« Le tout à la fois » : Duras, Chaplin, and the Totality of Comedic Performance

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Abstract : Describing Charlie Chaplin’s films, Duras notes in her Cahiers du cinéma special issue, Les Yeux verts : « Rien de Chaplin n’est retenu par Chaplin quand il joue, ni mis en réserve. Il joue le tout à la fois » (YV, 27). His performance destroys difference between « tous les modes de rire et de pleurer » (ibid.). From Duras’s comments on Chaplin emerges a blueprint for a singular comedic aesthetic, one that characterizes Chaplin’s work and also defines her own texts’ engagement with comedy. This author’s works are humorous not just because they confuse laughter and tears but also because her texts embody « le tout ». This term’s full comedic import comes into play in Duras’s interviews and in periodical issues like Les Yeux verts precisely because of how these works defy categorization. Ranging over all manner of diverse subjects, vacillating between reality and fiction, Duras’s voice creates humor in its heedlessness of boundaries and distinctions.

In two sections of Les Yeux verts, a special issue of Cahiers du cinéma written by Duras and first published in 1980, Duras provides a specific and objective portrait of the famous comedian Charlie Chaplin. She begins her commentary in a section entitled : « Woody Allen Chaplin » (YV, 27) and then she finishes her thoughts on the comedian some twenty pages later in the section, « Chaplin, oui » (YV, 46). Her discussions of Chaplin do not focus on the overtly slapstick or burlesque characteristics of the actor’s routine, elements that might traditionally be construed as comedic. Rather, Duras focuses on the hyperbolic and all-encompassing nature of his presence and his comedy, particularly in relationship to the political. The element that Duras seems to admire the most is the totality of his performance, the actor’s ability to hold nothing back and to display everything at once : « Rien de Chaplin n’est retenu par Chaplin quand il joue, ni mis en réserve. Il joue le
In the one page of text that comprises the first section on Chaplin, Duras uses « tout » no less than eleven times. The polysemous and hyperbolic « tout » is ubiquitous in Duras’s œuvre, and the word’s inherent ambiguity lends itself to various interpretations. Nevertheless, Duras’s use of the word « tout » in Les Yeux verts serves a specific purpose. Ultimately, the word’s repetition highlights a comedic aesthetic, one not just found in Duras’s analysis of Chaplin’s performance but also in this author’s work as a whole. The author’s commentary on Chaplin in Les Yeux verts provides a way of understanding the unusual comedic aspects of Duras’s writing and also the author’s own brand of comedic performance.

In Les Yeux verts, the description of Chaplin’s performance is surprisingly devoid of a lexicon that might traditionally refer to humor: words like « funny », « amusing », or « comical ». Instead, the reader gleams a sense of the incomparable definition Duras creates of comedy in the comparison that she makes between two kinds of humor, the first found in Chaplin’s films and the second used by the actor and director Woody Allen. Duras highlights the singularity of Chaplin’s comedic performance, not by describing the gags and jokes in his films, but rather by exploring how these comedic elements function in Allen’s films. The jokes in Allen’s work are, as Duras describes them, « toute une série de gags très très joués, très calculés, très locaux, très ‘pris sur le vif’, et en fait très élaborés » (YV, 27). What Duras seems to be criticizing here is the visibility of Allen’s comedy, the fact that all of his gags are obvious to the viewer. Chaplin, who acts « le tout à la fois », does not reveal comedy’s limits as does Allen. Duras explains this difference in terms that appeal to the reader’s sense of vision:

Woody Allen, c’est des pièces, des morceaux avec des coutures entre eux. Je vois les coutures tandis qu’avec Chaplin je ne vois rien, je vois une ligne droite, je vois un regard confiant qui inonde le monde. (Ibid.)

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1 As she explains in La Vie matérielle, « Écrire ce n’est pas raconter des histoires. C’est le contraire de raconter des histoires. C’est raconter tout à la fois » (VM, 31-32). This claim, the pretense of « telling everything all at once », encompasses different aspects of Duras’s writing: from her dismissal of the boundaries between autobiography and fiction to her work’s conflation of seemingly opposed terms such as remembering and forgetting and finally to her creation of texts like La Vie matérielle and Les Yeux verts, which discuss all manner of subjects seemingly without restraint.