Kinesthetic Empathy in Charlie Chaplin's Silent Films

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Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices

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Chapter 7

Kinesthetic Empathy in Charlie Chaplin’s Silent Films

Guillemette Bolens
As a performer and director who came of age during the era of silent film, Charlie Chaplin resisted the pressure of turning to the 'talkies' for 13 years after the advent of audio synchronisation in cinema. The first film with synchronised dialogues, The Jazz Singer, was released in 1927 and Chaplin did not use synchronised dialogues until 1940 for The Great Dictator. Kenneth Calhoon points out that City Lights (1931), 'used sound largely to ridicule sound, remaining essentially a silent film' (Calhoon 2000: 381). The 'talkies' of the 1930s were excruciatingly talkative. I propose that such constant linguistic noise deflected the audience's attention from kinesis and the silent narratives Chaplin was able to create with so much acuity. The expressive register of kinesic and kinesthetic communication was paramount in Chaplin's art, more than discursive meanings and verbal conceptualisations. According to Alan Dale, 'slapstick doesn't say anything about our condition as physical beings, though that is its one great subject. It simply nudges our feelings about this condition, with an unclloying, anxious cheerfulness that doesn't force a resolution to those feelings' (Dale 2000: 27). Silent films were a perfect medium for a kinesic genius such as Chaplin, who was able to juggle with complex gestural expression and resist emotional simplification.

Irresistible kinesthesia

Kinesis is perceived and kinesthesia is sensed (Bolens 2008: 1–33; 2010). I cannot directly experience another person's kinesthetic sensations, whereas I may share kinesic perception with others, for instance, if we watch the same gesture. However, I may infer kinesthetic sensations in another person on the basis of the kinesic signals I perceive in her movements. In an act of kinesthetic empathy, I may then internally simulate what these sensations may possibly feel like, via my own kinesthetic memory. Kinesthetic empathy plays a central role in Chaplin's art, and several scenes strike me as particularly revealing of the artist's astute attention to it and to the expressive potentials of its manifestation. One of them is in His New Job (Essanay, 1915). The Tramp (Chaplin) watches a solitary squatting gambler (played by Ben Turpin), whose strenuous dice throwing induces in Chaplin's legs increasingly pronounced empathic reactive gestures. The tempo and jerking tension of Turpin's resolute arm are transferred to the leg of the highly responsive character played by Chaplin. This scene is about nothing else but kinesthetic empathy, and it displays the kinesic manifestation
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of this intersubjective phenomenon in a way that is simultaneously focused, nuanced and irresistibly funny.

Kinesthetic empathy is also staged in City Lights. The Tramp accompanies a millionaire to a fancy restaurant. When drunk, the millionaire sees the Tramp as his life-saving friend and, when sober, as a total stranger. In the restaurant, after dinner, the dance floor is suddenly covered with couples dancing with intense stamina. The shot initially shows the orchestra gesticulating along to the energetic musical sound track (of scores composed by Chaplin himself), and then pulls back to the dancers. The camera glides along the floor towards their rapidly shuffling feet, and then leads us towards the rhythmically stamping feet of the Tramp sitting tipsy at a table. He is entranced by the energy of the dance and the frenzy of the crowd. A lady walks onto the dance floor and, while awaiting her partner, launches into a choreography of vigorous body-shaking right in front of the Tramp. When, the next second, a more dignified lady passes by him, the Tramp can no longer resist the urge. Seized by a tornado of kinesthetic impulses, he grabs the dignified lady and zooms across the dance floor in a high-speed series of intense twirls. The husband of the dizzied lady quickly and strenuously intervenes, leaving the ever-spinning Tramp with empty hands that end up dangerously clasping a tray-holding waiter’s waist. Almost killed by the autonomous momentum of his own body, the Tramp — after a last series of rapid twirls — finally collapses into the welcoming arms of the drunken millionaire.

