

Blind Gestures: Chaplin, Diderot, Lessing



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... the *mise en scène* of the blind is always
inscribed in a theater or theory of the
hands . . .

Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*

I

The centennial of Charlie Chaplin's birth saw the release on video of a commemorative set of his films. With reference to the expressive range of Chaplin's pantomimic art, the trailer advertizing this collection describes such silent landmarks as *The Kid* and *The Gold Rush* as "films that let you listen with your eyes." The formulation is revealing, for it points to the effective *deafness* adopted by the spectator of silent cinema, which relies on a gestural vocabulary not dissimilar from the sign language used by and for the deaf. Chaplin's "tramp," whose trademark muteness persisted well into the era of sound, embodied an irreducible humanity consistent with the utopian potential that silent cinema, with its simplified but universal language, held for many practitioners, Chaplin among them.¹ *City Lights* (1931), made after the advent of audio synchronization, used sound largely to ridicule sound, remaining essentially a silent film, in which printed dialogue cards convey the words of characters who are *seen* to speak

¹ See Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 173–98.

but are not heard. Billed as “a comedy romance in pantomime,” *City Lights* announces itself as an aesthetic alternative to the “talkie,” upholding the generic integrity that, over the years, has prompted comparisons of Chaplin’s work to that of Molière or the *Commedia dell’arte*.²

In *City Lights* the tramp (“Charlie”) is mistaken for a millionaire by a young blind woman selling flowers on a busy street corner. He falls in love with her and is eventually able to finance an operation that will restore her sight. The money, which Charlie is accused of stealing, is actually a gift from a real millionaire whom Charlie—ever the Good Samaritan—has dissuaded from committing suicide. On the eve of his arrest, Charlie presents the girl with the money, resigned to the idea that she will reject him once she can see him. Released from jail some nine months later, Charlie happens upon the young woman, no longer blind, arranging flowers in the window of the shop where she now works. Unaware of the tramp’s identity but amused by his shy attention, she offers him first a rose, then a coin—gestures that recall their original encounter in which Charlie, out of kindness towards the girl, spent his last penny on a flower he could well have done without (Fig. I). The window separating them reduces their present exchange to pantomime; it also centers Charlie within a visual frame he is anxious to escape. As he timidly retreats she gives chase, coaxing him back with the flower and pressing the coin into his palm. Her eyes suddenly glaze over as she recognizes her benefactor by the feel of his hand. She runs her fingers over the breast of his jacket, retracing the movement by which she had once felt for his lapel. In a gesture of incredulous wonder, she places her hand on her cheek. “You?” she asks. He nods, nervously biting his fingertip. “You can see now?” he indicates, pointing to his eyes, to which she responds, “Oh yes, I can see now,” affirming an insight born of touch, the primacy of which this unexpected reunion has revived. She takes his hand in hers and clasps it over her heart, and *City Lights* fades on a close-up of Charlie, still biting his finger, his characteristic speechlessness now specified as bated breath (Fig. II).

In this final scene, the acceptance Charlie could not dare hope for is granted under the cover of blindness, which the girl momentarily

² Claire Goll characterized Chaplin in 1920 as “the Molière of this century.” Anton Kaes, ed., *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909–1929* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978), 147; Karl Riha, *Commedia dell’arte* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1980), 52; Charles J. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 114.



Figure I. *City Lights*. © 1999 Roy Export Company Establishment. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

relives, and which allegorizes the just society that Charlie finds so elusive. Indeed, the blind woman personifies the *innocuousness* that Chaplin's tramp, a poor immigrant habitually persecuted by policemen, brutish waiters and good citizens, understandably cherishes. An attempt to avoid being seen is what leads to Charlie's first encounter



Figure II. *City Lights*. © 1999 Roy Export Company Establishment. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

with her. Threading his way on foot through a traffic jam, Charlie, in a reflex effort to escape the notice of a motorcycle cop, slips through the back seat of a parked limousine. As he exits onto the sidewalk, the slamming door alerts the blind woman to his presence and causes her to confuse him for the vehicle's owner. She appears as if summoned by the wish for ascendancy expressed by the tramp's ill-suited gentleman's attire and realized by his transformative passage through the luxury automobile. Blind, she is the medium of a shared hallucination. Chaplin experimented with a scene in which the girl dreamily envisions her benefactor as a dashing officer in a trim, elegant uniform (Fig. III).³ Though not ultimately used in *City Lights*, the sequence fleshes out the imaginary register to which her blindness admits him. The tramp, his comical awkwardness supported by Chaplin's own dazzling agility, finds an image of physical cohesiveness

³ This unused footage appears in Kevin Brownlow's documentary, *The Unknown Chaplin* (London: Thames Television, 1983).



