2. Friedrich Ebert, Social Democratic politician, was the first president of Germany, from 1919 to 1925.
3. Hauptmann (1862–1946) had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1912 and received the first Adler-Schild des Deutschen Reiches (Eagle Shield of the German Empire) from President Friedrich Ebert on his sixtieth birthday in 1922. On Hauptmann, see also the text by his brother, Carl Hauptmann, in chapter 4 (no. 49).
4. Occurring in the immediate aftermath of a putsch and a communist uprising, the Reichstag elections of June 6, 1920, showed increasing support for right-wing parties. The minority government that Ebert subsequently formed fell apart in May 1921. Ebert threatened to resign on multiple occasions during these years, but remained in office until his death in 1925.
5. This phrase (naming four bodies of water) is a quote from the Lied der Deutschen (Song of the Germans): “Von der Maas bis an die Memel, / Von der Etsch bis an den Belt.” The song was declared the German national anthem by President Ebert in 1922.
6. The lines are from Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” also famously set to music in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony: “Alle Menschen werden Brüder, / wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.” The English translation is from The Poems of Schiller, trans. Edgar Alfred Bowring (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1851), 63.
7. This sentence refers to efforts to restore an Anglo-French entente through talks between Aristide Briand, the prime minister of France, and David Lloyd George, prime minister of the United Kingdom, at a time when the allied countries disagreed on issues such as war reparations. The negotiations eventually failed when Briand fell from power in January 1922.
8. The original here reads:

Deutschland ohne Gold und Waffen.
Einsam stehst Du in der Welt:
Neue Zukunft gilt’s zu schaffen.
Neuer Glanz und neues Geld.
Doch schon lichtet sich die Wolke
Denn Du führst zum Licht uns hin:
‘Blondes Mädchen aus dem Volke,
Eines Volkes Königin!’

ROBERT MUSIL

Impressions of a Naïf


One would be hard-pressed to name a film star who could unite the admiration of both popular audiences and intellectuals more fully than Charlie Chaplin. In this article, the Austrian writer and passionate filmgoer Robert Musil (1880–1942) discusses his discovery of Chaplin during a trip to Berlin and reflects more broadly on his fascination with cinema. Where other writers might have written off slapstick as an “American” phenomenon, Musil locates its origins in a long tradition of popular European stage humor. In 1925, Musil would also review Balázs’s Visible Man (1924) in an essay titled “Ansätze zu neuer Ästhetik: Bemerkungen über eine Dramaturgie des Films” (Toward a new aesthetic: Observations on a dramaturgy of film), arguing that silent film could place spectators in an “other condition” beyond the conceptual limits of ordinary experience. On Chaplin, see also chapter 12, nos. 182, 183, and 184.

It was in Berlin. The theaters had not yet opened for the winter season, and the cinemas were buzzing. What should I do? I set aside my existence and went to the movies. If anyone
living between Berlin and Charlottenburg—*between* understood in the direction leading over Chernyshevskoye, Peking, and New York—had never experienced Chaplin, then it was surely me. I was encouraged by the fact that everything significant had already been said about cinema: for beside the polished intellect of experts, the voice of someone fresh from the backwoods has always been able to hold its own. Chaplin did not surprise me; I was already familiar with his kind. I had seen Chaplin’s father in the operetta back in the generation of my own forefathers. I had seen that fantastical shiny pearl of a physiognomist, thrown, as it were, before the swine, and fidgeting about stupidly with a sigh of resignation. Long before our current knockabouts, I had seen the knockabout roll the souls with his gallows humor. Yes, good comedians already existed, and all of them were acrobats. Perhaps Chaplin is better, but I am struck by what they all share, the common line leading to the rise of cinema. The swift and contorted gait, that flexibility that climbs over wardrobes as if they were footstools, the running-around and being run around, the face slaps, the mix-ups, kicks, somersaults, falls and leaps over rooftops: had this not always been the actor’s lifeblood, in which his fortunes first came to fruition? This is an ancient tradition, stretching back at least to Hanswurst comedies and Venetian masks,1 if it is not the very lifeline of the theater as such. Fleeing the austerity of religious service, into which he had been reluctantly driven by the development of European theater, the actor found refuge in the operetta, and he is now experiencing an explosive liberation in the cinema.