This extraordinary scene centrally stages kinesthetic empathy in action. Watching dancers, the Tramp experiences a series of kinesthetic sensations, which build up into a motor urge that he has no means to repress. Chaplin’s facial expressions humorously highlight the fact that the Tramp does not control his body’s responsiveness to his empathic faculty: he cannot help feeling and enjoying what he sees. Chaplin’s choreography calls to mind the idea that ‘Through kinesthetic imagination, unforeseen movement possibilities are generated directly from kinesthetic events’ (Reynolds 2007: 187). In relation to Merce Cunningham’s expression ‘slips of the feet’, Dee Reynolds argues that ‘If a choreographer can proceed through ’slips of the feet’, this undermines the notion that the dance is controlled by a sovereign subject. Indeed, kinesthetic imagination implies a decentred model of subjectivity’ (Reynolds 2007: 187). The dance of the Tramp in City Lights is a remarkable incarnation of decentred subjectivity leading to unanticipated movement possibilities.

As far as the viewer is concerned, the effect is also that of ‘de-centering’ (Reynolds 2007: 14), through elation. Laughter for Chaplin’s viewer has little to do, primarily at least, with social, rational, moral judgement, or any sense of superiority or incongruity, implying a self-possessed, ever-cohesive and coherent subject. To begin with, if we laugh at the scene, we do so on the basis of our own kinesthetic empathy. Laughter here implies that we know kinesthetically why the Tramp starts dancing. This type of knowledge pertains to a cognition that is embodied (Gallagher 2005; Gibbs 2006; Pecher and Zwann 2006). If the viewer cannot rely on her own sensorimotor intelligence and kinesthetic knowledge to make sense of the Tramp’s manifestation of empathy, then the scene is thoroughly incomprehensible. The fact that our self-control is perhaps greater (and so we remain seated in front of the screen) does
not diminish our readiness to make sense of Chaplin's movements via kinesthetic empathy. Thus, we do not laugh primarily because we feel superior in refraining from dancing; we laugh primarily because we know intimately why the Tramp starts dancing; we know what it feels like to feel like dancing when seeing others dance. In this sense, we are made to relate via laughter to a decentred subject who is shown to experience an overwhelming kinesthetic empathy. Sameness here (between the Tramp and the viewer) is that of a decentred subject (the Tramp and us), whose corporeity, in multifarious ways, makes sense of its lack of control and expresses it via dance and laughter.

Perceptual simulations

The expressive art form of silent films can serve as a magnifying glass focusing our attention on the ways that intersubjectivity feeds on kinesic communication, kinesthetic imagination and interlocutors’ readiness to make sense of each other's gestures and expressive movements. Most physical comedies of the silent era are based on fast motion and complex gestures, which are unproblematically understood by spectators despite the speed and intricacy of the perceived movements. The first stage of the viewer's comprehension is non-conceptual (Damasio 1999; Jeannerod 2007). A vast and fast-increasing number of neuroscientific studies suggest that 'the human brain understands actions by motor simulation,' which is 'based on direct correspondence between the neural codes for action observation and for execution' (Calvo-Merino et al. 2005: 1243; Berthoz 1997 and 2009). Further, the neural simulation of movement appears to be instrumental in the comprehension of gesture and hence in social cognition and intersubjectivity.

The astounding quality of Chaplin's acting constantly succeeds in triggering complex sensorimotor simulations. Beside motor sensation, a simulation may pertain to various senses, such as sight and touch. In *The Adventurer* (Mutual, 1917), for example, Chaplin's character escapes from jail and, one thing leading to the next, he finds himself courting the daughter of a judge in the latter's very own house. Sitting with the daughter (Edna Purviance) on a balcony, he is offered ice cream in a bowl. Baffled by this culinary novelty, he shoves the scoop in one piece onto his spoon in order to drink from the bowl. While he is drinking, the scoop falls into his trousers. The acting that ensues constitutes a moment of kinesic perfection, which is utterly impossible to translate verbally. My point, however, is that perceptual simulation is activated in the viewer by means of subtle and acute gestures of discomfort, following a first moment of surprise at the volatilisation of the ice cream. An alarmed but discreet awareness dawns on Chaplin's character, who slightly collapses his chest in consternation and then starts fidgeting, until he manages to divert the pretty girl's attention and make the ice cream glide down his trouser leg and exit onto the floor. During the time that the ice cream scoop has disappeared from sight into his trousers, Chaplin's kinesis induces an extraordinarily precise vicarious sense of the ice cream's tactile and thermic presence. The uncanny sensation is understood by means of a perceptual
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simulation triggered by the quality of his acting. With a poorer actor, the viewer would certainly understand the situation conceptually and contextually, but the sensation of melting and gliding coldness would be less vivid or entirely missing. Thus, Chaplin’s kinesis makes an absent, invisible and unfelt object (the scoop of ice cream) present in the viewer’s sensorial and cognitive system via the multimodal perceptual simulation the latter is liable to produce.