Figure III. *City Lights*. © 1999 Roy Export Company Establishment.

in a person who, like him, is so emphatically an object but not a subject of sight.⁴

Sergei Eisenstein thought Chaplin blind when he likened him to a rabbit: the lines of sight of a rabbit's eyes, so Eisenstein explained, intersect behind its head; this protects it from predators that typically advance from the back, but it creates a blind spot in front, leaving the rabbit prone to bumping into obstacles while fleeing.⁵ This may account for how Charlie, instinctively avoiding the policeman, stumbles headlong into something unforeseen. It also accentuates the link between mimicry and predation, if mimicry, as so often taken up by Lacan, is a matter of creating a blind spot—of disimplicating oneself from the spectacle of the world. Hence Lacan's understanding of painting as a strategy for disarming the gaze. As an animal may assume the dappled appearance of its natural surroundings, so the painter, in an act of camouflage, deposits flecks of color on the canvas—a background from which the artist appears absent. Each brush stroke is a gesture, precisely terminated, performed for the gaze that isolates it from the continuum of movements.⁶ Interrupted, it is like a punch that is retracted before landing, meant to intimidate but not injure. This interruption is what characterizes gestures, which always stop short of becoming actions. We need but recall how the courtly ritual of kissing a woman's hand is proper only as an approximation of an actual kiss. Lurking behind the deference of the polite gesture is an archaic struggle for survival waged primarily by posturing. Lacan invokes the Peking Opera as a form of theater in which one fights "as one has always fought since time immemorial, much more with gestures than with blows."⁷

⁴ *City Lights* might be read as an inversion of Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), in which an aging hotel porter, his regal uniform a bulwark against both physical and social decline, is dismembered by the Medusa-like gaze of his female neighbors. The same women who once tended to his uniform and thus maintained his "ideal-I" are also privy to his emasculation—his demotion to the station of lavatory attendant—which they regard with wide-eyed horror and gaping-mouthed derision. See Stephan Schindler, "What Makes a Man a Man: The Construction of Masculinity in F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh*," *Screen* 37 (1986): 30–40; also Kenneth S. Calhoun, "Emil Jannings, Falstaff, and the Spectacle of the Body Natural," *Modern Language Quarterly* 58 (1997): 83–109.

⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Essays, with a Lecture*, ed. Jay Leyda (London: Dobson, 1968), 109.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 114.

⁷ Lacan 116. Lacan's further description of the Chinese ballet as an arena in which "the spectacle itself is content with an absolute dominance of gesture" (117) accords with Louis Marin's characterization of the Court of Versailles: "Representation [. . .]

In *City Lights* the flower girl's blindness breaks the visual circuit that under the wrong circumstances invites aggression—and which the right gesture may have the effect of neutralizing. We avoid eye contact for safety's sake, but prohibitions against staring are dictated by common courtesy. Manners are as much an affair of the eyes as of the hands. It was once considered rude for a hostess to look directly at the plates of her dinner guests; a convex mirror on the wall enabled her to survey the table discreetly and thus determine which of her guests required attention. This domestic object has its archaic counterpart in the mirror-like shield that allowed Perseus to look at the Gorgon *indirectly*. Civilized tact replicates a tactic, described by Derrida as “[the] ruse that consists in sidestepping rather than meeting head-on the death that [...] threatens sometimes by the specular crossing of gazes.”⁸ The same kind of maneuver is familiar from the story in which Freud's father sidestepped rather than confront an anti-Semitic bully who had knocked his hat to the ground and rudely ordered him from the sidewalk.⁹ The hat was a new fur cap, a mark of assimilation, likeness being the true target of this assault. The animal pelt is a vivid reminder of the atavism that motivates mimicry. A “skin thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield,”¹⁰ it is camouflage, devised to hide by showing this “Christian,” as Jacob Freud called him, an image of himself.

Now Charlie, immediately prior to his reunion with the flower girl, is subjected to similar harassment: two newsboys taunt him and grab at his clothing, which is soiled and tattered after months in prison. The tramp musters bourgeois indignation, glowering in the direction of his assailants while blowing his nose on a thread-bare rag, which he then tidily slips into his breast pocket. The pedantic gesture of nose-blowing proclaims superior affect-control, yet its inherent comical potential underscores the paradox of assimilation: efforts to achieve the poise of perceived superiors create, following Norbert

carries out the substitution for the exterior act, where a force is manifested in order to annihilate another force in a struggle to the death, of signs of force, which need only be *seen* as a force to be *believed*.” *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 6.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 87.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vols. 2/3, *Die Traumdeutung, Über den Traum*, ed. Anna Freud, Marie Bonaparte (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1987), 203.

¹⁰ Lacan 107.

Elias, a “peculiar falseness and incongruity of behavior.”¹¹ Nowhere is this incongruity more evident than in Charlie’s awkward ensemble of bowler hat, cutaway coat, vest and cane. The very outfit that would help him blend into the background instead draws fire.

Given this failed assimilation, it is not surprising that certain commentators should have found signs of Jewishness in Charlie, if not Chaplin himself. In 1944 Hannah Arendt described the tramp as a character “born of the Jewish pariah mentality” and exhibiting traits that were “clearly Jewish.”¹² In 1945 André Bazin read *The Great Dictator* (1940) as an attempt by “the little Jew” to reclaim his mustache from Hitler. Bazin described Chaplin, creator of Charlie’s mustache, and Gillette, inventor of the safety razor, as “two men who changed the face of the world.”¹³ Regarding the “face of the world,” Vilém Flusser reminds us that the word “cosmetic” is derived from “cosmos”; the “gesture of shaving,” he contends, is part of a trend toward a socially engineered, “cosmetic” existence.¹⁴ The razor is an extension of the body, which in turn becomes an apparatus manipulated by the person gesticulating (“vom Gestikulierenden manipuliert”). Suggesting that a fascist with a full beard is a contradiction in terms, Flusser impugns a broader ascetic regimen in which, citing Elias, “self-constraint [becomes] an apparatus of habits operating almost automatically.”¹⁵ The modernism to which Chaplin belonged rebelled against the imposture of mechanisms disguised as nature. Henri Bergson sounded a proto-Brechtian note when he wrote that “[t]o imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person.”¹⁶ Appropriately, Bazin ventures that Chaplin exposed Hitler (“the man with the broken wrist who still

¹¹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol. 2, *Power and Civility*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 312–33.

