

THE POWER OF THE CLOWN:  
THE COMEDIAN AS A PRACTICAL POLITICAL MOUTHPIECE

BY  
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Charlie Chaplin made his first “talkie,” *The Great Dictator*, in 1940, one year before the United States entered into World War II. *The Great Dictator* is famous for Chaplin’s signature slapstick, as well as its obvious parody of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.<sup>1</sup> However, the film is perhaps most well-known for a speech delivered by Chaplin's character of the Jewish Barber at the end of the film.<sup>2</sup> There are many critics of Chaplin's decision to include the speech in this movie because it openly criticizes real political leaders, and is informed by Chaplin's personal political ideology.<sup>3</sup> These critics include both film reviewers of the time, as well as specialists in the field of film propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Klaus Mann, a contemporary of Chaplin's, declares that the speech is disconnected from the rest of the storyline, and that the film would have been both more entertaining, and a better propaganda device had it been purely satirical rather than including Chaplin's bitter harangue.

This essay addresses Mann’s criticism to assert that the speech is entirely in keeping with Chaplin's role in society as a comedian. Chaplin uses his status as a well-known jokester to bring awareness to a political and moral cause that he sees as being of the utmost importance. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Charles S. Chaplin, dir. *The Great Dictator*. Charles Chaplin Productions, 1940. Film.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin plays two parts - that of an unnamed Jewish barber and Adenoid Hynkel - the leader of an anti-Semitic regime. These two characters get confused for one another near the end of the film. Hynkel is taken into custody instead of the Barber, and the Barber is forced to give a speech to the regime’s gathered army, having been mistaken as Hynkel.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Jacobs, “World War II and the American Film,” *Cinema Journal* 7 (1967-8): 8.

<sup>4</sup> Mae Tinée, “Chaplin Talkie Hardly Meets Expectations,” rev. of *The Great Dictator*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1940: 24.

perfectly acceptable for comedians to project political ideology in their work because of their special status in society. Chaplin uses his identity as a comedian to entice the viewers, who are, for all intents and purposes, “held captive” by the humor in the film, until they have no choice but to sit through the final, jarring speech delivered by Chaplin.

Due to *The Great Dictator* being a comedic social commentary, it makes the audience accept some serious discourse on the issues it raises by “paying” moviegoers with the humor in the film. Charlie Chaplin's inclusion of the diatribe that closes the movie is not incidental, nor was it naïve of Chaplin to believe that his audience would listen to him. Chaplin may have been a comedic genius, but that does not mean that he could not make an impact on his audience's opinions on serious matters. It is not despite of, but more because of his status as a well-known comedian, that Charlie Chaplin was able to include his personal philosophy in the form of the four minute denunciation of Fascism and praise of action against oppression.

Klaus Mann argues that *The Great Dictator* is an inadequate attempt at attacking the Nazis in his article "What's Wrong with Anti-Nazi Films?" Mann thinks the film is neither comedy nor propaganda.<sup>5</sup> Mann believes Chaplin is too light-handed in dealing with the man that was responsible for the Holocaust and World War II.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, World War II propaganda expert Professor Robert Cole of Utah State University examines *The Great Dictator* in his article "Anglo-American Anti-fascist Film Propaganda in a Time of Neutrality: *The Great Dictator*, 1940" and addresses how Chaplin uses his usual comedic stylings to create the kind of feature film that makes such beautifully engaging propaganda. In his article, Cole asserts that Chaplin chose the correct medium with which to espouse political sentiments to the largest captive audience possible.<sup>7</sup> Professor Jodi Sherman is similarly supportive of Chaplin's movie in an article in which she argues that comedians have the power to use humor in ways that societal norms would not allow the rest of the population to, and, she asserts, it is because of this ability that “the Clown”

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<sup>5</sup> Klaus Mann, “What’s Wrong with Anti-Nazi Films?” *New German Critique* (2003): 178.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Cole, “Anglo-American Anti-fascist Film Propaganda in a Time of Neutrality: *The Great Dictator*, 1940,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21, no. 2 (2001): 137-38.

can be highly influential.<sup>8</sup> She asserts that Charlie Chaplin purposefully

uses this power as “the Clown” to reach out to his audience.