In order to enhance the viewer’s propensity to generate perceptual simulations, Chaplin frequently uses the technique of directing his gaze towards the camera. While fidgeting in discomfort and becoming aware of the ice cream’s migration down his trousers, the Tramp looks towards the camera several times. Each glance lasts only a split second, and this sharp tempo heightens with extreme economy and efficacy the viewer’s engagement in the scene. The audience’s participation is strongly increased by such glances, as a gaze can be enough to elicit reactions of attention (Grosbras et al. 2005). The fact that Chaplin looks at the camera, not actually at the audience, does not hamper our responsiveness to the phenomenon of the gaze. We feel looked at and our participation is thereby boosted, fuelling our propensity to generate perceptual simulations. Chaplin’s triggering gaze makes us vicariously feel the ice cream more intensely. The precise tempo and kinesic quality of his furtive peeks are key to the success of the effect. Indeed, other slapstick artists used the gaze towards the camera, but quite differently, and with various results. Roscoe Arbuckle, alias Fatty, would stare insistently towards the audience for sustained moments whose impact pertained to a humour of bold seduction.5 Buster Keaton, in contrast, was reluctant to use the gaze towards the camera and, on the rare occasions when he did, the effect, equally powerful, is of increased distance rather than proximity with the viewer. For instance, in The Scarecrow (1920), Buster looks at ‘us’ right before deliberately dropping himself backwards off a wall; in Sherlock Jr. (1924), he suddenly stares at the camera with extreme anxiety when he finally understands that he is sitting on the handlebars of a racing motorcycle that lost its driver a while ago (Bolens 2010). Such scenes are aesthetically impressive and emotionally startling, but they do not induce a sense of complicity or proximity.

Chaplin practiced the gaze towards the camera in order to pull the viewer into the action via her perceptual simulations. Another scene in The Adventurer exemplifies this. The Tramp is sitting with Edna, watching dancing couples. One couple is formed of a gigantic and heavy lady clasped by her short and skinny partner. The camera frames the seated Tramp swiftly glancing sideways towards the lady’s large moving behind, which happens to be rather close to his face. After the first discreet peeks towards the lady’s posterior, the Tramp pulls out of his shirt a pin and looks at ‘us’ for half a second. Then he starts picking his teeth with the pin. The camera shifts to Edna who, slightly worried, bends a little forward towards the Tramp, who giggles. This scene is very short but is apparently the final result of many long takes and much discarded footage (Brownlow and Gill 1983). In the scene, Chaplin creates complicity by looking towards the camera, prompting the viewer to produce a potential gestural simulation and to infer the Tramp’s intention. We seek to make sense of the Tramp’s gesture, and we infer that he is pulling a pin out of his shirt in order to prick the moving rear
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end of the dancing lady with it. Yet, the Tramp never performs this action. Rather, in our kinesic imaginations, we do – or at least those of us who chuckle at this scene do. For, our laughter suggests that we infer the thought flickering through the Tramp’s mind. In an effort to figure out his intention, we simulate the unperformed gesture of pricking. In *Action in Perception*, philosopher Alva Noë states, ‘As a matter of phenomenology, the detail is present not as represented, but as accessible. Experience has content as a potentiality. In this sense, the detail is present perceptually in my experience virtually. Thanks to my possession of sensorimotor and cognitive skills, I have access to nearby detail’ (Noë 2004: 215). Thanks to her sensorimotor and cognitive skills, Chaplin’s viewer simulates the potentiality of the pin – and her reaction may turn out to be of laughter or something else (a wince of empathic pain, perhaps, or embarrassment, spite, irritation for the ridicule inflicted on a woman because of her weight, etc.). Whatever the reaction, as long as there is one, it suggests that the viewer gained access to the potentiality in the Tramp’s suggestive pin handling.