¹² Hannah Arendt, “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (1944): 101, 113. Chaplin was born in London to parents of Irish descent, though he speculated that his mother’s family was part Romany (Gypsy). Joyce Milton, *Tramp: The Life of Charlie Chaplin* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 6–7.

¹³ André Bazin, *Essays on Chaplin*, ed. and trans. Jean Bodon (New Haven: University of New Haven Press, 1985), 15–19. Regarding the “face of the world,” see Mark Slouka: “[. . .] any child asked to sum up the century will instantly visualize Einstein’s hair and Hitler’s mustache.” “Listening for Silence: Notes on the Aural Life,” *Harper’s* 298 (April 1999): 64.

¹⁴ Vilém Flusser, *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie* (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1993), 143–50.

¹⁵ Elias 272.

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: MacMillan, 1924), 33.

obsesses our generation") as a mechanical puppet, an empty amalgam of rage, cruelty, sentimentality, and mustache.

This "cosmetic" asceticism, which demands of its adherents a maximum of refinement, traditionally uses comedy as the means to expose the imperfectly assimilated, consigning them to an overtly mimetic, theatrical existence. The *American Sign Language Dictionary* represents the word "Jew" with gestures that simulate a man stroking a prolific beard.¹⁷ Assimilation is undone by the beard, whose return constitutes a regression, both to the simplified representation required by the deaf and to more traditional forms of dramatic embodiment. The same dictionary renders "Italian" with a standard Neapolitan gesture, the thumb and forefinger tweaking the cheek in a sign of appreciation (of food, of a woman). Jews and Italians are not merely represented by characteristic gestures; they are stigmatized as gesticulating. The image of the gesticulating Italian, eventually to be formalized in the conventions of the *opera buffa*, already appeared in the sixteenth century as a foil to which polite restraint—the touchstone of the ascendant classes—was juxtaposed.¹⁸

Not that Chaplin's gestures are necessarily flamboyant. Rather, he is an agent through which the mannerisms of polite society pass over into sheer theater. (Having only just realized that the flower vendor is blind, he doffs his hat before taking her hand and graciously helping her to her feet.) The tension of an incomplete assimilation—the feeling of inadequacy vis-à-vis an internalized ideal—is manifest in the dramatic contradictions on which Chaplin's gags are structured. Analyzing this structure, Rudolf Arnheim observed how Charlie's clothing represents him in terms of what he is not: his poverty is not simply displayed but laid bare as "a distortion of good living."¹⁹

¹⁷ Martin Sternberg, *American Sign Language Dictionary*, revised edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 291. See also Desmond Morris, *Bodytalk: A World Guide to Gestures* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 8.

¹⁸ Peter Burke, "The Language of Gesture in Early Modern Italy," in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, ed., *A Cultural History of Gesture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 79–81.

¹⁹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 144–45. In an essay written shortly after the release of *City Lights*, Jan Mukarovsky analyzes Chaplin's acting with respect to a tension between socially and individually expressive gestures: "The integrating emotional feature of the social gestures is the feeling of self-assurance and superiority, whereas the expressive gestures of Chaplin-the-beggar revolve around the emotional complex of inferiority. These two planes of gestures interweave through the entire performance in constant catachreses." *Structure, Sign, and Function*, trans. and ed. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 175. Roland Barthes, noting Chaplin's conformity to Brechtian

Arnheim paid particular attention to the scene in *The Gold Rush* where a famished Charlie, preparing to eat a boiled shoe, uses a knife and fork to daintily remove the nail-ridden sole as if boning a trout.²⁰

This *as if*, which is at the heart of Chaplin's pantomime and of pantomime generally, inhabits the gap between the imaginary and the lack over which it is superimposed. Chaplin's acting represents as explicitly absent the plenitude that more naturalistic modes of performance, in the guise of an indivisible spectacle, would restore. Such illusion is conditioned on the lack of apparent self-awareness, which in turn affords the spectator the pleasure of watching without being seen. Not coincidentally, Charlie's attempts at watching the blind girl unobserved are punished, as when she, unaware of his presence, empties a pail of water in his face. Little wonder that the European Avant-garde celebrated Chaplin as a herald of modern disillusionment.²¹ Of course, disillusionment was already a feature of the popular, more primitive theatrical forms that Chaplin was helping to revive. Robert Weimann's discussion of the ancient *mimus*, in which actions are not merely performed but interpreted, is likewise applicable to the structure of Chaplin's gags (especially as described by Arnheim): "a gesture is 'investigated' and illuminated when it is imitated, when its social *ohm*, or measure, is discovered and exposed."²²

principles, offers a similar analysis (of *Modern Times*): "Charlie Chaplin is in a cell, pampered by the warders, and lives there according to the ideal of the American petit-bourgeois [. . .]; but his delightfully self-satisfied posture discredits this ideal completely, so that it is no longer possible for anyone to take refuge in it without noticing the new alienation which it contains." *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 40. See also Gerard Molyneaux, *Charles Chaplin's City Lights: Its Production and Dialectical Structure* (New York: Garland, 1983), 80–86.