Sherman’s article in favor of comedic propaganda becomes very helpful in defending Chaplin’s film against Mann’s accusations that a comedian should not make propaganda. Mann’s criticism can be countered with Sherman’s article: comedians can and should attempt to satirize or otherwise use their humor to a political advantage. This argument is taken a step further to advance the idea that “the power of the clown” means not only that a comedian is able to parody political events and characters for the amusement of others, but that “the Clown” can be somewhat like a megaphone for political ideology, capable of promulgating his beliefs to an audience that has been lulled into complacency by the entertainment he provides them with. If a film employs a mix of comedy and serious discourse, it utilizes the comedian’s special status in society, a status derived from court jesters of the past.<sup>9</sup> “The Clown” is arguably the most broad-reaching projector of political ideology, partially because people look to him as being harmless by his very nature as a jester. Consequently, his audience is obligated to hear what “the Clown” has to say, thereby presenting “the Clown” an unwittingly compliant crowd for his commentary.

Film reviews are some of the best evidence from this period to illustrate how the public received Chaplin’s film and indicate whether or not he was successful in reaching a large audience.<sup>10</sup> This makes it possible to assess public reception of a movie, to a point, with this evidence. One such reviewer from the Washington Post received Chaplin’s

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<sup>8</sup> Jodi Sherman, “Humor, Resistance, and the Abject: Roberto Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful* and Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*,” *Film and History* 32 (2002): 73.

<sup>9</sup> Court jesters were the only ones given a free pass to poke fun at the king and events at court. Currently, comedians enjoy this same protection regarding their ability to voice observations and criticisms. While most democratic societies profess to give all citizens this ability, in the United States, in the time leading up to the beginning of World War II, the kind of vocal anti-Nazi rhetoric Chaplin included in *The Great Dictator* was not welcomed by the Hays Code, as section X on “National Feelings” of The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 states, “the history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly.”

<sup>10</sup> Published reviews are one way to gauge how well a movie was received, and this can be judged based on the number of positive versus negative reviews, or the public visibility and popularity of the movie reviewers or newspapers they were published in. Reviews are used in this analysis, rather than ticket sales, or forms of personal reviews in the form of letters or diary entries from the time, because both of these types of evidence are difficult to find for this period.

film quite well.<sup>11</sup> Nelson Bell of the Washington Post points out that the movie had an abundance of the famous Chaplin brand of comedy, and that the film does not disappoint in this respect. Bell also addresses the fact that other reviewers of the film did not find Chaplin's humor to be on par with what was expected of him.<sup>12</sup> Mae Tinée, a reviewer from the Chicago Daily Tribune, was unimpressed by Chaplin's first proper attempt at a motion picture with speech.<sup>13</sup> She makes it clear that she did not enjoy *The Great Dictator* because she was “never crazy about Chaplin.”<sup>14</sup> Tinée may very well dislike the film simply because it is Chaplin's, and not because Chaplin was unsuccessful with his approach to the movie. Charlie Chaplin was an influential and beloved star in Hollywood at the time, and because Bell agrees with this sentiment, it can be argued that his review may better reflect how the majority of the public most likely responded to the movie. For example, Bell refers to Chaplin as “Mr. Charles Spencer Chaplin” at the outset of his review. His usage of this title foreshadows the respect shown to Chaplin in the rest of his review, a respect that Tinée does not echo in her review.<sup>15</sup> This illustrates that Tinée's review is fundamentally different than Bell's. She adds her personal dislike of Chaplin's sense of humor to her review, whereas Bell includes in his review the popular opinion of Charlie Chaplin as a comedic giant.

At one point, Bell's review focuses on the speech that Charlie Chaplin makes at the end of the film. Tinée's article acknowledges Chaplin's speech, but she does not give it the attention that Bell thinks it is due. This difference may be rooted in the very basic organization of the two reviewer's styles; Bell is more thorough in his review overall than Tinée is. Regardless, both of these reviewers felt the need to address the speech in one manner or another. Movie critics like Tinée cite the beginning of the speech as a break in the movie because it ruins the comedy and is completely disjointed from the rest of the feeling of the film.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, the speech can be anticipated by the rest of the film. Throughout his time in the ghetto, the Jewish Barber witnesses the terrible treatment suffered by the Jews under the regime, all while being chased and harassed by Double Cross stormtroopers.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising

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<sup>11</sup> Nelson B. Bell, “‘The Great Dictator’ Is Chaplin at His Zenith,” rev. of *The Great Dictator*, *The Washington Post*, 7 Nov. 1940: 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tinée, “Chaplin Talkie Hardly Meets Expectations”: 24

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Bell, “‘The Great Dictator’ Is Chaplin at His Zenith”: 18.

<sup>16</sup> Tinée, “Chaplin Talkie Hardly Meets Expectations”: 24.

<sup>17</sup> Chaplin uses “Double Cross” armbands for the soldiers in the service of Hynkel as an obvious parallel to the swastika used by Nazi soldiers under Hitler.

that the Barber will have something to say about what he has been seeing and experiencing by the end of the film. The Great Dictator indeed presents itself as a comedy to the audience, but, near the film's conclusion, the mood becomes profoundly serious. Some critics dislike the speech in that it was a direct political address within what masqueraded at the beginning as a feature film, but there is no problem with these two coexisting in one film. Furthermore, when compared to some other films being produced by Hollywood at the time, it should not have been particularly shocking that a director, especially one as politically vocal as Charlie Chaplin, would create a film that directly attacked one of the most menacing figures in world politics at the time.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the controversy surrounding *The Great Dictator* before and after its release, it has become a successful model for entertainers since Charlie Chaplin. Though *The Great Dictator* may have been negatively received by some critics and some of the viewing public, its approach has been duplicated by other comedians that wish to use humor to help frame dark themes. This influence is evidenced in programs such as the popular television series *M\*A\*S\*H*, which spanned eleven seasons, as well as current programs like *Saturday Night Live* that also utilize the same kind of satirical comedy to provide a commentary on serious political and social issues. The existence and popularity of these TV shows supports the idea that *The Great Dictator's* attack on Hitler was successful in its approach and aims, as actors, specifically Alan Alda, who portrays Hawkeye in *M\*A\*S\*H*, have followed Chaplin's lead.

There is a sure parallel between Chaplin's speech and Hawkeye's diatribe in an episode in season five of *M\*A\*S\*H* ("The General's Practitioner"), when Hawkeye eloquently establishes why he hates war. Hawkeye begins by disparaging the old adage, "war is Hell," by meeting it with, "War isn't Hell. War is war, and Hell is Hell. And of the two, war is a lot worse." When asked to elaborate on this, he obliges, readily armed with his logic that "there are no innocent bystanders in Hell. War is chalk full of them - little kids, cripples, old ladies. In fact, except for some of the brass, almost everybody involved is an innocent bystander."<sup>19</sup> The viewer

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<sup>18</sup> One particular case of a politically-conscious film being released around this time is that of the Warner Brothers Studio's film, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, released in 1939. The Warner brothers were sons of Polish Jews living in America and, because of the Nazi's anti-Semitism, they were some of those in Hollywood actively speaking out against the regime. See "Confessions of a Nazi Spy: Hollywood Strikes a Blow for Democracy," rev. of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *The Scotsman* 20 June 1939: 17.

<sup>19</sup> *M\*A\*S\*H*. Episode no. 118, first broadcast 15 February 1977 by CBS. Directed by Alan Rafkin and written by Burt Prelutsky.

understands that this piercing commentary is intended to lash out at not just the Korean War that the character of Hawkeye currently finds himself in, or even the Vietnam War that was ongoing when the episode was released, but war's very essence. The speech that the Barber delivers at the end of *The Great Dictator* is an emotional call to the soldiers of the Double Cross regime, and also Chaplin's movie audience - to keep Hitler, and oppressive dictators in general, from taking away the beautiful freedoms of democracy:

Greed has poisoned men's souls, has barricaded the world with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want... The aeroplane and the radio have brought us closer together. The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men - cries out for universal brotherhood - for the unity of us all. Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world... To those who can hear me, I say - do not despair. The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed - the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress... Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people! Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness. Soldiers! in the name of democracy, let us all unite!<sup>20</sup>

Hawkeye's speech is included in a humorous television show, just as Chaplin's speech finds itself at the end of a comedic feature film. These two speeches are also similar in that they both address an immediate concern in the film, a real-world concern of the actor, and a system or culture of beliefs.

"The power of the clown" not only indicates that a comedian is able to parody political events and characters for the amusement of others, but that - because of this special status in society that he enjoys as a commentator on political and social issues - a comedian can say what he wants about what he observes. If a film employs a mix of comedy and serious discourse, it utilizes the comedian's special "jester" status in society. "The Clown" is able to disseminate political ideology to a large portion of the public because people view him as being harmless by his very nature as a jester. It is suitable to utilize humor to deal with disturbing subject matter, and it is not despite, but instead more because of, his status as a well-known comedian that Chaplin was able to include the

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<sup>20</sup> Chaplin, "The Great Dictator's Speech."

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Barber's speech in a comic film. In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin uses his "power" as a "clown" to provide his audience with assertions of how things are, and also how he thinks they should be. Moviegoers receive his message because they feel as though they are accomplices in Charlie Chaplin's foray into the political arena - they have been laughing along with him throughout the entirety of the movie, and now they must see it through to the end.