There follows the Tramp’s own laughter. The meaning of his giggle is multi-layered because Chaplin’s acting triggers the viewer’s simulation and participation. By refraining from performing the transgressive gesture, the Tramp saves himself from a kind of social attention by which he would run the risk of disappointing beautiful Edna and of being noticed, caught and taken back to jail, a possibility reinforced by the fact that prison is the setting of the next scene. While not physically enacted, the Tramp’s desire to violate the social protocol and find momentary gratification in shocking the lady’s bottom is nevertheless fulfilled, owing to our perceptually simulated intervention. He does not do it, yet it is done - virtually, thanks to our complicity, regardless of whether we are reluctant or enthusiastic accomplices.

At this stage of my analysis, kinesic simulations are used consciously: I deliberately make inferences based on the fact that I recognise my simulations to be generated by Chaplin’s movements. The possibility – and sometimes necessity – of using perceptual simulations consciously can be observed in the viewer’s reception of two scenes in Chaplin’s *The Immigrant* (Mutual 1917). The Tramp plays cards with a group of men. He shuffles the pack cut into two even halves. His gestures are lithe and expert, but when about to join the two halves of the pack to mix them, each of his hands shuffles only one half of the cards, keeping the two stacks separate from each other. Because his gestures are skilled, the other players do not react to the fact that the Tramp blatantly avoids mixing the pack while pretending to do so. The humour of the gag comes from the success of this overt moment of bluff, and Chaplin’s audience understands the gag thanks to a kinesic simulation used consciously: unless we simulate the gesture that the Tramp avoids performing (i.e. mixing together the two halves of the pack of cards) and hence think of the missing gesture, we remain blind to his bluff, just like his game partners.

Later the same group plays dice. At one point, the Tramp, standing, throws dice three times, systematically performing the movements of a baseball pitcher as a prelude to the dice dropping. The baseball move consists in twisting the torso sideways while raising the elbow above the head before throwing the ball. This move usually goes with a sideways
lifting of the knee towards the belt. Chaplin performs the upper part of the move only, and rather poorly at that. Yet, this gestural misapplication achieves the comical illusion of professionalism. Cognitively speaking, the viewer enjoys the scene if she appreciates the way in which athletic pseudo-agility is applied to a game of chance. For, no skill is needed to play dice. By definition, dice is not a sport; one cannot train and thereby become a dice champion. Thus, Chaplin's art in this scene requires a reception that spans several levels of what may be called kinesic intelligence: neuronal in a spontaneous reactivity to motor stimuli; cognitive via perceptual simulations that mediate access to gestural meaning; and analytic when we use our knowledge of cultural practices, such as sport (baseball) or gaming with artefacts (card shuffling, dice throwing) to grasp the meaning, complexity and coherence of the perceived kinesic event. The ability to span these various levels constitutes kinesic intelligence, a form of intelligence that precludes a body/mind dichotomy.

**Bluff and intensity**

Kinesic intelligence is indispensable to decipher and practice the complex social and psychophysical phenomenon denoted by the term *bluff.* An instance of kinesic bluff is in *The Kid* (First National 1921). At one point in this film, the Tramp chases the orphanage cart in which the kid has just been abducted. He succeeds in getting hold of the child again and forces the cart driver to run away. As the latter soon stops at a distance and looks back, the Tramp performs a hilarious movement of kinesic bluff, engaging in an overacted, hyperbolic gesture of physical threat, twisting his entire body in a mimicry of rocketing, albeit immediately halted, speed. His kinesis serves to show that he is *pretending to intend* to chase the driver. He reiterates this move three times, until the orphanage employee gives up and runs off.

This beautifully ostentatious gesture of bluff contrasts with another scene in *The Kid,* where the Tramp, after struggling to the last, has nevertheless lost the child and all hopes of return. He walks towards his empty house and looks at its locked door. The extreme intensity of this moment is conveyed by one detail: the Tramp clumsily twirls his hat twice while looking at the door. Apparently nothing, yet a thousand times more powerful than any tear or facial contortion. The loss of the child is a catastrophe beyond qualification, which only silence can communicate. To communicate silence in a silent film, Chaplin expresses *nothing* and marks the deliberateness and forceful expressiveness of this choice with one of the most trivial of all possible place-holder gestures: twirling a hat. The effect of such a gesture at this point in the narrative calls to mind Carrie Noland’s claim that “The project of culture might be to marry modes of kinesis to specific meanings, but as embodied signifiers, gestures are more vulnerable to dehiscence (less fixed by convention to their signifieds) than scriptural signs” (Noland 2009: 39). Chaplin’s expressive power is correlated to his playing with gestures’ semiotic volatility.
Chaplin's art is unforgettable because it makes room for such volatility, thus gesturing towards the irreducible complexity and expressive resourcefulness of humans. Alan Dale stresses that Chaplin's 'great early inspiration' was to flout character coherence 'with both hands and a flourish' (Dale 2000: 38): 'in this early style, Chaplin always defers his ultimate definition of the figure by adding something out of the blue that doesn't add up but is unforgettable – because it doesn't compute' (Dale 2000: 39), say, twirling a hat when in despair.

