that sums up silent cinema, then *Limelight* sums up the totality of Chaplin's cinematic *oeuvre*. It is a requiem for the artist who is still making films, but feels that the end is already imminent and it is time for a farewell.

In the final scene of *Limelight*, Calvero (Charles Chaplin) and his partner (Buster Keaton) put on a skit, where they play the parts of two musicians trying unsuccessfully to perform a violin and piano duet. Tuning their instruments, they get into trouble that leads to absurd states of loss of control, to trampling on the violin and pulling out the piano strings. After their instruments are completely destroyed, the piano is miraculously well tuned without the wrenched out strings, Calvero, magician style, pulls out a new violin from behind him and plays it masterfully and most expressively. Keaton accompanies him with matching gracefulness and technique. The wonderful duet ends with Calvero's premeditated falling off the stage into the band's big drum. In this scene, the gags are all built around the struggle with the *sound-emitting* musical instruments. Keaton and Calvero, are overwhelmed by the preparatory tasks of setting up the music notes and tuning their instruments. In spite of their anticipating the tuning problem – they even have a tuning wrench and a wire cutter – the powerful piano and the delicate violin seem at first to be too much for them to cope with. They lose control. The humanised instruments “behave” like a monstrous enemy. With unrelenting thoroughness and persistence they stretch their instruments beyond their limits, until the violin and piano strings all snap. They seem to be taking the piano apart to get at its secrets and not out of sheer rage. Only after the instruments are destroyed and the men have suffered blows and humiliations through them do they gain control over them, seduce them like lovers, bend them to their will and needs, and finally perform brilliantly. They do not ignore sound, and are not helpless before it. They investigate it like true artists, struggle with it until they master it, and then use it in the best way. Just as Chaplin himself did in all his earlier films, as we just saw above. But this climactic moment, the triumphant performance having been achieved (self-reflectively it is this very film), is also the moment to bow out. One has to step off the stage. This powerful moment is a turning point inspired by the insight that their original art form has passed away, and cinema has actually become a new art that is alien to them. They belong to a generation that no longer exists. However painful, Chaplin resigns to this reality of being passé, and kills Calvero as Calvero killed his stage persona in the premeditated gag. Once more, like in

the *Great Dictator*'s final scene, the character and its mirrored reflection become one and they both reflect the filmmaker, Charles Chaplin. Highly significant is the way Calvero dies, to wit, whilst performing – surely, an actor's dream. Yet his actual deathbed in the gag devised by Calvero, which turns out to be Calvero's *real* death, is no other than the big drum. The most delicate instrument, his violin in hand, he dies in the drum that represents the roughest and most aggressive sound in the orchestra. Of course, Calvero in the film looks as Chaplin did in 1952, but in his dreams, Calvero appears as the Tramp in his typical costume. In this final scene, however, Calvero is dressed in "Semi Tramp garb", and side by side with his partner Buster Keaton, the spectacle is that of the two great old masters of slapstick and silent cinema.

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## Garso galia humoro kūryboje: Chaplinas – garsinių pokštų ir garso dizaino pradininkas

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje analizuojamos Chaplino garso sampratos naujovės, kurios, nors ir neįvertintos, gerokai paveikė kino garso kalbą. Nors literatūroje kalbant apie perėjimą prie garsinio kino Chaplino nuopelnai dažnai ignoruojami, savo kino kūryboje jis ne tik atrado naujus garso panaudojimo būdus – tiek conceptualius, tiek ir kaip technologinę priemonę, bet daugelyje scenų garsinius pokštus naudojo panašiai kaip rekvizitą ar dekoracijas vizualinėse išdaigose. Trys naujos kategorijos paaiškina nebyliojo ir garsinio kino dichotomiją: garsinis-nebylusis kinas (*audio-silent film*), kalbantis-nebylusis kinas (*talking-silent film*) ir filmuotas teatras (*filmed theater*). Siekiant ištirti tam tikrus geriausiai Chaplino „kalbą“ iliustruojančius garsinius pokštus, faktiškai praplėtusius jo kūrybinį kino humoro arsenalą, remiamasi reikšmingomis Michelio Chiono idėjomis apie kinematografinio garso raišką. Unikalus, toli laiką pralenkęs Chaplino garsiniai pokštai garso dizaino raidą pastūmėjo ta linkme, kuria, anot M. Chiono, jis buvo pradėtas naudoti vėliau, penktame ir šeštame XX a. dešimtmėčiuose.

### REIKŠMINIAI

ŽODŽIAI: Chaplinas, nebylusis kinas, dialogai, pokštas, garso takelis, garsinis pokštas, *Cirkas*, *Miesto šviesos*, *Modernūs laikai*, *Didysis diktatorius*, *Rampos šviesa*, perėjimas į garsinį kiną, garsinis-nebylusis kinas, kalbantis-nebylusis kinas, filmuotas teatras, audiovizualinė iliuzija, paistalynė, asinchroninis garsas, sinchroninis garsas.