

UNDERSTANDING CHAPLIN

Soon you will be seeing a film called 'Chaplin' - a film based on the life of Charlie Chaplin. Before you see it, it is worth thinking about what you will expect to see - what type of film you think will appear on the screen and what sort of story it will tell.

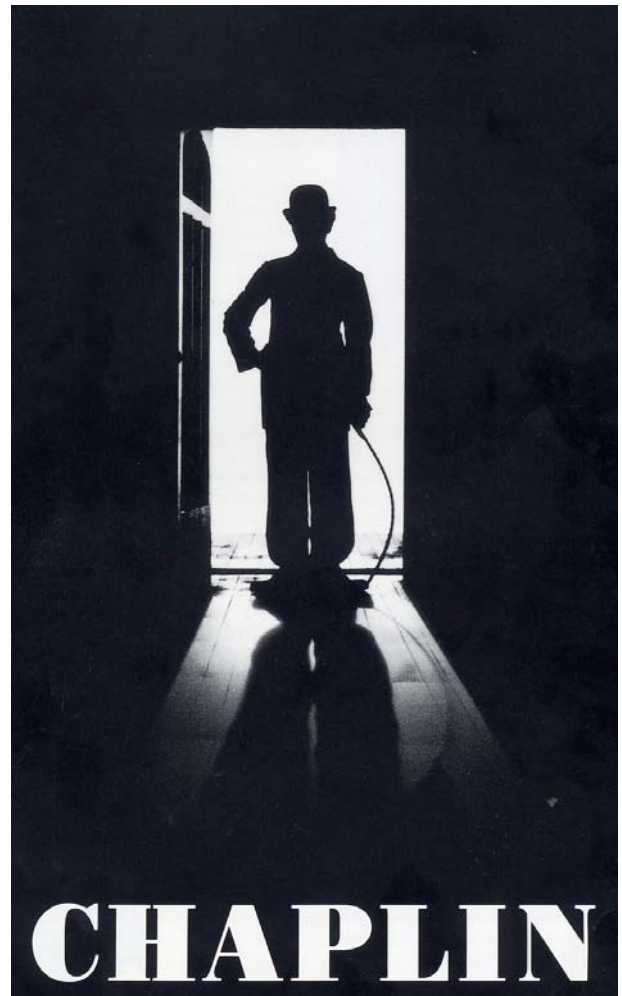
Firstly, write down anything that you know about Charlie Chaplin. If you don't know more than one or two things about him, then ask at home. Perhaps your family will be able to give you more information. For the moment, don't go to the library and look up information. When you go and see a film it is not usual to do this! As well as ideas about his life, you should also think about the times in which he lived. Do you think that the film will only tell us about Chaplin's life? What else could it tell us about?

When you have written down what you know about Charlie Chaplin, the next thing to do is to write down what you would expect from a film which will tell you about someone's life - these are sometimes called 'bio-pics' (i.e. films which tell someone's biography). Why do you think that people make films or write books about other people's lives? Why do we want to read about other people or see films based on their lives? What do you think are the attractions for the audience?

Next you should try to merge your two sets of information together. You should by now have some information about Chaplin. Also you should have some idea of what a bio-pic is. Looking at the information that you have on Chaplin, how do you think that this could be made into a story? How could the various ideas be conveyed to an audience through film? Are there any bits of information that you have found which you think could not be filmed? What are they? Think very carefully - although they might not easily be filmed as you have written them, they might be filmable if you change them or approach them from a different angle.

Before you see the film, collect as many reviews and articles about the film as you can. What other information can you gather from these? How have these changed your expectations of what the film will be about? How do they explain the story of Chaplin's life? Do they suggest any reasons why you should be interested in either the life of Charlie Chaplin or the film?

Two final points to think about before you see the film. One is the idea of a story. We normally expect a story to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Look back at the ideas that you have about Charlie Chaplin. Can you put them into the order in which you would expect them to happen in a story?



The second is how will the story be told. Will there be a voice over, giving its information? If not then how could we be given information? How do you think we will be introduced to Charlie Chaplin? And if the timescale of the picture is from his birth to death, how will we be introduced to him at various stages of his life?

'CHAPLIN' AND THE HISTORY OF FILM THE OPENING SEQUENCES

The film begins with a sequence set in a music hall, where Charlie's mother is booed off the stage in Aldershot. A very young Charlie begs to take her place on the stage and receives the cheers of the crowd.

Why do you think the filmmakers decided to start the film at this point?