Chaplin's range as a performer is less restricted than Lloyd's or Keaton's. Neither of them ever played a character as stylistically volatile as the Tramp or as extreme as the ranting Great Dictator. Chaplin can go so far because he interprets his physique for us as implying that this wisp could never belong anywhere, to anyone, and so the common social restrictions on behaviour don't apply to him. Chaplin originally used this freedom to be less, as well as more, delicate: he would play the less against the more.

(Dale 2000: 59)

Owing to Chaplin's expressive freedom and range, and because gestures are more readily vulnerable to semiotic discoherence than linguistic signs, delicacy in Chaplin's art cannot be reduced to sappiness. In this regard, the last scene of City Lights is famous. Numerous interviews confirm that it is common for viewers not just to weep a tear or two, but to plainly sob at this short sequence. Why? Are we all mawkish saps? An accusation of sentimentalism seems hardly sufficient to account for the pervading impact of this scene. The scene is silent on a double front. On the one hand, Chaplin was still resisting the 'talkie' when no one else would. By doing so, he maintained his audience's focus on kinesic expression. On the other, the acting of Virginia Cherrill (playing the Blind Girl) is remarkably sober. The documentary Unknown Chaplin by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill includes test footage of another actress performing this scene. Chaplin had great difficulties with Virginia Cherrill. He fired her and then hired her back; he clearly disliked her. The story is well known. At some point, he decided to ask Georgia Hale, the female lead in The Gold Rush (1925), to take a shot at the final scene, and he almost remade the film entirely with her. The extant test footage shows a stark difference in acting between the two, Georgia Hale, a fine actress, and Virginia Cherrill, an inexperienced actress. Hale keeps moving her face, putting forth expressions of endearment and amazement (that is, the signals she was expected to emit); Cherrill hardly moves a single facial muscle. And yet she is a million times superior. The moment of suspension created by her immobility and the concentration of her gaze are superior to any skilful and stylised gestures. Chaplin's genius shows in his ultimate choice of her performance over Hale's, despite the personal friction between them.

Cherrill's acting is remarkably powerful because it activates kinesthetic empathy in the viewer by means of kinesic suspension at the climax of the narrative. Here she stands, cured, able to see again thanks to the money dearly earned by the Tramp who unjustly spent almost a year in prison for it. When free again, the Tramp is in a state of misery
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...that exceeds his previous neediness. Right in front of the Girl's flower shop, he happens to be humiliated by newspaper boys, as they pull a piece of his shirt or underwear out of a hole in his trouser bottom. He angrily snatches away the torn piece of clothing, chases the boys in an effort to kick them with an extended leg, readjusts the shoe he almost lost in the action, and then wipes his nose with the torn rag before stuffing it into his breast pocket. In short, he is now on the very lowest rung of the social ladder, if not fallen off the ladder altogether, and just an inch short of losing his last shred of human dignity and composure. Then, looking up, he suddenly finds himself face-to-face with the Flower Girl. She still believes her saviour to be a handsome millionaire; she spends her days waiting for his reappearance. Separated by the glass window of the shop, she sees a tramp spellbound by her sight and she giggles. Then, while forcing a charitable coin into the Tramp's hand, she recognises his touch and freezes. A shift in the musical score written by Chaplin highlights the event of her recognition. After a few seconds and one or two words on caption, instead of letting go of his hand, she minimally draws it towards her. This is delicacy raised to a remarkable expressive height. He is a living scar and she keeps hold of him. And the film ends. Nothing needs to be added.

