“A new dictionary of gestures”: Chaplin’s *The Rink* and Ricciotto Canudo’s *Skating Rink*

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Abstract: This essay addresses Ricciotto Canudo’s poem *Skating-Ring à Tabarin. Ballet* (1920) and his subsequent ballet, *Skating Rink* (1922). Both works, produced within the milieu of the Parisian modernist avant-garde, are responses to Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Rink* (1917). Chaplin is repeatedly figured by the modernist avant-garde as exemplifying the possibilities of film as a new art form, in particular providing a novel lexicon for performance through bodily gestures that characterize the fragmented subjectivity of urban and industrial modernity. This essay argues, however, that in adapting Chaplin’s critique of class relations, sublimated within the comedy of *The Rink*, Canudo first modifies his own pre-war ideals of intersubjectivity in light of contemporary political and aesthetic developments, notably Purism and “the call to order,” and secondly appropriates Chaplin’s subversive challenge to bourgeois order to a language through which the subject experiences imaginary dissolution, but which nevertheless guarantees recuperation and control.

In May 1920 the Italian poet Ricciotto Canudo (1877-1923) published in the *Mercure de France* a long poem, *Skating-Ring à Tabarin. Ballet*, which took as its theme the movement of the masses and the triangular relationship between a young woman and two men (the “Poet/Fool” and the “Man,” subsequently known as the “Apache”) within that movement. The “Bal Tabarin” invoked in Canudo’s poem was a real place, originally a dance hall that opened on the rue Victor Massé, Paris, in 1904 (Mas 2009: 276n8), and then the subject of a painting by the Futurist Gino Severini in 1912. On January 20, 1922, *Skating Rink*, a ballet based upon Canudo’s poem, began performances at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. It was danced by the Ballets Suédois and choreographed by Jean Börlin; sets and costumes were created by the painter Fernand Léger and Arthur Honegger composed the music. The *mise-en-scène* of the ballet made explicit what had been less obvious, although nonetheless present in Canudo’s text, namely the indebtedness of the concept to
popular culture. In the title of the project, as well as in Léger’s costumes and Börlin’s movements for “the Poet/Fool,” the ultimately successful male protagonist in the romantic triangle, there was a clear invocation of Charlie Chaplin’s film comedy *The Rink*, made in 1916 for the Mutual Film Corporation. Through the reference to *The Rink*, this “high-art” avant-garde project—staged for an *haut-bourgeois* audience in one of the Parisian theatres that specialized in experimental works—invoked a fad of popular urban culture—roller skating.¹

Canudo probably saw *The Rink* (released in France as *Charlot patine*) in late 1917 whilst on leave from the French army. This expatriate and Paris resident (since 1901) volunteered in 1914 to fight in World War I while his home country was still neutral. Canudo shared the general enthusiasm amongst the avant-garde for “Charlot,” as the comedian was known in France. Other artists in his circle had already expressed their fondness for the little man, notably Yvan Goll in his *Chaplinade* of 1920, a long narrative poem illustrated by Léger.

In a 1922 critical study, the art historian Elie Faure observed of Chaplin’s “intermedial” genius: “On ne s’en rend évidemment pas compte parce que Charlot est un pitre, et qu’un poète est, par définition, un homme solennel, qui vous introduit dans la connaissance par la porte de ennui.” ‘This becomes obvious because Charlot is a clown, and a poet is, by definition, a solemn man who is introduced to you through the door of sadness.’ (1922b: 307)² Faure’s essay came immediately after his exposition of a theory of the “cinéplastique,” the notion of cinema as having the capacity to be a collective, temporal and spatial spectacle that synthesizes all the arts (Faure: 1922a). He remarked of Chaplin that, “Il organise l’univers en poème cinéplastique et lance dans le devenir, à la manière d’un dieu, cette organisation capable d’orienter un certain nombre de sensibilités et d’intelligences et par elles, de proche en proche, d’agir sur tout les esprits.” ‘He organizes the universe into a cineplastic poem and projects into the future, in the manner of a god, an organization that is capable of guiding a certain elite of sensitivity and intelligence, and through them, step by step, of acting on all minds.’ (Faure 1922b: 308)

In Canudo’s work and in his milieu, which before 1914 was principally the circle around the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, there was a great interest in the potential of cinema as a medium for artistic and spiritual expression—a potential that could be realized through film’s synthetic properties. In October 1911, Canudo published an essay,