I also saw a female Chaplin, an American actress. She seemed hardly noticeable in her skirts, but then she put on an old suit for men. The real catastrophe set in when she got to the collar button. The finger grabs the button from the top, but it refuses to snap shut. The finger grabs it from the bottom; it still refuses to close. The hands descend into the neck from raised elbows, slip upwards from below, twist around the corners, but the button naturally refuses to close—and this continues until the entire little human form is reduced to a bundle of colliding and diverging body parts, writhing about in convulsions of impotent anger; the parts meet one another over, under, in, and beside beds, wardrobes, corners, and chairs, until—yes, until suddenly the button simply closes, and a soft breeze caresses the feverish spectator. In its theatrical precision, all of this might be American, but it was born under a German bush named Wilhelm.2

I also had the occasion to witness an actor in a summer theater, hence in three dimensions and in the flesh. He gave a satirical rendition of a fistfight. Here too, the actor climbed over tables, wardrobes, backs, and here too, he struck the soft elegiac note characteristic of the comedy of bodily excess. We arrived in the loge just in time for his scene, and we exited again as he threw the last punch. Thus he stood before us, projected out of the emptiness, exactly as if appearing on a magic screen. Still, he remained a pale (albeit pleasant enough) comparison. How to explain this? I do not have much faith in the dramaturgic philosophy of the cinema (which is nonetheless becoming popular today), but rather in its technology. Considered from this angle, the reason likely resides in nothing other than this: This actor gives the same performance five hundred times, but I see him only once. Hence the probability that I see his best performance is one in five hundred. The film director, on the other hand, would film the same action five hundred times if necessary, and in this case the probability of spectators seeing the best moment always amounts to a certainty. This certainty is a source of superiority. I also used to think that I had already experienced violent brawls, but I had never seen fights like the one I saw that time in the cinema. The people in the film went flying, and the tempo reached such a pitch that we spectators also flew through the air. You could no longer decide whether you were the human beast defending himself or one of the bloodhounds that he hurled through the air. What purpose this element that technology stirs up within us might serve is a different question. I do not know. But it is there.
Another question: what use are words? I once saw a German film based on a sordid, kitschy novel. Such a sequence of events, which provokes nausea when a reader has to imagine it, is swallowed whole when placed before a spectator. After all, people sit for hours in tramways, rooms, and waiting halls looking at much more boring things, and we would long ago have committed suicide if our eyes were not much more patient, inured, and thankful than our ears; our eyes are more easily amused. And from time to time, when a girl says to a man, “Come join me in the water,” when her hair flutters in the wind, her fingers grab onto his sleeves and her eyes cry out, all of this taking place on a windy dune, ridiculously large before the tiny infinity of the sea lapping the shore below: from time to time, there are impressions that one never forgets. It is perhaps not so bad to be faced with the question as to why we really need words. Someone should try removing from the theater all those words that say nothing more than what the spectator can guess at first glance! The theaters would admittedly lose their best source of revenue: the platitudes.

Notes

1. Hanswurst was a stock figure in popular improvised comedy in the German-speaking world during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Eighteenth-century proponents of bourgeois theater such as Johann Christoph Gottsched sought to banish the figure from the stage, though it survived in popular forms such as puppet theater.
2. Musil is referring to the comic poet and illustrator Wilhelm Busch (1832–1908). Busch is also the German word for “bush.”
3. The original text contains an untranslatable wordplay: “Die Theater kämen freilich um ihre bestbezahlten Plätze, die Gemeinplätze.”

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BÉLA BALÁZS

Only Stars!

First published as “Nur Stars!,” in Filmtechnik, no. 7 (April 3, 1926), 126. Translated by Alex H. Bush.

In contrast to Henny Porten (no. 143), who emphasized the discipline and hard work of the film star, Béla Balází here sees the star as the result of a more innate—and eminently filmic—capacity for expressive body language. Like Friedrich Sieburg (see chapter 4, no. 52) and Kurt Pinthus (see earlier in this chapter, no. 144), Balázs attributes an immense power to stars to channel the affect and imagination of their publics. Balázs’s description of the star as an “ideal type for contemporary humanity” recalls the work of Max Weber, but it also points to a fixture of the star system, which marketed film stars according to certain social “types” they represented on the screen. The same year that Balázs published his article, the Viennese magazine Mein Film launched a series titled “Welchem Typ entspricht Ihr Aussehen?” (Which type do you resemble?), in which readers were invited to send in photos if they resembled one of the types discussed in the magazine with the chance of winning a film aptitude test. (Henny Porten was described as the “Gretchen-Typ,” while Asta Nielsen was described as a “Lulu-Typ”). It was precisely this reduction of stars to types that, according to Kracauer, Great Garbo resisted (see chapter 4, no. 61). The “type” in film would later be theorized by Ernst Jünger as a signature of mass modernity (see chapter 12, no. 188).