I propose that the efficacy of the scene lies in the way in which the Flower Girl's minimalistic movement activates the viewer's kinesthetic empathy more powerfully than any conventionally skilled and expressive yet 'noisy' gestures. Cherrill's absorption and immobility are vibrant and induce in the viewer the possibility to kinesthetically simulate and hence witness sensorially and emotionally the potential magnitude of an intersubjective contact based on radical reciprocal respect and acceptance. Cherrill's 'kinesthetic silence' opens a suspended time, where the viewer is liable to unfold her kinesthetic imagination. The scene is sappy when Hale skilfully emotes and produces ready-made meanings; it is not so with Cherrill, when she focuses her attention and ours on kinesthetic sensations. Chaplin calls the viewer's attention to kinesic and kinesthetic communication. City Lights is the epitome of this pervading aspect in his art, because of the sequences already discussed and also because the story is that of a blind woman deprived, for most of the film, of access to visual inputs and yet so kinesthetically intelligent that, months later, she recognises the Tramp by touching his hand. This tactile recognition involves kinesthesia, for to touch a hand is to feel its skin and its shape, but also its sensorimotor style (Bolens 2008), fuelled by kinesthesia – a kinesthesia that, in turn, induces kinesthetic sensations in the touching hand (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Stankov et al. 2001). The Other is thus acknowledged by the mediation of this very particular type of reciprocity. The scene of recognition in City Lights is striking because it situates personal identity on a level that escapes from common social categorisations, such as class, wealth, age, ethnicity, physical conformity, etc. The locus of recognition is kinesthesia.
Back to bluff and the viewer's kinesic intelligence

I wish to conclude on two scenes that interlace bluff with tact. The interlacing of such contrasted notions is interesting because it suggests that Chaplin expected more from his viewer than a simple reactivity to an emotionally straightforward weeping face, or to strenuous slapstick pratfalls and racing gangs (Clayton 2007; Tessé 2007). Chaplin's viewer has to exercise her kinesthetic imagination and engage her kinesic intelligence. In the first scene, the Tramp, faking wealth, drives the Flower Girl home in the millionaire's borrowed Rolls. He lets her into the car and, instead of entering by the opposite door, climbs clumsily behind her shoulders and contorts himself into the driver's seat. Our kinesic understanding of his incongruous effort grounds our appreciation of the odd yoking of bluff and tact: tactfully striving to make her feel fine about her condition, he pays extreme attention to her through moments of behavioural pretence and also sudden lapses from pretence, such as this, linking a bluff of social ease with uncannily cautious efforts and contortions. The Flower Girl does not perceive the hiatus (she literally cannot see it): it is addressed to us.

Similarly, when sitting in her apartment and helping her roll up a ball of yarn, the Tramp lets her mistakenly unravel his jersey entirely. Because the woollen thread exits out from under his jacket, her gesture of tugging on the yarn looks like she is pulling his guts out, with him twisting and arching his torso to let her pull the yarn without alarming her by alerting her to the mistake. His movements tap directly into the viewer's propensity to make sense of gestures in a multi-layered way, using kinesthetic empathy when the Tramp contracts his chest to let the wool out; motor cognition as he holds the thread in order to facilitate her task; and kinesic analysis to perceive the interlacing of tact and bluff, as he tactfully conceals her mistake in a successful bluff of normality. Chaplin strongly relies on his viewers' kinesthetic sensitivity, kinesic intelligence and ability to span the multiple levels of gesture comprehension, whether he stages a formerly blind woman suddenly absorbed in the recognition of a touch, or whether he enacts a tactful bluffer faking ease with extreme care.

Chaplin's creative power was at its height with silent films because it made room for kinesthetic imagination in himself and in his viewer. Acts of kinesthetic imagination are not motivated by rationally calculated, discursively articulated decisions, but rather by a desire to find new ways of using energy that emerge through the process of moving itself' (Reynolds 2007: 213). The talkies limited the movements of bodies, whose primary expressive function had become speech. In order to keep exercising his own kinesthetic imagination and to keep finding new ways of activating his viewer's empathic liseness, Chaplin's art had to remain silent for as long as possible. Only the catastrophe of Nazism prompted Chaplin to step out of silence with The Great Dictator (1940). Given the American and European threats that were directed against him for making such a film, this was an act of resistance and courage that truly leaves me speechless with everlasting admiration.
Notes

1. This is Chaplin's first film made at the Essanay Studios, which he directed himself. Before that, he worked for Mack Sennett at the Keystone Studios, where he was a star but not a film director. On Chaplin, see Rohmer (1989), Bordat (1998), Bazin (2000), Magny (2003), Martin (2003).