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu discusses the social implications of eating fish, which articulates the working-class body differently: "in the working classes, fish tends to be regarded as an unsuitable food for men [. . .] because [. . .] it is one of the 'fiddly' things which a man's hands cannot cope with and which make him childlike [. . .], because fish has to be eaten [. . .] with restraint, in small mouthfuls, chewed gently, with the front of the mouth, on the tips of the teeth (because of the bones)." *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 190. Cf. the scene in *City Lights* where Charlie consumes a plate of spaghetti, the ascending note of a slide-whistle accompanying each long strand as it disappears into his mouth.

²¹ See Sherwin Simmons, "Chaplin Smiles on the Wall: Berlin Dada and Wish-Images of Popular Culture," forthcoming in *New German Critique*.

²² Weimann further observes that the "early modern German verb *ahmen* or *ahmen*, which became *nachahmen* (to imitate), implies a measuring and presupposes a standard not exclusively derived from the object itself." *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 2.

Blind, the young woman in *City Lights* is immune to disillusionment, oblivious to the social *ohm* that Charlie's performance otherwise reveals. The *absorption* that constitutes her as *tableau* and assures the spectator the autonomy of being unseen precludes such movements as make the blind appear uncanny and stigmatize them as "seers." (Just as her later statement that she "can see now" is doubly true, so her blindness is at once literal and figurative.) Chaplin praised Virginia Cherrill, the screen novice who portrayed the flower girl, for her ability to feign blindness without compromising her beauty, that is, without the "distressing" effect of looking upward and showing only the whites of her eyes.²³ Yet he complained that she was unable to perform naturally so simple an act as extending her arm and offering a flower.²⁴ The disquieting aspect of lifeless eyes is displaced onto gestures lifelessly performed.

Here we may perceive an echo of the Neo-Classicism that forbade the depiction of distorted or contorted features. This tradition has an afterlife in Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater* (1811), in which the narrator's interlocutor compares the surprising gracefulness of marionettes to human performers who execute movements mechanically. He describes a celebrated ballet dancer who, in the role of Paris, offers the mythic apple of discord to Venus, appearing as if his soul were situated in his elbow—"a horror to behold" ("ein Schrecken, es zu sehen").²⁵ A reference to Bernini reveals an anti-Baroque sensibility and implicates Mannerism—with its stylized gestural drama—as the negation of physical beauty. The rupture between body and soul corresponds to the interruption that defines gestures and replaces the imaginary wholeness of the body with dismemberment.²⁶ The extreme division between interior and exterior, which in the Baroque found expression in puppets, masks and hollow eye-sockets, may be a cultural cipher of a natural split between a being and its appearance—a bi-partitioning to which, following Lacan, the being is always accommodating itself.²⁷

This division between being and semblance is critical in matters of

²³ Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 326.

²⁴ Brownlow's *The Unknown Chaplin* contains footage—a home movie taken of Chaplin directing *City Lights*—in which he is seen trying to perfect the gesture and teach it to Cherrill.

²⁵ Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. 1, ed. Helmut Sembdner (Munich: Hanser, 1964), 338–45.

²⁶ See Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 152–55.

²⁷ Lacan 106.

survival—in love as well as combat—in which the subject displays an imaginary self, projecting strength and beauty in place of vulnerability. A particular example of this doubling is found in fencing, which raises combat to a social art, and in which one's opponent emerges as a "well-adapted reflection."²⁸ Typically practiced before a mirror (as is classical dance), fencing pairs opponents who are closely attuned to each other's movements, "synchronized" as it were. Moving almost in unison, they confirm common refinements that connote mastery over the body and identify them as members of a superior class.²⁹ Molière's "bourgeois gentilhomme," who receives instruction in fencing, is taught that his body should "make as small a mark as possible."³⁰ Like the stroke of the painter's brush, the flick of the rapier is part of the camouflage that pacifies the gaze. Gestures ungracefully executed betray an inner tension and leave the subject exposed—more to ridicule than danger—revealing an excessive body that vibrates with comic energy.

Molière's "would-be gentleman" cannot adopt with ease the norms of the aristocratic milieu to which he aspires. His attempts to fence, sing, dance, pay compliments, even philosophize, are overtly mechanical. This automatism, which renders him ridiculous for all to see, illustrates Bergson's understanding of the comical, characterized as "*Something mechanical encrusted on the living*."³¹ Bergson offers marionettes as an example of this "deflection of life towards the mechanical."³² When of these puppets he observes that "the very liteness of the bodies seems to stiffen as we gaze,"³³ his words echo the anecdote on which Kleist's piece turns. A youth, noted for his own lithe beauty, inadvertently glimpses himself in a mirror while toweling off in a public bath. He calls attention to the pose, in which he discerns a likeness to a famous marble figure of a boy pulling a thorn from his foot. The speaker, though he has also noticed the similarity,

²⁸ I borrow this phrase from Jean Starobinski's analysis of the idealized self-image received from the flatterer. *Blessings in Disguise; or, The Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 40.

²⁹ This doubling is explicit in Stellan Rye's film *The Student of Prague* (1913): Baldwin, noted for his skill as a swordsman, dies after piercing his mirror-reflection, from which he has become alienated. This alienation corresponds to his failure to gain acceptance by the nobility.

³⁰ Molière, *Tartuffe & The Would-Be Gentleman*, trans. H. Baker and J. Miller (New York: The Heritage Press, 1963), 104.

³¹ Bergson 37.

³² Bergson 34.

³³ Bergson 35.

declines to validate the boy's vanity; mockingly, and with words that expose the imaginary wholeness of the body as phantasmatic, he accuses his young friend of seeing ghosts ("er sähe wohl Geister"). The boy tries in vain to duplicate the pose, the grace of which dissolves in the instant of becoming self-aware. Repeated with increasing frustration, the gesture acquires "a comical element" ("ein komisches Element").³⁴

Defined, then, as the disaggregation of the inner and outer self, the comical stands opposite the aesthetic ideology that holds body and soul in tandem and obliges one to imitate inimitable models. The tradition that eschews the material along with the mechanical echoes distinctly in Bergson, who argues that comical effects arise "[w]here matter [. . .] succeeds in dulling the outer life of the soul."³⁵ Goethe's Wilhelm Meister ("Wäre ich ein Edelmann") suggests that training for the stage fosters a consonance of body and spirit, endowing the actor with some of the "brilliance" (*Glanz*) that was otherwise proper to the aristocrat, whose only purpose was to "appear" (*scheinen*).³⁶ The artifice of courtly gestures recedes behind the veil of second nature; like the actor, the courtier performs, but *as if* there were no one watching. The conceit of being unobserved, which in Goethe's day was becoming a dramaturgical ideal, excludes the popular dramatic traditions inherited by Chaplin. The blind woman in *City Lights* is a screen onto which is projected the pretense of invisibility. Yet Charlie's is an inexorably theatrical existence that calls the gaze upon itself. Appropriately, when at the film's climax he and the flower girl look at each other from opposite sides of the shop window, he indeed stiffens. Here, for the first time, she reciprocates his gaze, freezing him in the act of smelling a flower he has just retrieved from the gutter. She offers him a flower to replace the one coming apart in his fingers, her pantomime naturalized by the plate of glass that renders her inaudible to him.

³⁴ Another anecdote from the same piece describes an encounter with a bear that had been taught how to fence. Able to tell gestures from blows, the animal was not susceptible to the deceit of thrusts meant as decoys. The speaker, who found himself handily defeated by this improbable adversary, felt his vulnerability as a division between soul and appearance, the disunity of which is acute under the bear's penetrating gaze: "auf Finten [. . .] ging er gar nicht einmal ein: Aug in Auge, als ob er meine Seele darin lesen könnte, stand er" ("not once was he taken in [. . .] by feigned thrusts: he stood, his eye looking into mine, as if he could read my soul there").

³⁵ Bergson 29.

³⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, vol. 7, *Romane II*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1977), 280–82.

II

The scene of recognition in which *City Lights* culminates—a scene in which two individuals achieve understanding by working out a simple set of gestural and verbal signs—recalls an eighteenth-century discourse that centered on such hypothetical scenes. In 1775 Samuel Johnson visited a college for the deaf in Edinburgh and was astonished to see deaf children who could not only speak and write but also read lips, that is, comprehend speech expressed as physical gesture: “if he that speaks looks toward them, and modifies his organs by distinct and full utterance, they know so well what is spoken, that it is an expression scarcely figurative to say, *they hear with the eye*.”³⁷ This expression is strikingly close to the one used over two hundred years later to characterize Chaplin’s silent films (“films that let you listen with your eyes”). The similarity points beyond a common detail to a shared investment in a telos of hope grounded in a better human nature.³⁸ Johnson concludes: “whatever enlarges hope, will exalt courage; after having seen the deaf taught arithmetick, who would be afraid to cultivate the *Hebrides*?”

Meant however wryly, Johnson’s comparison is typical of the Enlightenment habit of treating various forms of sensory deprivation, deafness and blindness in particular, as present analogues of historically less developed states of cognition. More specifically, the blind woman in *City Lights*, who gains the use of her eyes following surgery, is reminiscent of examples from the eighteenth century, when improved methods for removing cataracts furnished epistemology with “a new kind of empirical subject.”³⁹ A person born blind who suddenly acquired the ability to see gave empirical philosophers the opportunity to test assumptions about the relationship of ideas to sense-perception. If ideas were not innate but derived from the senses, as they maintained, then it followed that a person born blind or deaf would have different ideas (about God, death, etc.) than one

³⁷ Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. J. D. Fleeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 136 (emphasis added). I am indebted to Ian Duncan for this reference.

³⁸ Witness the Rousseauian coloration of the final speech in *The Great Dictator*: “We want to help one another. Human beings are like that [. . .]. The way of life can be free and beautiful, but we have lost the way. Greed has poisoned men’s souls [. . .]. Machinery that gives abundance has left us want. Our knowledge has made us cynical; our cleverness hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little [. . .].” The entire speech is reprinted in Bazin, 22–24.

³⁹ Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 27.

whose senses were intact. *City Lights* contains two such empirical subjects, one blind, one effectively dumb, and while the film can hardly be thought to engage epistemological debates, its insistence on pantomime reanimates the dramaturgical implications of a philosophical discourse on the language of gesture.

Chaplin's tramp is a modern counterpart to what Diderot, in his *Letter on the Deaf and Dumb* (1751), terms a "theoretical mute," i.e., "a man who would forgo the use of articulate sounds and try to make himself understood by gestures alone."⁴⁰ Diderot proposes to use this man to inquire experimentally into the difference between the syntax of modern French and the sequence of perceptions characteristic of the earliest languages. He explains that the usage in French of placing nouns before adjectives reverses the "natural order of ideas," for it is by their sensible qualities that we first come to know things. This reversal, which subordinates adjectives to substantives, represents an "acquired" or "scientific" order, a "deliberate arrangement" that develops "after a language is fully formed."⁴¹ Diderot is concerned to understand how so-called "inversions," which are common in other learned tongues and relatively rare in French, "crept into and were preserved in languages."⁴² A man born deaf and dumb, unencumbered by "prejudices with regard to the manner of communicating his thoughts,"⁴³ offers a clue to prehistoric stages of human cognition, to which we otherwise have no access. For Diderot, the deaf exhibited a diminished capacity for abstraction consistent with those earlier stages. Thus it was given to this "theoretical mute," who is himself not deaf and dumb but acts as if he were, to translate a French speech into sign language: "from the succession of his gestures" one would be able to infer "the order of ideas" according to which early humans conveyed thoughts without words.⁴⁴

Inversions—vestiges of this "natural" order of ideas—are numerous even in the classical languages. Diderot explains this by speculating that gestural language gave rise to oratory, which retained the structure of a language addressed more to the senses than the intellect.⁴⁵ Oratory formalized the habit, which the logic of gesture

⁴⁰ Denis Diderot, *Early Philosophical Works*, trans. and ed. Margaret Jourdain (New York: Burt Franklin, 1916/1972), 163.

⁴¹ Diderot 161–62.

⁴² Diderot 163.

⁴³ Diderot 167.

⁴⁴ Diderot 163.

⁴⁵ Diderot 178.

required, of announcing the principal subject first, *in order that* the meaning of all subsequent gestures (or locutions) not be lost. Diderot found similar habits in classical French theater, which he criticized for its preponderance of mannered and declamatory attitudes, themselves inherited from schools of painting deemed “theatrical.”⁴⁶ The syntax of oratory smacks of the deictic practices that Diderot banished from the stage, and which Brecht reintroduced (“with a philosophical shake of his finger [the Sergeant] points out to the Corporal the difficulties of the job”).⁴⁷ The gist of “epic theater” was to expose the conventions that in post-Enlightenment drama passed as nature. Diderot praises the “sublime eloquence” of Lady Macbeth’s mute gesture of remorse, at the same time naming a pathos that is *a priori* theatrical (“I know nothing in speech so pathetic as the silence and motion of this woman’s hands”).⁴⁸

Stationed vis-à-vis this mute eloquence is a theoretical deafness, which becomes a standard for judging the naturalness of an actor’s performance:

I used to frequent the theatre, and I knew by heart most of our best plays. On the days when I meant to examine actions and gestures I would climb to the gallery, for the further I was from the actors the better. As soon as the curtain was raised [...] I put my fingers in my ears, much to the astonishment of my neighbors [...]. But I coolly answered that “everybody has their own way of listening, and mine was to shut my ears to hear the better.”⁴⁹

Few performers could stand this test, Diderot asserts, and how “humiliated” most of them would be if he were to publish his criticism! Humiliated, like the “bourgeois gentilhomme,” whose mechanically affected movements left him open to ridicule. The gestures of courtly society are the most artificial when they seem to come naturally; likewise, the criterion of verisimilitude, which Diderot helped establish, is most fully satisfied when theatrical conventions take on the color of their surroundings, so to speak, shedding all

⁴⁶ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting & Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 79. On the relation of oratory to theatrical gesture, see Dene Barnett, *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th-Century Acting* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987), 11–14. Barnett’s study uses a variety of eighteenth-century manuals that instruct the actor in the art of gesture and provide diagrams often similar to those found in sign language dictionaries.

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, “Seven Photo Models of Mother Courage,” trans. Hella Freud Bernays, *Drama Review* 12 (1967): 46.

⁴⁸ Diderot 167–68.

⁴⁹ Diderot 173–74.

appearance of artifice. Chaplin's tramp, a "would-be gentleman" in his own right, reveals these conventions as hollow gestures, even when subtly perfected. In this way, he embodies the "plebeian standard whose collision with the mythical is the crux of comedy."⁵⁰ Yet enveloped within *City Lights* is an alternate, naive structure of belief—one not susceptible to comic disenchantment. The blind woman is the ideal viewer in a theater that strives to make its conventions disappear behind a veil of illusion. Hers is a vantage point from which proceeds the hallucinatory construction of the imaginary, projected as beauty, which in turn expresses a unity of body and soul. When the youth in Kleist's narrative perceives this unity in his own reflection, he is chided for seeing ghosts. By the same token, the tradition of drama that begins with Diderot and Lessing, which installs verisimilitude in the place of stilted posturing, is one in which, finally, the spectacle aspires to the spectral.

