

City Lights

At the conclusion of *City Lights* (United Artists, 1931), the Tramp (Charlie Chaplin) looks wistfully at the Flower Girl (Virginia Cherrill) and asserts, with the hopeful inflection of a question, “You can see now?” She replies, “Yes, I can see now,” and it seems as if the whole of the film could be contained in the ambiguous, equivocal meaning of that exchange. *City Lights* is a richly romantic, tragic, and—at the same time—comic film that speaks powerfully of the difficulty of inhabiting a world from which one is in danger of being ejected. Written, directed, produced, and scored by Chaplin, *City Lights* took almost two years and 1.5 million dollars to finish, though it made nearly 2 million over the course of its run and half a million during the first two weeks; it was a commercial as well as a critical success. Today, it remains one of the most moving and significant films in American history.

City Lights addresses several themes typical of Chaplin's Tramp films—the flaws endemic to the world of luxury, the struggle of the alienated individual in urban America, the moral superiority of the working poor—and some specific to the role of sight in American cinema at the dawn of sound. As the film opens, the title appears in lights over an energetic evening cityscape; in the distance we see the monument to “Peace and Prosperity” that will be unveiled in the next scene. This vignette sets the stage for the story to come, presenting a picture of urban America from the privileged perspective of the wealthy and the accepted. The modern, forward-looking city becomes an anonymous site of misery, misrecognition, and pitilessness for the Tramp. As the monument is unveiled, amidst the quacking of the city's elite, we see the Tramp ironically curled in the arms of Prosperity, where he has slept the night before. Offended, the crowd commands him to remove himself. The Tramp wanders the bustling city street, and to avoid the gaze of a nearby policeman, the Tramp climbs through a waiting car to the other side where he meets the Flower Girl. After purchasing a flower, the Tramp discovers her blindness—but she, hearing the door to the car slam shut without having had the opportunity to render her patron change, believes him to be something he is not. The Tramp, unable to correct her misrecognition, observes her for a time, under the cover of her blindness. On her return that evening to the shabby flat she shares with her Grandmother (Florence Lee), she dreams of her wealthy suitor.

Later, the Tramp encounters an inebriated Millionaire (Harry Myers) attempting suicide by drowning; he is in despair because his wife has left him. The Tramp saves him, though both fall into the river several times during the process. Returning to the Millionaire's luxurious home, they drink heavily under the disapproving eye of the butler (Allan Garcia). After the Millionaire again attempts suicide, the two head out for an evening under the city lights, the Tramp in his new friend's borrowed clothes. At a stylish supper club, the two frenetically dance the night away. In his inebriated state, the Millionaire gives the Tramp his car. He sees the Flower Girl passing, and retrieves a few bills from the Millionaire to buy all the Flower Girl's merchandise before driving her home. When he returns, the Millionaire has sobered up and forgotten the camaraderie of the night, though the routine recurs later that evening. The next morning, the two awake in the Millionaire's bed—one of several homoerotic moments in the film. Despite his mighty struggle to remain in that world, the Tramp is again thrown out. The parlour is littered with rising partygoers, and the Millionaire leaves on a vacation to Europe.

The Tramp visits the Flower Girl, but learns that she is ill. Saddened, he is determined to earn

money to help her and her Grandmother. Under the gaze of the statue for Peace and Prosperity, the Tramp, newly-employed as a street cleaner, shovels animal excrement into his bin. Later that afternoon, he calls on the Flower Girl, who eagerly awaits his arrival. He arrives laden with gifts of food; he tells her of a Viennese doctor who not only has a cure for blindness, but cures the poor for free. The two share a comfortable visit, until he discovers a letter informing her of impending eviction; now, the Tramp is even more in need of funds, but he has lost his job as a street-cleaner. A crooked boxer offers him easy money if he will participate in a rigged fight, but, wanted by the law, he flees, leaving the Tramp with a robust new opponent (Hank Mann). He attempts to ingratiate himself, smiling winsomely, and awaits his fight as boxer after boxer returns, badly beaten. In the ring, still wearing his bowler, it looks for a brief moment that the Tramp might indeed succeed, but after the second round, the Tramp is carried out, dazed. Later, he wanders the city streets, searching for a way to help the Flower Girl; a wave of well-dressed people rushes by him, and he encounters the recently-returned drunken Millionaire in their midst, who takes him home.

Unbeknownst to all, two burglars await. The Tramp tells of his and the Flower Girl's troubles, and the Millionaire dispenses \$1,000 to help. Discovering a gun on the floor, the Tramp worries that his friend will again seek to take his life; as they argue, a burglar creeps up behind them with a sap, eventually knocking the Millionaire unconscious. By the time the police arrive, the burglars have fled, the Millionaire does not remember the Tramp, and the Tramp has a wad of money in his pocket. He escapes in the confusion of the darkened room, and runs to the Flower Girl, giving her the money for her trip to the eye doctor. After leaving, however, he is captured by the law. For close to nine months, the Tramp is incarcerated; meanwhile, the Flower Girl has regained her sight and opened a successful shop. When we see her next, she is serving a handsome, well-dressed man, and for a brief moment, she thinks he must be her suitor; however, he leaves without recognizing her.

Released from prison, the Tramp seems broken. He aimlessly wanders the streets in torn pants, dirty bowler, and safety-pinned jacket, a far cry from either tidy vagrant or gentleman in borrowed clothes. On the street, he is mocked and tortured by paper boys, and when he finds some flowers swept into the gutter from the shop, he stoops to pick one up only to endure the boys tearing at his exposed underwear. After he chases them away, the Tramp recognizes the Flower Girl and gazes with such force she wonders if she has made a conquest; she gives the funny vagrant a coin and flower to replace the one from the gutter that he had crushed in his astonishment. As they touch, she recognizes him; she acknowledges that she can see, but in her eyes there is sadness, for he is not the man she thought he was. The camera fades out on the Tramp's shy, hopeful smile.

Among Chaplin's numerous financial and personal crises during the production of *City Lights*, the advent of sound was in danger of making his most well-known character and the moral-aesthetic sensibility he represents a relic of a bygone age. It is only as part owner of United Artists, however, that Chaplin was able to enjoy the privileges that granted him the flexibility to indulge his spontaneous production habits and the freedom to reject dialogue. In the late 1920s, cinema was quickly passing the rubicon marked by synchronized sound-on-film; *City Lights*, not a true silent film but a "silent talkie," would attempt to negotiate this new technological terrain by employing a synchronized sound track but no dialogue. Chaplin's score is notable in its use

of sound effects that not only complement the film's physical comedy but also suggest a kind of commentary on the empty noise of talking pictures—in the opening sequence, for instance, the pompous city luminaries “speak” through kazoos. Despite this satirical commentary, there is also a nostalgic quality about the film especially resonant for its Depression-era audiences. *City Lights* seems aware of itself as an anachronism, much like the Tramp himself, who belongs to none of the worlds he so desperately wants to inhabit. The Flower Girl's unresolved choice at the conclusion of the film is thus not hers alone; it is also a choice the audience must make.

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