What is the first impression we get of the boy, who is after all about to be the central character of the film?

We are also given a brief impression, firstly of the family life Chaplin grew up in, and also of the type of society he lived in.

What effect did the first 15 minutes of the film have on you? What did you learn about the life of Chaplin?

How did you expect him to develop as a character (other than knowing that he made films)?

If you look back at the work that you did before you saw the film, how did the opening sequences fit in with what you were expecting?

MUSIC HALL

Chaplin spent over ten years of his life working in music hall, in 1907 joining the Karno Pantomime Group. But what do we understand by the term music hall and how much influence, if any, did it have on the new cinema industry?

The music hall was a place of cheap and cheerful entertainment. By the middle of the 19th century there was an ever widening gulf between the 'theatre' and the music hall. An act of parliament in 1843 determined that straight plays could be performed anywhere but the terms of the necessary licence barred the sale of food and drink in the auditorium. However, the selling of food and drink in the auditorium meant that straight plays could not be performed, but musical entertainment could still go ahead. So, put bluntly, if you wanted to see Shakespeare performed properly you went to the theatre - if you wanted to eat drink and be entertained by singers and comedians, you went to the music hall.

However, though the music hall of the late 19th century was undoubtedly in its heyday, its popularity was beginning to ebb. It was not moving with the times and the owners and managers seemed stuck in a time warp - they had little vision and assumed that things would simply carry on regardless. By the end of the century the very first films were what the public wanted to see. In fact the first performances were in the music halls, in 1896, but were considered by most owners to be simply a gimmick that would die out very soon. They were wrong!

RESEARCH

If you live in a town of any size then there would certainly have been at least one music hall there at the turn of the century. See if you can find out where the music hall was located. What is it now? (Or if it has been demolished, what has been put up in its place?). Also, can you find out where the first cinemas were in your town? Your local library might have some old fashioned advertising bills which will tell you what would have been showing either in the music halls or else in the cinemas. For both the music halls and the cinemas in your area, try to write up a short history which gives dates of opening, closing and the changes that happened to them. Look carefully at the dates. If the music hall or cinema closed at a certain date then can you give any reasons why this might have been?

Why do you think that audiences ended up being more enthusiastic about the cinema than the live entertainment that was available at the music hall? Certainly there was a very distinct crossover effect from music hall to movies and in many ways the traditions were very similar. It is no coincidence that many of the performers in early films were actors and actresses direct from the music hall. Can you suggest why this might have been the case?

What, in fact, do music hall and early films have in common? (assuming that you have seen one or two that is). How does the film show the relationship between the music hall and cinema? How does it show the importance of Chaplin's training in music hall routines when it comes to making films and creating characters?

In fact Chaplin's training in the music hall was to stand him well throughout his career. How does the film show his move from music hall to movies? How easy do you think Chaplin found the shift from live performance to acting in films?

CHAPLIN AND CINEMA

Chaplin was obviously very enthusiastic about the potential of film. Exactly what was this 'potential' and what evidence do we have as to how he used it?

Chaplin started his career in the cinema at a time when Hollywood and the American film industry was really starting to grow. It is also important to recognise what Hollywood was at this time. As the film makes clear, the film industry was growing very quickly. Yet when Chaplin arrived it consisted merely of enthusiasts making do, frequently on a shoestring. The West Coast was chosen for several reasons, perhaps the most obvious being that the climate was ideal since it is so thoroughly reliable and almost always sunny.

Hollywood was a small town which represented work, luck and judgment, a town populated with obsessiveness and glamour-seekers which managed to fuse the abilities of the two into a successful unit. In time, it became a sort of El Dorado; in a sense it embodied the American dream. But the early pioneers of cinema were also astute businessmen - they realised why music hall had died and what it was that audiences now wanted.

Art and commerce did mix. In fact they could at times hardly keep up with the demand. But it was also a place of vision. Instead of keeping still and merely churning out what audiences wanted the place attracted (and often rewarded), men who could see a little bit further than the end of the year, who were capable of pushing back the boundaries and trying new things. This is not to say that the rest of the world sat still - the German cinema of the 20's was perhaps far more radical and experimental but Hollywood never ignored the competition. It simply learned from and absorbed them!

What impression of Hollywood are we given in the film? What did you learn about Hollywood in those early pioneering days of cinema? "Cinema is all about trickery." What evidence are we shown in the film to back up this claim?

HOLLYWOOD IN THE SILENT MOVIE PERIOD

We only see Chaplin at work on his 'major' opuses, yet it is important to note quite how many films he did in fact make,

- 1913 Signs movie contract.
- 1914 Appears in 34 one or two-reel Keystone Cop comedies directed by himself, Mack Sennett and others and in 'Millie's Punctured Romance', a feature film.
- 1915 Makes 14 one and two reel comedies for Essanay.
- 1916/7 Makes 12 two-reelers for Essanay. 1918 In his own studio, sets out to produce eight short films for First National.
- 1919 2 films, 'Sunnyside' (2 reels) and 'Shoulder Arms' (three reels). Helps form United Artists.
- 1921 Makes 'The Kid' (six reels).

If you look at the number of films that Chaplin was making in 1914, he was, on average, making three films a month! It is possible to see why Hollywood was sometimes known as a 'factory'.

RESEARCH

Try to find out as much as you can about Hollywood in the early 1900's, up to the introduction of sound. How were films made and, more important, what types of films were made? If you can, try to find some programmes for these early film shows, and try to imagine what a night at the cinema would have meant in 1914.

Chaplin was in fact a very busy artist and not only that. As mentioned above, in 1919 Chaplin helped form United Artists. This was a company formed by Chaplin and his friends Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and D. W. Griffiths, the aim being to make and distribute their own and other people's quality products. Why do you think Chaplin was so anxious to control his products? Why was he so keen to help make and distribute the products of his friends and other artistes?

THE TRAMP

If you look back at the work that you did before you saw the film, probably one fact that you will have known about Charlie Chaplin was that he played the tramp character in many films. Why do you think the character of the Tramp managed to capture the imagination of audiences worldwide?

If comedy was the staple ingredient of films in those early days, and if Chaplin was at heart a comedian, there was in his comedy something else, something again recognisable to all people which made him different from the Keystone Cops, for example. So what was it?

Attempt to analyse the character of the Tramp. Try to write a description of him for someone who may never have seen a Chaplin film. To what extent was Chaplin and his Tramp the product of his upbringing, as shown in the film? Does the film 'Chaplin' make a link between his creative genius and elements of suffering? Or was the Tramp simply an attempt to be different from all the rest which just happened to work with cinema-going audiences?

THE KID

A good deal of attention is focused upon the film Chaplin made in 1921 called 'The Kid'. What did you notice as being so important about the film? Admittedly we are only shown short extracts but from what you see is it possible to say why the film is so important? How much do you think was based on autobiographical elements?

Why was Chaplin able to deny one of the ancient maxims of the screen, never appear with children or animals, and actually make a success of it? If you can, try to see all of the film 'The Kid' (It is available on DVD on amazon.co.uk). Having seen it, try to say how it attempts to create humour from what is basically a very sad story. How true is this of all of Chaplin's films?

There is a saying that comedians are some of the saddest people around. In what ways does "Chaplin" back up this saying. How is his life presented to us? Is it all success or are there also tragic moments? If most of his films were comedies, then would you call 'Chaplin' a funny film? How would you describe it?

THE RISE OF THE TALKIES

There were aspects of his career where Chaplin was inherently rather stuck in his ways. Many people said "talkies" would never catch on and thought Warner Brothers would get their pants burned, yet the overnight sensation that was 'The Jazz Singer' meant that suddenly, everyone everywhere was making talking pictures. Chaplin remained stubborn.

That said, the notion of sound being married to pictures was not new - there were musical accompanists for films and frequently sound effects (of a sort). How was this episode dealt with in the film? Why was Chaplin so reluctant to allow the Tramp to speak? Was he simply being stubborn or again was this another example of the artistic instinct which had so far at any rate been a success?

CHAPLIN THE REBEL

There can be no doubt that Chaplin's upbringing and experience of poverty as a boy had a profound effect on him. This can be seen both in his films and in his actions whilst living in the USA. As the film makes clear, Chaplin was rarely out of the news for political and social reasons. He certainly managed to make enemies in many of the wrong places - his most virulent being Hoover. How did Chaplin manage to alienate people in positions of power? Why do you think Chaplin never asked for American citizenship?

There is a scene in the film at a party where Chaplin manages to alienate J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI. As a matter of course, Hoover makes it his business to keep tabs (often illegally) on most members of Hollywood whom he considered to be subversive or, worse still, 'communist'. Yet the tale of Chaplin and Hoover really symbolises Chaplin's growing isolation from the world - not that he was a hermit. Rather he went his own way, seemed to hate the glitz that went with the industry and continually challenged social themes and injustices.

How else does the film deal with the issue of Chaplin's growing isolation, both politically and socially? Are there any particular scenes or images that seem to describe this situation? Does the film criticise Chaplin's conduct or is it essentially sympathetic towards his predicament?

'CHAPLIN' THE FILM

We started the second section of this guide asking you to consider the opening 15 minutes of the film. Now we would like you to think about the ending of the film.

We see Chaplin and Oona on the boat for England and, despite a fleeting mention of the premiere of 'Limelight', that is really where, according to the film, the life of Chaplin comes to a creative halt. The rest of his life is encapsulated in a series of conversations with his literary agent (Anthony Hopkins) and an eventual return to the USA to receive an Academy Award for his contribution to the art of the motion picture where the film ends. The message is that his retirement/exile to Switzerland with Oona suggests his work is done and we can now join him in a period of reflection.

Why do you think that we are not given much detail about this part of Chaplin's life? Why should the major part of the film concentrate on his rise in Hollywood?

A LIFE IN A BIO-PIC

You will already have considered bio-pics in the introduction to this guide. Now that you have seen the film and have researched Chaplin think about these two points:

What do you think were the major challenges that might have confronted the scriptwriters of the film?

How do you think they might possibly have set about writing a script for a film that features a man who lived for over eight decades?

In section two we have outlined the major historical and social events that occurred during Chaplin's working life. Yet the film seems to mention these events and incidents merely in passing. For instance, the conflict with Hoover which is referred to in the film perhaps three times actually assumes that the audience know a little bit about the House Subcommittee on Un-American Activities and the furore that the investigations and hearings caused within Hollywood.

Equally, the film suggests that Chaplin discovered movies in the rear room of a bar whilst on tour in the USA, therefore sometime after 1910. Yet, as is pointed out above, even by 1904 cinemas were popular and as there were many in London, it stretches the imagination somewhat to assume that Chaplin never saw one.

In a condensation of a man's life a film might have to distort the truth somewhat on 'artistic' grounds. Why do filmmakers not simply stick to the truth? Is film more dramatic than real life? Why should it be?

Why do audiences expect larger-than-life situations and events from entertainment, even when in the case of Chaplin the film is based on actuality? Are scriptwriters duty-bound to take liberties with the truth, if only because time is an important factor?

CREATING CHARACTERS

One of the key moments of the film is where Chaplin creates the character of the Tramp - his most famous invention. Try to remember how this invention took place.

In the film, we must remember that while we watch Chaplin creating the character of the Tramp, we are also seeing Robert Downey Jr. creating Chaplin creating the character of the tramp. One could say that the success of any film relies on the actors being able to create believable characters and also on the art of the director being able to film the story in a way that we find interesting.

Draw up a chart as suggested below and write down the names of five characters who appear in the film in the left hand column. Then in the middle column, try to describe the characters - not just what they looked like but also what type of character they were. Then in the final column, write down how we built up this picture of them. What were the key moments in the film which gave us information about them?

NAME	CHARACTER DESCRIPTION	ACTION

A SENSE OF TIME

The time scale of the film is almost eighty years, covering the whole of Chaplin's life. How does a filmmaker let us know the differences in time? What are the means on offer to him/her in creating a sense of time and place within a film?

A LIFE AS A STORY

You will by now have looked closely at the beginning and end of 'Chaplin'. In considering the film as a whole, is it possible to say what it is about? Yes, it is about Chaplin's life but is it about other things? We are shown a film about one person and the world in which he lives. How does he relate to the world around him? He is very poor at the beginning of the film and by the end he is rich. What are we told about this 'rags to riches' story? Does wealth bring happiness?

Try to think of any other themes which appear in the film. For each of these themes try to pick out the parts of the film which relate to them. You may find that certain parts of the film will appear in more than one theme.

FINALE

After watching the film for two and a half hours one should ask oneself these important questions:

- Why was Sir Richard Attenborough so determined to make the film?
- What were your general feelings about Charlie Chaplin - the man - after you had left the cinema?
- How would you describe the film to your friends?
- How far were your expectations about the film fulfilled? You will need to look back to the work that you did before you saw the film to answer this question.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Examine the structure of the film 'Chaplin'. To what extent does it follow the conventions of the bio-pic? What kind of a picture of Ghaplin does it present?
2. Hollywood was a boom town where you were popular until your next movie. How true is this of Charlie Chaplin?

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