2. In the history of philosophy on humour and laughter, the idea that it is a sense of superiority or of incongruity that elicits laughter has often prevailed. See Morreall (1987), Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997), Critchley (2002).

3. For example, in the films of Mack Sennett, Fatty Arbuckle, Harry Langdon, Max Linder, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton. See Dale (2000).

4. In Jean Decety and Jennifer Stevens' words, 'Simulation of movement has come to be recognized as a distinct modality of representation. It may be most aptly characterized as the fundamental and mental counterpart to motor behaviour. Simulation of movement precedes and plans for upcoming physical action and activates the same cortical and subcortical structures that mediate motor execution. But, the pragmatic value in motor simulation is that, at its core, it is the gateway to human social understanding. An embodied perspective moves us away both from a mentalistic view of cognition and from a dualistic view of a mind/body. It considers cognitive processes as rooted in bodily experience and interwoven with action in the world and interaction with other people. The fundamental ability of the motor system to resonate when perceiving actions, emotions, and sensation provides the primary means by which we understand others and can therefore be considered as a basic form of intersubjectivity' (Decety and Stevens 2009: 14-15). See also Adolphs (1999), Niedenthal et al. (2005), Berrol (2006), Foster (2008), Beilock and Lyons (2009), Decety and Sommerville (2009).

5. See, for example, The Cook (1918), where Fatty Arbuckle and Buster Keaton share a dance scene, in which Arbuckle parodies the pseudo-oriental Salome-type number made popular by Maud Allen's The Vision of Salome, inspired by Max Reinhardt's mise en scène of Oscar Wilde's Salomé in 1904.

6. The Oxford English Dictionary (second edition 1989) defines the verb to bluff as follows: '1.2. In the game of poker: To impose upon (an opponent) as to the value of one's hand of cards, by betting heavily upon it, speaking or gesticulating or otherwise acting in such a way as to make believe that it is stronger than it is, so as to induce him to 'throw up' his cards and lose his stake, rather than run the risk of betting against the bluffer. (Of U.S. origin.) Hence, transf. of other wagering, political tactics, international diplomacy, etc. to bluff off: to frighten off or deter (an opponent) by thus imposing upon him as to one's resources and determination. 1.3. intr. To practise or attempt the imposition described in 2; to assume a bold, big, or boastful demeanour, in order to inspire an opponent with an exaggerated notion of one's strength, determination to fight, etc.'

7. I use the term discoherence in the sense expounded by Jonathan Dollimore (1991: 87): 'In highlighting the contingency of the social, the critique of ideology may also intensify its internal instabilities, doing so in part by disarticulating or disaligning existing ideological configurations. To borrow a now obsolete seventeenth-century word, the dislocation which the critique aims for is not so much an incoherence as a discoherence - an incongruity verging on a meaningful contradiction. In the process of being made to discohere, meanings are returned to circulation, thereby becoming the more vulnerable to appropriation, transformation, and reincorporation in new configurations.'

8. See, for instance, the interviews in Charlie: The Life and Art of Charles Chaplin, 2003, produced, written, and directed by Richard Schickel.
9. On this sequence, Kenneth Calhoon writes: 'two newsboys taunt him and grab at his clothing, which is soiled and tattered after months in prison. The tramp musters bourgeois indignation, glaring in the direction of his assailants while blowing his nose on a threadbare rag, which he then tidily slips into his breast pocket. The pedantic gesture of nose-blowing proclaims superior affect-control, yet its inherently comical potential underscores the paradox of assimilation: efforts to achieve the poise of perceived superiors create, following Norbert Elias, a "peculiar falseness and incongruity of behaviour" (Calhoon 2000: 387–388). This description suggests that the rag used as handkerchief is not the piece of clothing torn by the newsboys. As prosaic and apparently trivial as this detail may seem, it matters, I think, that we are dealing with one and the same object. The fact that the rear-end rag is the handkerchief increases the proximity between utter dereliction and resistance to it by means of gesture. This sequence shows a Tramp sunk so low that he does not smile anymore, a rare fact, given his usual tendency to sneer with a vengeance. In the final scene of City Lights, we are beyond the point of an actor-Tramp comically showcasing the failed acting of a proud derelict. People passing by in the street mock him, but the audience does not laugh...
Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices


