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Histrionic Gestures and Historical Representation: Masina's Cabiria, Bazin's Chaplin, and Fellini's Neorealism

by KARL SCHOONOVER

Abstract: This article argues that Giulietta Masina's hyperbolic physicality in *Nights of Cabiria* (*Le notti di Cabiria*; Federico Fellini, 1957) intervenes in earlier representations of wartime suffering. With Bazin's theories of Chaplin's slapstick at hand, Masina's comedic gestures can be seen as exposing the subjective and geopolitical limits of how postwar Italian neorealism made history with bodies.

It is hard not to recognize Charlie Chaplin in Giulietta Masina's gestural performance as the title character in *Nights of Cabiria* (*Le notti di Cabiria*). In this 1957 film directed by her husband, Federico Fellini, Masina constructs a physical persona whose Chaplinesque gestures echo her acclaimed appearance as Gelsomina in Fellini's Oscar-winning *La strada* (1954) three years earlier. Both films build their narratives from episodes that recall the intricate somatic structure of Chaplin's silent slapstick. Both films ask audiences to *read* Masina's body: her hyperbolic gestures, postures, and facial expressions supply comedic effect, but they are also key to understanding each film's stories, themes, and as it turns out, argument about cinema's access to history.

As in Chaplin's work, gesticulation carries political weight in Masina's early films.[1] We might think of this weight as a kind of historical baggage or, even better,

1 Two scholarly essays written nearly sixty years apart help us organize the breadth of work on Chaplin while themselves exemplifying the impulse to read his body at the intersection of social politics and the medium of cinema. First, social psychologist Harry A. Grace's early academic study debates the political impact of Chaplin's comedy and provides a literature review of the comedian's critical reception: "Charlie Chaplin's Films and American Culture Patterns," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 10, no. 4 (1952): 353–363. Second, and more recently, Tom Gunning offers a rich synthesis of Chaplin theory in "Mechanism of Laughter: The Devices of Slapstick," in *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. Tom Paulus and Rob King (New York: American Film Institute and Routledge, 2010), 137–151. Chaplin's long association with the idea of cinema as a medium of universal and international appeal can be found in sources as diverse as André Malraux's "Sketches for a Psychology of the Motion Picture," in *Reflections on Art: A Source Book of Writings by Artists, Critics, and Philosophers*, ed. Susanne K. Langer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958), 327; and Yingjin Zhang's "Chinese Cinema and Transnational Film Studies," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Kathleen Newman and Nataša Ďurovičová (New York: Routledge, 2010), 131.

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as the weight of history. The significance of Masina's gestures for Fellini's political critique has nevertheless been overlooked. In what follows, I seek to remedy this oversight by arguing that Masina's early films constitute a gestic critique of the notion that the cinematic image provides privileged access to history by way of its depictions of the human body. This critique appears to be directed at the images of the imperiled or distressed human bodies that are common to many of the most influential neorealist films. Masina's gestures, like Chaplin's, are in this sense historiographic: they comment on the way that films have been understood to "write" or "record" history through bodies, and they point to the limitations of models that hitch cinema's capacity for historical representation to a reified account of the body.[2] At the same time, Masina's gestural performances and the films' approach to them enact the alternative to corporealism that the critique of neorealism demands. These films use gesture to demonstrate how cinema's images are always part improvised and part premeditated, and thus less amenable to political dogma. Precisely because of its overt mixing of accident and choreography, slapstick's body (Masina's body as much as Chaplin's) tells us something unexpected about the nature of cinema's relation to history. If we look closely at gesture in these films, I am suggesting, we find a pointed treatise on what it means to represent political change through bodies and to tell history by virtue of (and as though it was) a string of bodily acts. We also find an alternative mode of representing history and change.

Making a case for what visually connects Masina and Chaplin is not difficult. The ill-fitting clothing and eccentric accoutrements that they share accentuate the body's hermeneutic significance. The awkward length of their sleeves underscores their devilishly callous shrugs, which are themselves barometers of their aberrant inclinations. Their high hems punctuate their backward kicks, delirious dances, and stomping cacophonous rages. The dark eyebrows against pale faces emphasize their emblematic sideways looks. The rhythmic sway of their handheld appendages, with Cabiria's umbrella clearly referencing Charlie's cane, syncopate with their bowlegged waddles. Chaplin himself once said that Masina "was the actress who moved him the most."[3] In subsequent years, film scholars also made use of this analogy, reading the Chaplinesque qualities of Masina's performances as evidence of Fellini's growing discomfort with narrativizing contemporary political questions, of his turn away from realism

2 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno understood the cinema and its absorbing "gestures" as a potentially powerful instrument of the process of reification (i.e., capitalist culture's pernicious tendency to turn something intangible or human into a physical object). They also famously close "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" with a statement that reflects just how bodily this process can become: "The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion." Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), 167.

3 Melton S. Davis, "First the Pasta, Then the Play," *New York Times*, January 2, 1966. For examples of the connection between Chaplin and Masina, see the sampling of period reviews reprinted in the sourcebook *La strada*, ed. Peter Bondanella and Manuela Gieri (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987). See also the chapter "Chaplin" in Sam Rohdie's *Fellini Lexicon* (London: British Film Institute, 2002). For more on the star persona of Masina, see John Caldwell Stubbs, "The Persona of Giulietta Masina," in *Federico Fellini as Auteur: Seven Aspects of His Films* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 136–170. Interestingly, in Tullio Kezich's book-length study of the actress, Masina claims that Charlie Chaplin was not on her mind when she created her character for *La strada*; Tullio Kezich, *Giulietta Masina* (Bologna, Italy: Cappelli, 1991), 52.

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and toward the carnivalesque.[4] However, the similarity of Masina's waif to Chaplin's "Little Tramp" also has potent political significance in its dialogue with the corporeal form of politics posed by neorealism. Referencing Chaplin alongside neorealism's more familiar martyred bodies, *Nights of Cabiria* merges two extremes of cinematic performance: the comedic body of slapstick comedy and the documentary body of neorealism's purportedly "actorless" cinema. In doing so, it asks us to rethink neorealism's investment in deploying corporeal spectacle as a privileged means of historical representation. Through a network of citations, the film disrupts the idea of the body as testimony.

Unlike other critics of his day, and in the face of the clear parallels described already, André Bazin, postwar Italian cinema's most important international advocate, dismissed the analogy connecting Masina to Chaplin. He found the comparison "hard to take."[5] Bazin's discomfort presents us with a highly productive conundrum. Bazin offers a nuanced account of the filmic body, and he often represents on-screen gesture as an especially sensitive medium for articulating the politics of being human.[6] In particular, Bazin's discussion of the ambiguous "presence" produced by cinema centers on the filmed body: its vital polysemy, its odd admixture of accident and intentional acts, its confusion of original experience and repetition, its pastness and perpetual germaneness. He writes of Chaplin's performance in *Limelight* (1952) as "daringly based on the flesh and blood ambiguity of the cinematographic image: see and understand!" Elsewhere, he tells us that De Sica's debt to Chaplin was "the gift of being able to convey an intense sense of the human presence, a disarming grace of expression and gesture."[7] In the same essay, he praises a film for how "not one gesture . . . is given prior significance."[8]

As I explain in more detail here, Bazin's analysis of Chaplin's body and its gestures works to complicate our sense of the materiality of the image and its relationship to time; it also proposes that the filmed gesture captures a historicity otherwise unavailable to conventional history writing. For Bazin, Chaplin's slapstick makes bold the anti-reifying force of the (film) image. History à la cinema is not the reification of change into things, objects, or bodies, according to Bazin, and his work on Chaplin suggests a more radical account of change than we might expect. If Bazin valued slapstick, then he also championed *La strada* and *Nights of Cabiria*, defending them against those Italian critics who saw them as betrayals of neorealism. Moreover, Bazin often traced a continuity connecting Chaplin's work to neorealism proper, using the latter to define the potentials of the former.

4 For an example of this tradition, see Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 137–138; Chris Wiegand, *Federico Fellini: The Complete Films* (New York: Taschen, 2003), 47; and Rohdie, *Fellini Lexicon*, 19–22. For more on the tradition of bracketing the political content of Fellini's work, see Andrea Minuz, *Viaggio al termine dell'Italia: Fellini politico* (Soveria Mannelli, Italy: Rubbettino, 2012).

5 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2:91.

6 Bazin discouraged his readers from seeing the expressiveness of bodies in neorealist films as evidence that "the urban Italian has a special gift for spontaneous histrionics." I follow Bazin's lead in this regard, focusing on the international valences of Cabiria's gestures and the geopolitical weight that this cinematic body carried.

7 Ibid., 138.

8 Ibid., 73, 68.

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How, then, do we explain Bazin's resistance to the Masina-Chaplin comparison? Was Bazin perhaps overinvested in the allegory linking Masina's characters to the nation of Italy and its struggles to shrug off the vestiges of abject poverty over the course of the 1950s? Or did he refuse this comparison because he was unable to see how a historiographic critique might be routed through the female form?

Performing Neorealism. *Nights of Cabiria* opens with the title character frolicking near the bank of a river with her boyfriend. The fun ends abruptly when Cabiria's beau suddenly grabs her purse and pushes her into the river. Unable to swim, Cabiria quickly goes under. A group of men and boys then drag her unconscious body to shore and resuscitate her. Viewers conversant with Italian cinema may find this scene disconcertingly familiar, oddly iterative for a film with a supposedly realist premise. The drowned Cabiria echoes bodies found in at least two of neorealism's most prominent films made nearly a decade earlier: the ominous floating corpses in the Po River valley section of *Paisan* (*Paisà*; Roberto Rossellini, 1946) and the drowned boy found below the bridge in *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*; Vittorio De Sica, 1948).[9] By quoting these iconic scenes from Italian films already famous internationally, *Nights of Cabiria* fixes neorealism as its starting point. This opening sequence also initiates a pattern of citation whereby the film restages neorealist scenarios to depart from the epistemological premise of neorealism in which the realist image is a testimony of social truth and the on-screen body is that truth's corroboration.

With its iterative qualities and semantic instability disturbing narrative cohesion, Cabiria's body disavows the notion that the body is a stabilizing feature of the image: a feature that is capable of certifying the realism of the film, maintaining its narrative coherence, and securing its humanist politics. No sooner is Cabiria roused back to life than her once-flaccid body explodes into a cacophony of raging gestures. Having awoken in the midst of resuscitation, Cabiria has misapprehended the intentions of her rescuers and violently rejects their assistance, which she has mistaken for a sexual assault. The narrational device of offering more information about Cabiria's situation to the viewer than to her amplifies the comedic effect and makes her gestures appear all the more hyperbolic. The absurdist quality of her corporeality marks the gap between what we know and what Cabiria perceives. This combustive and highly gestural performance of anger in this way invokes Chaplin's use of physicality to exaggerate the gap between intention and action—between the outcome we anticipate and Charlot's blind faith in an innocent future.[10]

Seen from this perspective, *Nights of Cabiria*'s opening scene intervenes in the politics of Italian postwar cinema by citing incommensurate cinematic physicalities: neorealism's politicized cadaver collides with the slapstick body. It is as if the martyred body of Anna Magnani's Pina in *Rome Open City* (*Roma città aperta*; Roberto Rossellini, 1945)

9 Another comparison might be to the final suicide attempt in "Tentato suicidio," Michelangelo Antonioni's contribution to the 1953 omnibus film *L'amore in città* (Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Alberto Lattuada, Carlo Lizzani, Francesco Maselli, Dino Risi, and Cesare Zavattini).

10 *Charlot* is Charlie's nickname in French, Spanish, and Italian. I use both *Charlie* and *Charlot* in this article to distinguish the Little Tramp character from Chaplin, the actor and filmmaker.

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had risen from the dead as Charlot.[11] Accentuating Masina's physicality, the camera keeps her body in a larger frame than other actors and thereby suggests that this actor's erratic gestures may at any moment exceed the camera operator's anticipation of her movement. This framing strategy recalls Chaplin's tendency to frame himself more widely than other actors, so as to "show off" his body's relative spontaneity. For James Naremore, such a shooting practice "theatricalizes contingency."[12] Using an open frame composition to indulge or, as Naremore implies, artificially exaggerate the contingencies of the profilmic body could not be more neorealist.

If the neorealists and Chaplin share a legacy as much as neorealism and Fellini, or Cabiria and Charlie, then a clear sense of what the body does for neorealism is required. Canonical neorealist films such as *Rome Open City* frequently shoot spectacles of physical suffering and vulnerability in a documentary fashion and in long takes, as if the imperiled body must be granted more screen time than other narrative elements. As constructions or reenactments, these sequences disguise themselves as laying bare the involuntary corporeal contingencies of an actual injured body. Think of the final disorienting and unbalanced framing of the slain Pina in *Rome Open City*, which reveals her skirt hiked up above her garters, her awkwardly splayed legs, and her torn stockings. This shot stylistically emulates newspaper photography or newsreel reportage, and in its simulation of accident, the film accentuates the force of contingency that operates in all photographically generated images. By foregrounding the impact of chance on its image, the film's form allows its fiction to poach off the documentary potencies of the photographic. Neorealism stylizes such amplifications, which serve to remind the viewer of the evidential qualities of even the most preplanned of sequences.

The gesturing body supplies a particularly productive means of amplification. When neorealist films linger on corporeal scenes, then, they seek both to remind the viewer of the war's impact on Italy and to emphasize the body as a site of spontaneity, immediacy, and truth within the image. Through this lingering, and other compositional accentuations, neorealism establishes the body as the unaware object of the gaze. As Bazin wrote, "[g]esture, change, physical movement constitute for Rossellini the essence of human reality."[13] The body becomes the means by which realism underwrites the image, thus granting fiction the weight of documentary evidence. As I have argued elsewhere, the otherwise stylistically heterogeneous films grouped under the rubric "neorealist" share a particular politics of the look, an impulse to naturalize the authority of the viewer as a detached bystander, an outsider looking on.[14] For these films, the fullest and most accurate range of vision results from the unnoticed observer. This fantasy of anonymous bystanding certifies the ethical rigor and moral surety of

11 Neorealism proper might be said to use slapstick from time to time. In *Rome Open City*, an old man is knocked unconscious with a frying pan to make him look dead during a raid by Nazi soldiers. But this moment is only heard, and the innocent unseen violence sets up the viewer for the very startling visibility of Pina's assassination a few minutes later. We should also note that Fellini's complex relationship to neorealism proper includes his work on the screenplays of many of the earliest neorealist films, including *Rome Open City* and *Paisan*.

12 James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

13 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:100.

14 Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

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the viewer, who is sequestered from the social and historical specificities of the image and released from any awareness of his or her own positionality.

In truth, of course, even the most kinetic of neorealism's bodies were never simply documentary; that extreme body's vital vulnerable frailty and its spontaneity were harnessed to a historically specific mode of spectating that carried a particular geopolitical cadence. This spectatorial mode of "brutal humanism" is a postwar humanist optic, a protocol of visual engagement that sustained the affective structures necessary for the priorities of large-scale postwar reconstruction projects and international aid missions.[15] Probably the largest of these transnational programs was the United States' massive recovery package, the Marshall Plan, which initiated a period of intensified American imperialism in Europe, or what cultural historian Victoria de Grazia calls the era of "market empire."[16] In this context, the postwar humanist optic worked to transform subjective engagements in the late 1940s and 1950s, convincing those who lived in the North Atlantic nations not only that they were citizens of the world and responsible for one another's well-being but also that the practices of democratic liberty included the imposition of a form of political will that encouraged market-friendly geopolitical schemes. According to the logic of market empire, postwar North Atlantic citizens were to be accommodating in their pursuit of political expression: Cold War democracy required a certain pliability, a looser attachment to participatory involvement on the part of citizens. In this new era, it had to feel right (and necessary) to ignore the wills of other nations' voters, as in the case of US involvement in Italy's 1948 elections; conversely, it had to feel acceptable to allow foreigners to usurp one's political will when necessary, for the greater global "good." The latter led to what can be described as Italy's self-imposed limited sovereignty. By invoking neorealist representations of victimized corporeality alongside Chaplinesque gestures, *Nights of Cabiria* renegotiates this relationship of international spectator to realist spectacle and of viewer to victim.

The film follows the daily defeats and small triumphs of a spirited but tattered prostitute who lives in the dusty shantytowns of postwar Rome.[17] Repeatedly scammed by men and cheated by the world, she rarely appears deflated by her circumstances. Instead, she responds to her many disappointments and public humiliations with outbursts that become her trademark. *Nights of Cabiria* appears to follow neorealism's lead, reinforcing the postwar humanist optic of brutal humanism by offering physicality as an expressive form of testimony put on display for an outside onlooker. The film seems to extend the life of neorealism's detached moral bystander, and to participate in the preempting of local sovereignty, by endearing itself to the North Atlantic viewer.

15 Ibid.

16 Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

17 Danielle Hipkins argues that the figure of the female prostitute in Italian cinema of the 1940s and 1950s reveals the gendered tenor of postwar nationalism. Building off Ruth Ben-Ghiat's suggestion that cinema participated in "creating a collective self-image of a victimised nation," Hipkins argues that films in this period conflate the female prostitute's body with the Italian nation. She writes, "Some of Italian cinema's most direct explorations of Italian war guilt were to be made through the figure of the prostitute." "Were Sisters Doing It for Themselves?: Prostitutes, Brothels and Discredited Masculinity in Postwar Italian Cinema," in *War-Torn Tales: Literature, Film and Gender in the Aftermath of World War II*, ed. Danielle Hipkins and Gill Plain (London: Peter Lang, 2007): 82, 87.

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Yet *Nights of Cabiria* narrates our relationship to the physically excessive performance style of Masina in a manner quite different from canonical neorealism. With each of its gestic offerings, the film challenges the complacent and sequestered spectator; it does so by questioning the notion that the body can serve as a vessel for transparent expression. As in the drowning scene, the film weaves the themes of performance and spectacle in and around Masina's exaggerated but highly effective physicality in a way that heightens the semantic indeterminacy that haunts all filmic bodies. In this film, unlike in canonical neorealism, making the body into a spectacle does not resolve the instability of the image; it always, in fact, unleashes that instability: we cannot tell whether Masina's physical expressions represent an affectation or a spontaneous natural response, an improvisation or an actor's rehearsed interpretation of a scripted event, an inadvertent physiognomic tic on Masina's part or a conscious citation of Chaplin.

Cinematic Gesture and History. Fully understanding this film's deployment of gesture demands that we revisit theories of cinematic corporeality that recognize the vital contingencies of a filmed body but do not use them to hypostatize the image. Recent theoretical work on the filmed body underscores the significance of Bazin's early intervention, to which I return in a moment. For these theorists, the gesturing body exemplifies cinema's potential to dereify the modern subject's relation to the historical past and the temporality of the present, opening up new modes of imagining change. Giorgio Agamben, moreover, famously laments the loss of gesture in middle-class Western society. Without gesture, he argues, society has lost a means to discover the potentiality of action. Action resides in a kind of being for which conventional language is inadequate. It is what he calls a "pure mediality" or a "pure means."[18] In this context, the image has the potential to be more destructive to gesture than even conventional written or spoken language. "Every image, in fact, is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the *imago* as death mask or as symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamis* intact (as in Muybridge's snapshots or in any sports photography)."[19] Unlike Benjamin's account of the epic theater, in which gesture involves a stopping, a critical intervention, Agamben's gesture counteracts reification by redynamizing the image. Gesture pulls the image back toward action, contingency, and *dynamis*. For Agamben, this is what the medium of cinema offers the image: it reanimates it, releasing the potentiality of gesture: "In cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss."[20] Adrian Martin suggests we read Agamben's statements alongside the work of film critics interested in the "figural," most notably the French writer Nicole Brenez.[21] Mining the gestures of films made under Stalin, for example, Brenez uncovers a sensual vitality that manages to deliver political

18 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 59, 60.

19 Ibid., 55.

20 Ibid., 52.

21 Adrian Martin, *Last Day Every Day: Figural Thinking from Auerbach and Kracauer to Agamben and Brenez* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2012).

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subversion despite the restrictive production conditions and censorship of the period. Her gestural archeology suggests that significant traces of history remain impregnated in the image of the moving body. For Brenez, cinema is a record of historical bodies and of ineffable, inexplicable movements captured without restraint. Filmed gestures remain a testament to subjective experiences otherwise deprived of agency, a registration of experience finally allowed representation.[22] In "Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much," Jean-Louis Comolli suggests in a related way that by exposing rather than smoothing over the embarrassing incongruences between an actor's body (Pierre Renoir) and his character's body (the soon-to-be-executed Louis XVI), *La Marseillaise* (Jean Renoir, 1938) asks contemporary viewers to step into the point of view of Louis's subjects watching him during his final days.[23] The awkwardness of the king's body and the excesses of gesture discomfit the viewer in a way that enables transhistorical pathways to identification. Cinema grants its viewer a relationship to the body that approximates an otherwise inaccessible mode of vision; gesture forms the gateway to this historical subjectivity.

In none of these examples is gesture valued only for its conveyance of psychological interiority or even as a reflection of well-established historical facts. In each case, cinematic gesture instead unleashes a de-reifying force on traditional practices of historical narration. Gesture refuses objectification and easy instrumentalization: the gesturing body is not a symbol but remains instead a dynamic force whose central feature is persistent "presence," and which questions our sense of both what the past was and what future change looks like. Lesley Stern puts it like this: "[G]estural inflection has the capacity to move us (viewers) in ways that involve less semantic cognition than a kind of sensory or bodily apprehension."[24] Cinematic bodies are never just signs for Stern; they express relations between different photograms, different audiences, and different texts. This does not mean that gesture cannot express ideas. In fact, she states, "[g]esture . . . enables simultaneous attention to the somatic (pertaining to both the performer and the audience) and the rhetorical."[25] This means that even the most histrionic physicality on the movie screen can offer a rhetorical challenge, an intellectual provocation, and for Comolli and Brenez, a metadiscursive intervention.[26]

Bazin's Chaplin. What if we were to read gesture not as a language per se but as the means by which bodies resist symbolic or metaphoric transformation? What if we were to read gesture as the way that figures refuse figuration? From this perspective, Cabiria's body would be something other than a stable emblem of a tattered nation.

22 Nicole Brenez, commentary in a video essay on Boris Barnet's 1936 film *By the Bluest of Seas*, "Nicole Brenez on *By the Bluest of Seas*," YouTube video, 6:02, posted by "alsolikelife," November 19, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7ghMxw548w.

23 Jean-Louis Comolli, "Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much," *Screen* 19, no. 2 (1978): 41–53.

24 Lesley Stern, "Putting on a Show, or the Ghostliness of Gesture," *Senses of Cinema* 21 (2002), http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/21/sd_stern.html.

25 Ibid.

26 For a synthetic theorization of the cinematic body, see Akira Mizuta Lippit, "Digesture: Gesture and Inscription in Experimental Cinema," in *Migrations of Gesture*, ed. Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 113–131.

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Long before Agamben and the "gestural turn" in criticism, Bazin recognized in Chaplin's body the potential of cinema to capture a historical moment without reifying it and to preserve an experience without foreclosing its meanings for future audiences.

Across numerous essays, Bazin describes the pleasures of watching Chaplin as closely tied to cinema's medium specificity.[27] Chaplin fandom—or what is elsewhere called "Chaplinitis"—often appears in Bazin's writings as a devotion to the cinematic body.[28] Like other movie-star worship, it is a fascination with mechanically produced kinetic images and with the unique capacities of those images to capture and transmit an intensely rich somatic experience. Chaplin knew how to foster this affliction by designing films replete with a particularly cinematic kineticism. Bazin's essay on Chaplin's *Limelight* captures the strangeness of this cinematic body. Bazin calls cinema "an hyperbole of incarnation because of the overwhelming presence of the image."[29] As a devotional object, the cinematic body is ideal, because the dense dynamism of this physicality is not depleted by repeated viewings, something that Bazin reminds us of in another essay: "Chaplin films can be seen over and over again with no loss of pleasure—indeed the very opposite is the case. . . . [T]he satisfaction derived from certain gags is inexhaustible."[30] For Bazin, the cinematic body entails a kind of physicality that is not delimited by the body of the actor, the character, or the star persona. Instead, the cinematic body must be understood as an intertextual and multisourced amalgam of those entities. Bazin explains: "Charlie is a mythical figure who rises above every adventure in which he becomes involved. For the general public, Charlie exists as a person before and after *Easy Street* and *The Pilgrim*."[31] Taken from the start of Bazin's "Charlie Chaplin" essay, this quotation seems at first to describe viewers' delight in recognizing consistencies among the various performances of an actor across different films, but Bazin's consideration of Chaplin's stardom is actually referring to a more complex form of spectatorial identification. Charlie is a composite being comprising the Little Tramp character, the actor himself, and the indexical image of the actor's body. Charlie also surpasses all three. In other words, Chaplin's fans recognize not only the same actor and character from film to film but also the same cinematic body from film to film. Their recognition of this cinematic body is an apperception, denoting an entity experienced only through watching films and known only through the

27 In this section, I mostly refer to Bazin's essay "Charlie Chaplin" in *What Is Cinema?*, 1:144–153. See also Timothy Barnard's revised translation of this essay in his edition of *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose, 2009), 25–35. Volume 2 of Gray's earlier translation of *What Is Cinema?* contains three other key considerations of Chaplin's work: "The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux" (102–123), "*Limelight*, or the Death of Molière" (124–127), and "The Grandeur of *Limelight*" (128–139). For Bazin's further writings on Chaplin, see *Essays on Chaplin*, trans. and ed. Jean Bodon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). For alternate critical perspectives on Bazin's theorization of Chaplin, see Rochelle Fack, "Bazin's Chaplin Myth and the Corrosive Lettrists," and James Tweedie, "André Bazin's Bad Taste," both in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 246–253 and 273–287, respectively.

28 Bazin never exempts himself from Chaplinitis, and in three essays—"The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux," "*Limelight*, or the Death of Molière," and "The Grandeur of *Limelight*"—he is careful to interrogate the Chaplin "myth" in the context of his own obsession with Chaplin.

29 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:137.

30 Ibid., 1:147.

31 Ibid., 1:144.

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intellectual transcendence of the limits of an individual film text. The cinematic body here shares a history with the body of the performer, in this case Chaplin, but it also has a life beyond that performer.[32]

Bazin argues that while Chaplin would still have been "a clown of genius" if movies had not been invented, the actor attained aesthetic perfection via the cinema. In the following quotation, Bazin describes how Chaplin's body exploits the increased responsiveness of film technology, a claim that seems to rest upon the distinction of the photographic from the cinematic:

> Thanks to the camera, the evolution of the comic effect which is being presented, all the while with the greatest clarity, not only does not need boosting[;] on the contrary it can now be refined down to the utmost degree; thus the machinery is kept to a minimum, so that it becomes a high precision mechanism capable of responding instantly to the most delicate of springs.[33]

While Bazin outwardly advocates minimal camera work in this passage, he is not arguing against film technology per se. After all, the camera brings clarity through its precise responsiveness. However, Bazin's account also suggests that Chaplin embraced not just the photographic quality of the film image, which is a form of recording capable of preserving a lived moment with great precision, but also its cinematic qualities, or its ability to extend the vitality of that lived moment in its duration across space and time for the spectator. In other words, Chaplin's gestural comedy epitomizes simultaneously the photographic and the cinematic qualities of the filmed image; his slapstick offers an account of representation. These specific images contain a theory of the capacities of the cinematic image to present history. By using the word "springs" (*ressorts*), Bazin also invites a confusion of the camera's mechanism and the resources of Chaplin's body. In a compelling moment of presemiotic theorization of the film image, Bazin attempts to articulate the pleasure of cinema as following from an experience of watching movement with the awareness that the body is both a reality (a true organic form) and a representation (a mechanical record produced from a tracing of light). Chaplin's body-in-motion enables a photographic recording to become an ideally cinematic experience; a film becomes cinema.

Bazin outlines the political significance of Chaplin's physical comedy in his exposé of the radical temporality embodied in Charlie's best-known gestures: his mishaps with objects, his defiant backward kick, and his ill-fated attempts at mechanical movement. In the first type of gestural slapstick, Charlie's mishaps with objects, Bazin finds a parable of political anachronism. In the World War I parody *Shoulder Arms* (1918), one of Chaplin's successful international features, for example, many gags result from Charlie's failure to recognize how history changes the purpose and social value of objects: "The utilitarian function of things relates to a human order of things itself utilitarian and which in turn has its eye on the future. . . . However, they do not serve

32 Bazin's essay "The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux" elaborates on how the Chaplin myth depends on an intertextual and extratextual figure known as "Charlie" who transcends any specific film.

33 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 1:147.

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Charlie as they serve us."[34] Charlie's mishaps expose the fact that everyday objects are not only things; they are social precepts, calls to action, and destinies. They shape what is possible not only in our present world but also in its future.

Throughout the film Chaplin blindly adheres to convention even when an object no longer serves its functional or social purpose. In one sequence, Charlie continues to depend on doors and windows for protection and concealment in a bombed-out house that has lost all its walls. Later, he blithely follows what he believes is ceremonial custom, thinking nothing of giving a German medal to an Allied commander. With intentions that never seem affected by history, Charlie engages reality as an immutable certainty: medals are always medals; doors are always doors. Comedy arises when he is unable to adjust his aspirations to external change. These mishaps reflect Charlie's inadaptability, or what Bazin reads as Charlie's desire to resist the passage of time and ignore the changes that history brings: "Charlie pushes to an absurd extreme his fundamental tendency not to go beyond the moment."[35] Temporariness is the temporality in which he lives and thinks. He does not think in advance or about the future, which means that all of his motivations are essentially antiteleological. The socially determined variability of an object's use-value confounds Charlie with hilariously disastrous consequences, revealing what Bazin called "his total indifference [to the] sacred."[36] Charlie's fumbling with cutlery represents, for Bazin, a refusal of the social strictures that we automatically accept and take for granted. "Unknowingly, every minute of our time we adjust to this framework. But Charlie is of another metal."[37] And if in Chaplin's films, Charlie's actions become, through "a derisory paradox, the only actions . . . that make sense," then they must interrupt ideology's minute-by-minute inculcation.[38]

Inadaptability takes on a wicked willfulness in Charlie's trademark backward kick, which Bazin describes as "a simple and yet sublime gesture that . . . expresses his supreme detachment from [the] biographical and social world." Bazin continues: "[T]his back-kick is a perfect expression of his constant determination not to be attached to the past, not to drag anything along behind him."[39] As a writer interested in social context and committed to the politics of the present, Bazin is neither intimating that Chaplin's performances disregard history nor implying that Charlie exists outside of history. Rather, Bazin is suggesting that Chaplin's gestural performances show us something telling about the filmed image itself, a stubborn presentness that is difficult to find in other means of representation. Identifying Chaplin as the realization of cinema's temporality serves a political goal for Bazin because through this analysis of gesture Bazin makes known the political stakes of cinematic specificity. Cinema allows a different social relationship between the past, the present, and the future, potentially dynamizing the standing social order of time and reorganizing the way we relate to history.

34 Ibid., 1:145.

35 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Barnard, 29.

36 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 1:152.

37 Ibid., 1:153.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 1:149.

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If we first notice a political inflection in his analysis of Charlie's backward kick, Bazin elaborates this theme more fully when he turns to the aspiration of the Little Tramp to maintain perpetual mechanical motion: "[I]n all of Charlie's pictures there is not one where . . . mechanical movement does not end badly for him. In other words, mechanization of movement is in a sense Charlie's original sin, the ceaseless temptation."[40] In part, mechanical movement refers specifically to the famous moments when Charlie struggles to interface with the machine world, as in the assembly line or feeding machine sequences in *Modern Times* (1936). But Bazin also uses the word *mechanical* more broadly to designate any pattern of behavior that never adjusts itself to the demands of an ever-changing present. Mechanical movement stands in for the idea of redundant action—the out-of-sync response that fails because it can only "offer the solution proper to a previous and specific moment."[41] Many Chaplin characters aspire to a machinelike efficiency and controlled existence, a Fordist fantasy of submitting the unknowable rhythms of the organic body to the regime of the machine. In emulating the rigorous patterns of a machine, however, these characters cannot help but overregulate their bodies, keeping them anachronistically set in accordance with a moment that has passed at exactly the instant that it is identified. To fully adopt a controlled physicality, Bazin writes, "is to project into time a mode of being that is suited to one instant, and that is what is meant by 'repetition.'"[42] This absurdly premeditated motion refuses to adapt itself over time and thus is always already an anachronistic gesture because it rejects the idea of the world as constantly changing.

By contrast, actual, or lived, human movement necessarily involves a series of revisions and renegotiations between intention and the onslaught of external constraints, such as the parameters of physical space, the movement of others, and so on. Bazin reads the parable of failed mechanical movement—the ridiculous desire of a man to emulate a machine and the hilarious consequences of trying to enact such a desire—as the filmmaker's tacit critique of conservative and regressive elements in culture and politics: "[E]very time Charlie makes us laugh[,] it is when he has been imprudent enough, one way or another, to presume that the future will resemble the past or to join naively in the game as played by society and to have faith in its elaborate machinery for building the future[,] its moral, religious, social and political machinery."[43] Chaplin's performance of the body—his expressive physicality—enables Bazin both to posit the cinema as a guard against the systematic depersonalization threatened by modernity and to imagine a cinematic practice able to counter modernist film aesthetics. If Chaplin's comedy illustrates something truly cinematic, then this implies that cinema is not a machine that regulates bodies. The famous first section of the film *Modern Times* suggests a distinction between cinema and mechanized forms of experience (e.g., feeding machines, the assembly line) that threaten to impose robotic efficiency on all aspects of daily life. An almost balletic synchronized merging of man and machine comes toward the end of a sequence of utter calamity. Sandwiched between gears of

40 Ibid., 1:151.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 1:152.

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various widths, Charlie's body curves and surrenders to the pace of the mechanism in a manner that cannot help but remind us of a filmstrip's passage through the gears of a projector or camera. This sole moment of resolution in the man-machine struggle comes from a machine that seems to echo the mechanics of cinema. *Modern Times* suggests here that the mayhem that results from merging the body and technology finds relief and exception in the cinema. Cinema emerges as a means of accessing the vital contingency of human life and not as a technology for systemizing the body, reducing its meanings, or encoding its gestures.

In these ways, Bazin's essays on Chaplin imply that cinema does not fix the body in its images. Further, the essays suggest that cinema's registration of physicality is uniquely suited to disputing modernity's attempts to reify human life in the body, to regulate its vitality in measurable units, and thus to reduce its potential force for change by assuming to know the shape of history ahead of time. As such, cinema's medium specificity is for Bazin inherently progressive though not exactly teleological. What seems to draw Bazin to Chaplin is how clearly his comedy illustrates and allegorizes cinema's precise illumination of the *living* human condition. Across these writings, we find Charlie's comedic physicality embodying the technical virtuosity of the film image in a way that distinguishes cinema from those machines that confine human intentions, constrict our bodies, determine our future movement, or dictate our actions and perceptions. The physicality of Chaplin's comedy exposes the danger of reifying human life—or more aptly, human living.

If conventional liberal historiography locates progressive change in personhood, reproduction, and agency-filled moving bodies, then Chaplin's deployment of the filmic body in all its gestic and kinetic glory forces the viewer to imagine the image's historicity in more vibrant and less static terms. We might say that Bazin describes Chaplin's comedy as containing a self-reflexive account of history as a process of representation that reifies change.[44] *Nights of Cabiria*, too, produces a visual discourse on cinema that responds to the idea of cinema as a regulator of bodies, a medium that reifies change, and an agent of conventional historiography. In the context of a postwar politics of the image, this film's use of gesture calls the bluff on neorealism's attempt to install the cinematic body as testimony and interrupts the conflation of cinematic representation with reality. In the end, this gesturing body works to undo the humanist optic described at the start of this essay by allowing space for the de-reifying force of the image to take over the film.

Masina's Chaplin. Given the importance of the cinematic body to Bazin's political definition of the medium, it is curious that his essays on *La strada* and *Nights of Cabiria* virtually ignore the gestural antics that characterize Masina's performances. Other than his comments on Cabiria's final look, Bazin dismisses comparisons of Masina to Chaplin as unconvincing. Bazin's refusal of the resemblance, and his neglect of Masina's physicality, obscures the fact that Bazin's sense of political cinema may share

44 My sense of Bazin's writings as implicit theories of history and critiques of traditional historiography expands on the work of Philip Rosen. See, in particular, "Subject, Ontology, and Historicity in Bazin," in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3–41.

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more in common with Fellini or Pasolini than it does with Rossellini, De Sica, or other canonical neorealists. As I suggested in my introduction, Cabiria's gestures reveal that this film frames and narrativizes moments of exceptional physicality as a means of questioning, rather than confirming, corporeal spectacle. This strategy averts attempts to render the filmed image of the body as irrefutable testimony or as simple national allegory.

Cabiria's histrionic outbursts at the start of the film, described earlier, and her much-discussed returned gaze, which comes at the film's end, clearly reference Chaplin's comedy. I want to start, however, with two additional Cabiria antics that recall Bazin's Charlie: her mambo and her physical troubles with surfaces. In a manner similar to Charlie's backward kick, Cabiria's mambo bespeaks a desire to transcend her body's social circumscription and to escape its placement in social space by the gazes of others; her trouble with surfaces reflects her dogged refusal to recognize social barriers as real or consequential. Not only do nearly all her more overt physical assertions backfire diegetically; their kineticism also belies a tension between the film's narrational aspirations for Cabiria and her narrative fate.

Cabiria's ecstatic embrace of publicity in her mambos seems to derail her redemption narrative precisely at moments when transcendence of her current circumstance seems most possible. At the same time, in terms of character development, these mambos are bodily outbursts that express her aspirant agency; they give visual form to her stubborn will to control her public appearance. As much as they block her redemption, in other words, they also question its terms and conditions. Whenever Cabiria's mambos start, they appear to be natural and spontaneous, slowly building their rhythm from her tics and tappings, and then coming to completely possess her body. The narrative suggests that while each of these mambos originates from Cabiria's desire to reappropriate the spectacle of her body in public space, they always end with her losing both physical and social control of her body.

She first dances the mambo at the Passeggiata Archeologica with the men who loiter there but who are neither pimps nor johns and are figured as homosexual. Since this scene introduces us to Cabiria's work environment, the dance in a sense illustrates her aspiration beyond the life she knows—her desire to distinguish herself from the others who sell sex at the Passeggiata Archeologica and to deflect the scornful gazes and constant insults of Matilda, the self-proclaimed grand dame of the district. This dance also appears directed not just to the diegetic audience that has gathered to watch her mambo but also to the film's audience. After the discomforting vulnerability of her waterlogged, limp, and unconscious body at the start of the film, Cabiria's mambo redefines her body in the eyes of the viewer. We are no longer submitted to a pitiful display of Cabiria's compromised body or forlorn physique. With this new spectacle, she has returned to her position as the object of our gaze, but narratively, she has chosen that position and through it attempts to redefine her to-be-looked-at-ness. By the end of her mambo, however, the film has rescinded her access to her body as a vehicle for her character's self-determination. Cabiria fails to maintain control over her dance and her image as a fight breaks out between her and Matilda. Like Chaplin's tramp, Cabiria ends up an outcast even among others of her kind.

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The spontaneity and comic genius of her mambo may endear the audience to Cabiria's character, but narratively, these attempts at social redefinition always fail, confirming her status as an outcast. In the scenes that follow the first mambo, the dance recurs as Cabiria further attempts to refigure her identity in social space. One scene in which Cabiria wanders down a posh Via Veneto begins by visually articulating the confines of her social status and ends with her defiant dance. At the start of this scene, her small stature and quirky, bowlegged walk quickly intersect with the haughty sauntering of two high-end prostitutes. The women are much taller than Cabiria and adorned in fashionably tailored outfits. She is out of place, and it is not just physical difference that marks Cabiria's status as a foreigner in this neighborhood. The implication of this shot is that the women withhold any recognition of Cabiria to enforce her lower social status and mark their territory as off-limits to the likes of our heroine. The camera shares their perspective briefly, and thus the audience sees both the awe and the defiance in Cabiria's face.

After wandering into a quieter part of the neighborhood, Cabiria happens upon music streaming from the window of an underground club. She bends down to hear the music and seems unable to restrain herself from breaking into another mambo. Again, the film first prompts us to read Cabiria's mambo as an appropriate form of acting out. The mambo is a tool that permits Cabiria to refute being publically spurned; it permits her both to break free from the looks of the Via Veneto prostitutes and to change her status in our eyes. Just as her body appears to surrender fully to the rhythms of the dance, however, she realizes that the nightclub's officious doorman is watching her. She approaches him slowly and throws a friendly nod his way. He shoos her away with a gesture and his imposing glare. "Can't I look?" she asks him. To which he responds, "Just scram." He implies that her type is not welcome here.

Later in the evening, Cabiria performs a third mambo, this time on the dance floor of a club that she has visited as the guest of the movie star Alberto Lazzari. Even before she dances, her presence in the club sparks much attention, illustrated by the judgmental glares and knowing smiles from the wealthy women who are the club's typical clientele. In this most expressive and theatrical of her mambos, Cabiria aims to snub the scorn of these disapproving looks. In his book on Nino Rota, Richard Dyer notes her exuberance: Cabiria "goes straight for the spirit of the music, improvising movements that are more vaudeville than mambo."[45] Cabiria's body reneges on any earlier aspiration to fit in. Because it is preceded by the choreographed exoticism of the club's professional dancers, two black women more in sync with "African" drumming at the start of the scene, her overspilling excitement feels even more out of place and obstreperous. Adorned with beaded bikinis, horsetails, and blank stares, these dancers introduce a disturbingly racialized blend of mid-twentieth-century European colonialism alongside the hyper-blasé restraint of beatnik jazz. We watch Cabiria take in these dancers. Her face is befuddled at first; then it casts a frown that dissolves with

45 Dyer reads the reactions of the club's posh clientele differently. Cabiria's mambo "is naff, yet there is an energy and glee to it that the other clients clearly envy." Richard Dyer, *Nino Rota: Music, Film, and Feeling* (London: Palgrave Macmillan and British Film Institute, 2010), 129.

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a shrug and a sideways glance that together function like an eye roll. While Cabiria seems to dismiss their potted tribalism as pretentious, the film uses the dancers as counterpoints to the Cabiria mambos that precede and follow their performance.[46]

Each mambo stands as a thumbnail sketch of Cabiria's story and makes that story physically manifest: the dances initially reflect the verve of her broader fight for self-determination, but they end by demonstrating that her inability to control her body in public constrains her life. After the first instance, we know that each time she dances the mambo, it will overtake her; we know that her fearless abandon will eventually betray her intent, resulting in further judgment and shame, reconfirming her social circumscription.

There is also something harder to describe going on here. We see the film use a gesturing body, including Masina's masterful performance of ebullience, to cue our endearment to Cabiria and our investment in her fate. At the same time, the film uses the body constantly to remind us of Cabiria's entrapment. A biographical account might invoke Masina's early training as a dancer or Fellini's sadistic directorial style in relation to Masina's performances, demanding take after take to achieve just the right sense of accident and authenticity.[47] In any event, the film hinges on the gestural richness contained in the mambos. Their physicality keeps us in a delicate tension between the cathartic thrill of watching the transcendence of social entrapment and the cringing discomfort of witnessing someone embarrassing herself.

To understand fully how the film deploys Masina's bodily performance, it is crucial to notice that the mambos consolidate Cabiria's characteristic tics, condensing the cadence of her quotidian movements into an exaggerated expression (Figure 1). For example, when not dancing but anxious or excited, Cabiria shifts her weight from one foot to the other, sometimes raising her calves in a small back kick. A similar alternation afflicts her bowlegged stomps. In the mambos, this shifting of weight becomes a rhythmic mashing of her toes into the ground that anticipates the Twist or a back-and-forth step that recalls the Charleston. The film thus clearly suggests that these dances are cathartic for Cabiria, as though they invoke and exorcise earlier physical states. Each mambo summarizes and reflects another physicality, reviewing and commenting on Cabiria's gestures elsewhere in the film. Consider, as well, how the dances incorporate the jerky gesticulations that elsewhere characterize her fits of frustration: her tantrums are reworked with each flung fist and shimmied hip. The mambos also include waist-high kicks, which she throws her entire body into as if she were kicking someone or something. Throughout the film, her gait often also has an erratic pace

46 Pauline Kael characterizes the black nightclub dancers that appear in many of Fellini's films as merely reflective surfaces to capture the ennui of elite Italian society. She writes that these spectacularized bodies are "introduced to show the decadence and boredom of the beholders." "The Sick-Soul-of-Europe Parties," *Massachusetts Review* 4, no. 2 (January 1, 1963): 379. For further context and analysis of race in this scene, see Karen Pincus, "Empty Spaces: Decolonization in Italy," in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 299–321. See also Áine O'Healy, "Difficult Discussions: Notes on Teaching Italian Cinema in North America," *Italian Studies* 63, no. 2 (Autumn 2008): 271–272.

47 For more on the production history of this film, see "Fellini dirige Giulietta," in *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano raccontata dai suoi protagonisti, 1935–1959*, ed. Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), 374–377.

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and zigzagging character. These qualities are accentuated in the ecstatic stopping and starting motion of the mambos. She shakes her hips, nods her head, and then stops with one hand on her hip and the other in the air. With each of these poses, she stops the body's large movements for a moment. The poses are exclamations of excitement and declarations that she is in control, if only for a moment. Quickly, however, she loses control of the mambo. After a few restrained shimmies, inhibitions are quickly dispensed with and the dance takes command, as if even Masina cannot stop the rhythm.

Figure 1. Three moments of a mambo, in *Nights of Cabiria* (Janus Films, 1957).

How these mambos end is not simply diegetically consequential in the sense of being embarrassing for Cabiria. As the dances finish, they also ask us to reflect on the extent to which the body can be seen as a site of agency. Like Charlie's antics, Cabiria's mambos question whether change is possible by showing us the seemingly intractable shape of progressive time. Here we are reminded of Bazin's description of the famous chase scene in *Shoulder Arms* when Charlie disguises himself as a tree to avoid capture: "Charlie's defensive reflexes culminate in the reabsorption of time by space."[48] Charlie's shifting between different registers of motion and stillness articulates a refusal of the

48 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Barnard, 30.

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temporality of the chase itself. The stops and starts of Cabiria's mambo profess a similar defense mechanism. The staccato of the dance attempts to hold back narrative destiny by inserting hammy poses, seizures of motion allowed for by the rhythms of the mambo. Nevertheless, the mambo cannot release Cabiria from the narrative's forward motion, and so it illuminates exactly what she is up against. The fleeting moments of release that the mambo grants her are temporary and, at least diegetically, serve only to confirm the intractability of Cabiria's predicament.

Like the mambos, Cabiria's physical troubles with surfaces make evident both the character's desire to redefine herself in social space and her inevitable failure to do so. This second instance of gestic comedy comes as Cabiria tries to integrate herself smoothly into the foreign worlds of celebrity and wealth introduced to her by Lazzari. The first such mishap occurs as she enters the nightclub just described, where she later erupts into dance. Lazzari effortlessly navigates the curtained entryway of this exclusive establishment, but when Cabiria encounters the large velvet barrier a few minutes later, she is stymied. For several comical seconds, we watch as her hidden form struggles to find the break in the curtain, punching and kicking all the while. Judging from the confused looks of the two waiters who finally rescue her, few of the club's visitors have had this problem.

Transparent and translucent surfaces similarly confound Cabiria, as is seen in her visit to Lazzari's villa. This palatial home is adorned not only with white telephones, Italian cinema's overdetermined symbol of excess and superficiality, but also with frosted-glass walls, mirrored panels, aquariums, pools, and other reflective surfaces. The automatic mechanical sliding of mirrored closets causes her to spin around on her heel. Later, she crashes into a plate-glass door that others navigate without difficulty (Figure 2). The comedic mishaps that result from her failure to negotiate these surfaces demonstrate Cabiria's inability to distinguish between what is real and what is surface. Her difficulty with solid but transparent surfaces, moreover, typifies an insensitivity to the imagined but nonetheless intransigent boundaries that separate social spaces. This obliviousness itself collapses the difference between physical and imagined boundaries, or solid and self-policed barriers. It therefore foreshadows her ambiguous look back at the camera at the film's end, anticipating her disregard of the cinema's screen as the surface meant to divide spectator from spectacle.

Figure 2. Cabiria encounters trouble with the surfaces of Alberto Lazzari's palazzo, in *Nights of Cabiria* (Janus Films, 1957).

As examples of slapstick, Cabiria's mambos and her interactions with surfaces work comically because they capture her attempts to escape social circumscription and her failure to do so. Importantly, her slapstick sways on the threshold between a willful

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and unwilled act. With these gestures, her bodily defiance appears as a humorous and slightly disruptive spectacle for our gaze. In each instance, the film deploys gesture to demonstrate visually a blurring between the intentional and the accidental, between self-determination and subjection, between a desire to fit in and the utter failure to do so. As with Chaplin, the film makes us feel our hunger for physical mishap and thirst for further outbursts, both of which are urges that will compete with our capacity for compassion. Narratively, we want her to behave, but cinematically, we crave more histrionics. These scenarios as a result bring a self-consciousness to the viewer's own activity of looking. If the film fosters this awareness through displays of the body, then it does so in a patterned repetition of physical comedy based upon further entrapping of those who are looked at while overstating the social mobility of those who look.

Deinstitutionalizing Spectacle. Through its narration of Cabiria's outbursts, mambos, and other mishaps, the film's first half begins to question whether we should regard the body as a site of transformation. Her antics offer the film an opportunity both to overlay and to differentiate diegetic looking at Cabiria with and from the film spectator's perspective. With the mambos, for example, we step into the looks of Matilda or the potential johns in the first dance, the Via Veneto prostitutes in the second, and the clientele of the club in the third. As we feel for her, we can do so only through the perspectives of these judging diegetic looks. These scenes complicate us watching her with us watching her being watched. This structuring of looks divides our investments; we toggle between those spectating and those being made into a spectacle (a structure accentuated in the hypnosis scene discussed later).[49]

The second half of the film gives further meaning to this dilemma in its harsh depictions of institutionalized spectacles, including certain devotional rituals of the Catholic Church and the magic act of a small-time variety theater. By juxtaposing and thus analogizing these institutions, the film not only debunks their lures but also distinguishes them from cinema in general and from Fellini's cinema in particular. Throughout these scenes, the film contrasts cinema to institutions that reify the body as spectacle in service of ideology, and in this sense we find *Nights of Cabiria* also contesting the epistemological premises of neorealism. The film argues against cinema becoming an institution that employs corporeal spectacle to dupe audiences by provoking somatic experiences. By its end, the film uses a cinematic effect, the immediacy and proximity induced by the main character looking back, to taunt the conventional edicts of cinematic spectacle.

This contrasting of cinema to other institutions of visual spectacle takes place in two key scenes, the first of which concerns the Catholic Church. In this scene, Cabiria and her colleagues join a procession of pilgrims to the Madonna of Divine Love, a hilltop church that attracts large crowds desperate for miracles. To get to the sacred spot inside the chapel, the characters must push through unruly mobs of impassioned believers and devotional imagery. The climax of this scene comes with two disappointments: Cabiria prays for a better life but hears nothing; meanwhile, one of her colleagues, a

49 According to Vito Zagarrio, a feminist reading would reveal how the film constructs Cabiria's agency as riddled by contradiction and her desire for autonomy as conflictual. "Sulla strada di Fellini," in *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 9, *1954–1959*, ed. Lino Micciché, Sandro Bernardi, and Scuola Nazionale di Cinema (Marsilio, Italy: Edizioni di Biancoenero, 2001), 249.

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man who has lost the use of his legs, throws down his crutches in front of the Madonna only to have his unsupported body crash violently to the floor. Realizing that their pleas for salvation have gone unanswered, Cabiria later cries, "Nothing has changed. We are all the same." Unlike neorealism's corporeal moralism, the body is refused salvation by this film; even martyrdom is not offered to the suffering. The film withholds the cathartic release of seeing a suffering body either miraculously healed or spectacularly martyred. Moreover, it refuses to grant our sympathy any impact on the narrative.

In the film's second exploration of an institution of spectacle, which comes after the disappointing pilgrimage, Cabiria wanders into a variety show filled with a noisy and lecherous audience. Here a seedy hypnotist performs stage magic that includes sawing a woman in half, as well as putting unsuspecting innocent audience volunteers—including Cabiria—under a trance and forcing them to act out embarrassing and revealing physical antics. The cacophony of this scene, alongside its emphasis on devotion and display, suggests that, like the church, the magic act is another cultural institution that relies upon spectacle to defraud its audiences. Both the church and the magic act are, moreover, spectacles whose drama and attraction depend upon the corporeally infused deception realized in the crucifix iconography of the church, the hanging braces and crutches dedicated to the Madonna, and the squirming torso of the headless woman sawed in half by the magic act.

Both scenes use projected light and shadows to accentuate the question of cinema's relation to these cruel implementations of visual spectacle. *Nights of Cabiria*'s pessimism toward the two institutions should be seen as raising the question of how cinema can and should entail a different politics of looking. For Bazin, Chaplin's gags lead us to see how cinema might succeed in expanding the conventional means of confining the subject to a single time and space. The fact that the image of Charlie's body yields humor again and again exposes the vitality of cinema as both inalienable and, in a certain sense, anachronistic. Our laughter suggests to Bazin that cinema's mechanical reproduction of the gesturing body is anything but a process of reification. If we measure the effectiveness of Charlie's antics in narrative terms, then we find that the body always fails him in the diegetic world. If instead we understand the body as a cinematic entity, as Bazin encourages, then the film image emerges as a vital sphere of dynamic subjective effects.

For his character, Charlie's "sin," according to Bazin, is to think that he can depend on repeating the same gesture again and again without adapting it to historical change. In a similar fashion, Cabiria's failed attempts to control her bodily outbursts never provoke a change in the way that she approaches being in public. This pattern of obstinacy can be funny to watch at first, but with the church and the magic show, the film's tone shifts. Spectacles of the body refuse to serve her well; she gets either nothing from them or too much. Her histrionic gestures conspire against her, always exposing her body as ill suited to public life in the way that mechanized movement escapes Charlie.

According to Bazin, cinema gives Charlie's gestures a second life. The cinematic repetition of bodily gags does nothing to decrease comedy or reduce the body's vitality. Quite the opposite is true: filmed motion may seem to be preserved, but cinema delivers a fresh kinetic dynamism to each viewing scenario. Cabiria's own repetition compulsion also suggests that the cinema is more than just a machine to reify the

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relationship of audience to image. In both the church and the magic show, the film invokes Cabiria's destiny as bodily but refutes the revelatory potential of that embodiment. The film thus both produces and disarms the body as a means of giving historical suffering expression within a fictional diegesis. Cabiria's boldest and final gesture further undercuts the spectator's ability to identify with the image as purely other.

Looking Back. Masina's performance further calls attention to the dynamic between audience and image by adopting two Chaplin tics not addressed so far. The first, the sideways glance, timidly refuses intimacy both within the image and beyond it. Often in the middle of a sentence, Cabiria's eyes cock devilishly to one side as if punctuating her thoughts with the sudden suspension of eye contact within the diegesis and the evasion of direct address (Figure 3). As such, these sideways glances set up the film's ultimate statement on cinematic vision and its final appropriation of Chaplin: Cabiria's look into the camera at the film's end. The force of this final look derives from a truly cinematic effect, one that makes the activity of our looking overt in a slightly uncomfortable way. The look also feels special because of its constancy. Since we have come to know Cabiria through her persistent sideways glances, the steadiness of this final look more forcefully brings us into an odd intimacy with her screen presence, an intimacy that seems to overcome the character's narrative defeat.

Figure 3. Cabiria's sideways glance, in *Nights of Cabiria* (Janus Films, 1957).

After Cabiria's humiliating participation in the magic show, she meets a man who proposes marriage to her on their third date. Soon after, she sells all her possessions, including her home, to move to the country with her fiancé. Once the couple has set out on their new life together, the film shows its hand. A supposedly romantic walk in the woods turns sinister; her fiancé has brought her here to kill her and then run off with the nest egg that she has put aside for their future. As he is about to push her off a cliff, he pauses, seemingly halted by Cabiria's desperate pleas. Suddenly, he grabs her money and takes off, literally leaving her in the dust. Only his most abject pity has saved Cabiria's life. Left alone with this fact and her complete financial ruin, she appears to contemplate suicide. The destitute and dejected Cabiria wanders out of the dark woods onto a road, where she encounters a crowd of young people strolling and playing instruments. They warmly welcome her into their procession. Seeming to accept their hospitality, Cabiria smiles and looks around, resting her gaze for a moment finally on ours. In her look, she appears to recognize us, acknowledge our presence, as if she sees us watching her. By this point, the film has accustomed us to paying

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close attention to nonverbal cues, and Cabiria's look into the camera must be read as one of her most enigmatic gestures. Her direct gaze suggests an awareness of our presence as spectators, and yet it is not a confrontational address. Her face appears neither angry nor embarrassed to have caught us looking at her. Neither the shot's framing nor its composition acknowledges her look, thus suggesting its random or improvisational quality. Do her eyes meet the camera's gaze accidentally? Does the inclusion of this casual, fleeting look serve as a self-reflexive gesture, allowing us access to an otherwise private communication between the actress and an off-screen colleague? Or was this moment scripted? The film refuses either to answer or to dispel these questions. *Osaka Elegy* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1936) ends with a remarkably similar ambiguity. The uncertain fate of the protagonist, a woman who has also turned to prostitution, is suspended when she looks for a few seconds in our direction. As in *Nights of Cabiria*, a sudden vibrancy takes over, one that connects us to the camera's motion and to her movements.

Many critics read Cabiria's final gaze as a direct citation of the ending of Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), in which Charlie looks back at his film audience. Bazin argues that Cabiria's final gaze was nearly her only Chaplinesque gesture. He wrote that her look constitutes an invitation "to remove us quite finally from our role of spectator."[50] By ending his essay on Cabiria with this provocation, Bazin cuts short any discussion of how this gesture might trouble his exposition of the film as a whole, and, more generally, whether this moment alters his conception of neorealism. The phrase "remove us from our role of spectator" implies that this moment demands a more active mode of viewership or encourages a model of intersubjective semantics that challenges the typical unidirectional movement of meaning from text to viewer. Yet unlike Brechtian techniques that aim to expose the artifice of the performance scenario, Cabiria's look neither exposes the gap between performer and character nor antagonizes the gulf between diegetic space and audience space. As Bazin's commentary rightly implies, this moment attempts to do the opposite: it aims to collapse both forms of distance. Many scholars of this film share Bazin's interest in reading the ending as a disruption to the history of film aesthetics and a radical break from the conventions of film spectatorship, including Tom Brown, who includes a chapter-length description of this moment in his study of the returned gaze in cinema.[51] And just a few years after *Nights of Cabiria*, characters from Godard's films would boldly stare back at us, and critics would herald this unconventional address to the camera as piercing the illusionism on which conventional film fictions depended. Yet Cabiria's look does not exactly constitute what has come to be known as direct address; nor is her gaze a gesture of irony or alienation.

If her gaze tricks us for even a moment into thinking that she sees us, then this violation of the fourth wall stymies our ability to divide actor from character or to distinguish a profilmic space from a filmic space. What is particularly startling about

50 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:92.

51 Tom Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 78–115. Dudley Andrew argues that this returned gaze is crucial for understanding Bazin and all cinema after his writings. *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xx–xxiv. See also James Tweedie's fascinating reading of a short sequence in *Nights of Cabiria* in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 273–287.

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Cabiria's final look is that we experience it both as individual spectators, in the sense that its address seems personal, and as a collective, in our always-attendant awareness that films that can be repeated for later audiences or projected simultaneously in other locations. By foregrounding its semantic ambiguity and the origin of the image's presence, the film reminds us that since its images are mechanically reproduced, the same body can be distributed across various viewing scenarios and various times—traveling across the world and history. Others have experienced this same surprising spontaneity before and will do so again.

In Fellini's pre-Godardian moment, Cabiria's look reconfigures a more specific cultural discursive frame: the space between Italian cinema's images and its international audiences. Throughout the film, Cabiria's complex exploration of the social space between spectating and the spectacle carries, I would argue, a political resonance in the social and historical context of postwar Italian cinema. Her look troubles the premises not of all film spectatorship but specifically of neorealism's spectator and its postwar humanist optic. Its ambiguity signals the film's aspiration to muddle the narrative traditions of corporealism that produce an "objective" account of Italy for the international spectator's gaze. Foregrounding the dual presence of the cinematic body, this spatially and temporally disorienting gesture subtly reframes the international spectator's relationship to cinema, history, and geopolitics. With Cabiria's final gesture, international viewers are less clearly certified as neorealism's absented bystander; the film's final gesture acknowledges their presence as more than invisible witnesses. While the film can do little more than pose the question of the agency of looking in these final seconds, it does leave the status of an international audience for European cinema posed and radically unanswered. No longer the body caught unaware by a neorealist gaze, our heroine seems to look both at us and at herself being watched by us. In this way, Cabiria's gesture comes to flaunt those subjective instabilities of the cinematic body that neorealism aimed to elide. Like Chaplin's slapstick, her gaze exposes the double and thus paradoxical ontology of cinematic presence as described by Bazin—a cinematic presence defined by a relationship to the filmed body quite distinct from the one canonical neorealists would have us inhabit. Her gaze engages us in the odd present tense of the cinema, a double temporality that disallows the image from ever fully belonging to its object or its subject (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Cabiria's final look, in *Nights of Cabiria* (Janus Films, 1957).

As radical as his approach to Chaplin may have been, Bazin's reluctance to recognize the same ambivalences in the bodies of neorealism speaks to the limits of his

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historical position. To let go of the body as a key form of testimony would have serious consequences for a global community suddenly reacquainted with the importance of mass-mediated historiography, since photographic documentation played a crucial role in transmitting the message of Europe's horrors and prioritizing this message for international audiences. To dynamize the space of interpretation shared between Europe and its outside onlookers might endanger the supposedly evidentiary message of Italian cinema and jeopardize not only the groundswell of enthusiasm for European film throughout the world but also the political empathy that such films apparently engendered. Chaplin allowed Bazin an alternative space, where the stakes of historical representation were not quite as high. We can imagine, then, that Masina's Chaplinesque Cabiria presented a conundrum for Bazin, forcing him to push his radical theory of reality to its frontiers. How do you argue for reality's ambiguity when Europe is still healing from the pain of war and is still so vulnerable to totalitarianism? What would a full application of his dynamic model of historicity do for representation in neorealist films—films that were for him still very much wrapped up in the materiality of physical realities of the present and in what those realities meant for the world's future? Fellini's film seems more comfortable with considering what Chaplin's aesthetics can teach us about the historiographic potential of the cinema image in the postwar period. It is not my intention to dismiss either Bazin's passion for neorealist films or the historical importance of photographic documents in this period. I do want to insist, however, that the evidential burden neorealism places upon its pseudodocumentary images has too often prevented us from the full critical engagement with the cinematic body that Bazin's writings on Chaplin encourage us to pursue. For Bazin, Chaplin's slapstick makes clear that cinema is never just a string of photographic documents. It shares part of its ontology with still photography, but its movement and its uncanny copresence make it always much more than just a collection of static records. Once we have liberated the filmed gesture from the critical piety often associated with the photographic, we discover that cinema's complex record of the body presents a radical historiography and a historical image that in the end disrupts the telos associated with traditional historicism. Interweaving history and histrionics, *Nights of Cabiria* suggests one way to challenge cinema's institutionalized conventions of making history with bodies. *

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