III

Persons born blind who could be studied in the process of learning to see, or feral children rescued from the wild and taught to speak, presented moral philosophers of the eighteenth century with what they took to be "surviving elements of the mind, behavior, and physiognomy of primitive man."⁵¹ These and similar subjects offered an empirical alternative to speculation, for in them one could ostensibly observe the prehistoric origins of cognition and perception. Such "first-hand" observation is a corrective to metaphysics: to think an origin that is inaccessible to experience is to see ghosts.⁵² In a searing indictment of British empiricism, Friedrich Engels points out that the culture most firmly rooted in the empirical tradition, with its "contempt for all theoretical thought," was uniquely susceptible to "spirit-rapping" and "spirit-seeing."⁵³ Engels refers in part to the phantasmagoria that came into vogue in England at the end of the eighteenth century. Impresarios used magic lanterns to cast images of skeletons and phantasms onto transparent scrims placed

⁵⁰ Weimann 16.

⁵¹ Bewell 26.

⁵² Liliane Weissberg, *Geistersprache: Philosophischer und literarischer Diskurs im späten achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990).

⁵³ Frederick Engels, "Natural Science and the Spirit World," in F. E., *The Dialectics of Nature*, ed. and trans. Clemens Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1940), 297–310. Written in 1878, the essay was published posthumously in 1898.

above and before the audience. Anecdotes abound in which frightened spectators use walking sticks to fend off these hovering apparitions.

Similar anecdotes surround the screening, a full century later, of Lumière's *L'Arrivée d'un train* (1895), when the sight of a locomotive pulling towards the camera was reported to have sent spectators running for the aisles. While we doubt the veracity of this account, the story is nonetheless meaningful. The "myth" of the credulous spectator is addressed by Christian Metz, who argues that the fictional integrity of the illusion depends upon a viewer, equally fictional, who accepts the illusion for reality. Spectators do not really believe that the events on the stage or screen are true, yet the scene is constructed *as if* so completely gullible a spectator existed. This naive spectator, moreover, is what enables us to sustain our own incredulousness by "delegating" belief to someone outside ourselves. This credulous person, says Metz, is "another part of ourselves [. . .], still seated *beneath* the incredulous one, or in his heart." Metz cites Octave Mannoni, who compares this disavowal of belief to ethnological accounts of populations in which the belief in the magical power of ritual masks is displaced onto distant ancestors. The spectators who were purportedly terrified by the image of the approaching train are the early ancestors of later cinema-goers, who no longer believe.⁵⁴ Like those persons born blind who gained their eyesight, they are hypothetical empirical subjects, caught in the process of learning how to comprehend.

The comparison of those credulous spectators to phylogenetic counterparts—"primitives" or children—situates the Lumière screening within a process of disenchantment that includes the history of the theater. Part of this process is addressed by Lessing in articles 10 through 12 of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. Written in 1767, these reviews focus on Voltaire's play *Semiramis*, which was currently playing in Germany but had premiered in Paris almost twenty years earlier. It is a fable in which, on the occasion of a queen's engagement, a ghost appears to prevent an occurrence of incest and to avenge his own murder. Lessing begins by faulting Voltaire's chauvinism—his view that the Greeks themselves could have learned something from the French—though this by way of framing Voltaire's own objections to

⁵⁴ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 72–73.

the miserable physical circumstances under which plays in Paris were performed: a poorly appointed theater, little more than a converted dance-hall, in which patrons stood shoulder to shoulder in a filthy parterre. What offended Voltaire most, however, was the "barbarous custom" of tolerating spectators on the stage. *Semiramis*, a play of almost operatic proportions, was meant as a remedy. At the first performance, spectators were still seated on the stage, but after that the stage was cleared, and what began as an exception for an anomalous play came to be common practice. Yet only in Paris, Lessing adds, for theater-goers in the provinces still preferred to renounce all dramatic illusion rather than forfeit the privilege of rubbing elbows with mythic-heroic personae.

Whatever its impact, *Semiramis* found little favor among French critics, for whom the appearance of a ghost seemed entirely at odds with enlightened attitudes. Voltaire countered that the belief in ghosts was proper to the play's ancient setting. Predictably, Lessing sides with Aristotle in contending that the playwright is not an historian: he does not recount what has happened but causes it to unfold before our eyes. Less predictably, Lessing maintains that the belief in ghosts has not been convincingly put to rest; the seed of this belief lies within everyone, and it is the playwright's task to bring it to fruition. He faults Voltaire not for conjuring a ghost, but for failing to reproduce the conditions under which a ghost might plausibly appear. "Consider the scene," Lessing writes. "In broad daylight, before the assembled nobility and heralded by a peal of thunder, Voltaire's ghost rises from the crypt [. . .]. What old woman could not have told him that ghosts shun the light of day and avoid large companies of people?"⁵⁵ To this Lessing juxtaposes the more exemplary ghost of Hamlet's father, "who comes at that solemn hour, in the chilling stillness of night, attended by those elements that we, from our wet nurses forward (*von der Amme an*), associate with the appearance of ghosts."⁵⁶ Like those credulous ancestors referred to by Metz, old women and wet nurses are called upon to personify the internalized criterion of believability.

But instead of marking the resilience of the belief in the supernatural, this may well signify its obsolescence. Lessing's invocation constitutes the "rhetorical recoil" that Terry Castle attributes to the attempt

⁵⁵ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke*, vol. 2, *Kritische und philosophische Schriften*, ed. Jost Perfahl and Otto Mann (Munich: Winkler, 1974), 323. My translation.

⁵⁶ Lessing 322.

to annul the supernatural: "In the very act of denying the spirit-world of our ancestors, we have been forced to relocate it in our theory of the imagination."⁵⁷ Castle's analysis concerns those ghost-shows mentioned earlier, in which spirits appeared to hover in thin air. While intended to demystify by unmasking the techniques of charlatans, these displays had the effect of revealing superstition as the unshakable twin of rationalism:

The rationalist attitude depends on this primal internalization of the spectral. For as long as the external world is populated by spirits—whether benign or maleficent—the mind remains unconscious of itself, focused elsewhere, and unable to assert either its autonomy or its creative claim on the world.⁵⁸

Lessing's description of Voltaire's fanfare-laden play suggests a sort of festive phantasmagoria. By contrast, the ghost in *Hamlet* epitomizes what is essentially spectral about dramatic illusion in general. The spirit projects the disembodiment for which theater, beginning with Diderot and Lessing, strives. The aesthetics that secures autonomy by means of the illusion's integrity has a clear stake in the imaginary, that is, in replacing the real object with an imagined substitute. Imitation must never pass itself off as nature, but instead recreate nature minus the contingency of the natural world. Lessing offers *pantomime* as a model from which Shakespeare profited and from which Voltaire might have. Because Hamlet is alone when his father's ghost appears, the audience's attention is concentrated on him. It is through Hamlet's reaction to the ghost that the ghost becomes plausible:

Alle unsere Beobachtung geht auf ihn, und je mehr Merkmale eines von Schauer und Schrecken zurrütteten Gemüts wir an ihm entdecken, desto bereitwilliger sind wir, die Erscheinung [. . .] für eben das zu halten, wofür er sie hält. Das Gespenst wirkt auf uns, mehr durch ihn, als durch sich selbst.⁵⁹

All of our attention is drawn to [Hamlet], and the more signs of a heart shaken by fear and terror we see in him, the more inclined we are to accept the apparition . . . to be that which he holds it to be. The ghost affects us, but more through him than through itself.

⁵⁷ Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: 18th-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 143.

⁵⁸ Castle 143.

⁵⁹ Lessing 323–24.

The judgment that Shakespeare's ghost shows himself to Hamlet exclusively is predicated on the defining conceit of modern drama, namely that no crowd is present. The audience observes, but no longer helps constitute the spectacle which, self-contained and self-absorbed, is oblivious to the fact of its being watched. Lessing's characterization of *Hamlet* enlists Shakespeare's play as a model of absorption; Hamlet himself is the credulous spectator, a surrogate believer whose actions anchor a successful mimesis and at the same time guarantee the mediacy that, for Lessing, grounds aesthetic experience. It is interesting that Diderot should also invoke pantomime, which he defines as a natural language of gesture.⁶⁰ Lessing retains the more conventional understanding of pantomime, which, in his critique of Voltaire, functions as a mechanical analogy. The mime who creates the semblance of gravity by pretending to carry something heavy, or who simply swats at an imaginary fly, foregrounds the absence of the object his or her actions circumscribe. These are not Lessing's examples, for he gives none other than Hamlet himself, from whose verbal and physical gestures the ghost borrows its palpability.

This interplay of presence and absence accords with the *fort/da* dynamic that Metz relates to cinematic spectators suspended between the simultaneous affirmation and denial of a lack. Hamlet believes so that we don't have to, yet his believing suffuses the scene with a credibility that makes it whole. His presence both renders the ghost terrifying and enables us to remain in our seats. The character Hamlet—as Lessing portrays him—functions like the fetish, which in covering a wound becomes itself erotogenic, making the object desirable again without debilitating fear. The comparison helps locate the lost object of cinema within the oedipal logic that *Hamlet* dramatizes, and what better example of the persisting spectral than the law that prosecutes us not for our deeds but our wishes!

IV

Where Hamlet sees (and we see) the spirit of his dead father, the blind woman in *City Lights* imagines a handsome young officer in Charlie's place. The footage in which he appears was left out, and so

⁶⁰ Dorothea E. von Mücke, *Virtue and the Veil of Illusion: Generic Innovation and the Pedagogical Project in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 93–94.

he is not seen but constituted as an “anamorphic ghost”⁶¹—the imagined negation of a figure whose gestural persona bespeaks disunity. If indeed Chaplin’s gags unmask poverty as a “distortion of good living” (Arnheim), then the flower girl represents the vantage point from which the distortion is undone. She is the credulous spectator, divided off as a separate person and located squarely within the diegetic frame. Like Hamlet, she anchors a credible mimesis. Through her, a naturalistic mode of theater, premised on successful illusion, exists alongside the disenchantment to which we are privy and she is not. The surgery—the *suture*—that enables her to see does not diminish her naiveté: it merely naturalizes a perspective into which we are drawn.⁶²

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⁶¹ Lacan 89.

⁶² By way of reversal, *City Lights* confirms Lacan’s analysis of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, in which the image of two figures, attired in and surrounded by the accoutrements of power, status, learning and wealth, is disturbed by a death’s head, which appears in distorted form in the painting’s foreground. The skull is anamorphic, recognized only when viewed askance. Holbein shows us that “as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught” (92).