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Author(s): Adrian Daub
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“HANNAH, CAN YOU HEAR ME?”—
CHAPLIN’S GREAT DICTATOR, “SCHTONK,”
AND THE VICISSITUDES OF VOICE

Adrian Daub

In an article that appeared in the *New York Times* attending the release of *City Lights* in 1931, Charlie Chaplin sketches the transition from silent to talking picture and outlines the terms of his own “Rejection of the Talkies.” Like film theoreticians and other practitioners of the time, Chaplin offers a lapidary narrative in which we move from an idyllic situation that requires no (spoken) language to one that replaces the imaginative work of the audience with a mere receptivity to “the particular tongue of particular races.” On this view, the introduction of sound cinema abolished the freewheeling internationalism of the silent films with their easily substituted intertitles, their montage principle, and a gestural vocabulary assumed to be nearly universal. Suddenly, film was capable of constructing viewing communities, interpelling certain spectators, and marking others as outsiders. These communities come into existence through a shared understanding—they know what the characters are saying. But perhaps more importantly they also constitute themselves through incomprehension—the “intended” or “proper” audience is one that does not know or understand certain things, codes, and in particular languages. Chaplin himself relied on this latter effect in one of his most famous films: *The Great Dictator* undertakes its critique of Fascism by offering us a language that we the viewing community cannot understand and spends its running time working out the implications of this nonunderstanding.

As Michel Chion has pointed out, debates precipitated by the advent of the talkie circled around the question of speech and language, shirking the category of the voice entirely—even though speech and language had been characteristic of films long before the introduction of the sound cinema. Rather than language, what was genuinely new in sound cinema was the particular embodiment of human vocality: tone, cadence, and
accent brought a bodiliness to filmic communications that the abstract rhythm of intertitles had previously kept at bay. Sound film revealed whether an ostensibly Anglophile everyman or everywoman was actually saddled with a thick European accent. It introduced the question of how to mark difference and particularity in human speech while rendering it comprehensible: How does dialogue make clear that characters are speaking German while translating their conversation? And, conversely, what about speech that the film’s ideal viewer is not supposed to understand—is there something wrong with a viewer who can follow the discourse of a Hollywood film’s German, Japanese, or Vietnamese bad guys?

After first compromising in *Modern Times* (1936), Chaplin altogether abandoned his “rejection of the talkies” for *The Great Dictator* (1940). This is anything but coincidental, as the same period gave rise to broadcast technologies that made human speech, and in particular political speeches, available to wider communities of listeners. In particular the rise of Nazism in Germany is inextricably bound up with an obstreperous vocal performance, perhaps the most recognizable in history. It was “the Führer’s voice” (much more so than his face) that reached and thereby constituted “the German people,” as one propaganda slogan put it. Many contemporary observers suggested that it was this preponderance of Hitler’s voice that accounted for his rapport with the German people—one that visual communication not only would not have sustained but would have fatally undercut. As Max Picard put it in his famous *Hitler in Ourselves* (1947), Hitler’s blank oval face was something like a road sign—“but there were only a few who read this warning sign.” Hitler’s very success as symbol for an enraptured collective (Volksgemeinschaft), Picard argues, depended on the hypertrophy of his voice and the nullity (or straightforward unavailability) of his face: “Hitler was heard but was not seen. That was his big advantage.”

In both discourses, then, visuality is played off against vocality, and their interactions are mapped in explicitly political categories. This essay argues that it is this question of voice versus image in film and the role of voice and vision in theorizations of Fascism that underpin Chaplin’s attempt to challenge Nazism in and through film and comedy. If Hitler was to be unmasked by being seen (as the buffoonish Adenoid Hynkel) since he could not be unmasked simply by being heard (as Picard’s image of the warning sign seems to suggest), how exactly would visuality undo the work of his voice and what would be the nature of both this work and its undoing? In negotiating the difficult intersection of exorcising voice by means of voice, Chaplin’s film will turn out to draw on traditions that go
GREAT DICTATOR AND VICISSITUDES OF VOICE

far beyond the scope of film aesthetics and stretch back to the very origins of the Western philosophical project.

When Chaplin released The Great Dictator in the United States in 1940, theater marquees crowed that “he speaks” in the film. Indeed, the comedian’s first full sound film (over a decade after the invention of the medium) has Chaplin delivering a bilingual performance, culminating in three public speeches (including one radio address), the first two in the highly comedic gibberish of dictator Hynkel and a second, sentimental one in the everyman’s English of the Jewish barber. German American groups attacked the former two, taking them to implicitly link Hitler’s inhumanity to German language generally (Chicago even banned the picture8), and most left-leaning critics (including those quite close to Chaplin and Chaplin’s views) generally dismissed the latter speech as clichéd pabulum.9 In the words of Rudolf Arnheim, “[T]here are some of us who feel that, in [The Great Dictator], Chaplin did not fully realize his intentions”;10 Chaplin himself admitted in his 1964 autobiography that “the majority of the critics objected to the speech and said it was not in character”11 (nevertheless, Chaplin’s book reproduced the speech in full).

Between these speeches, the new element of sound in Chaplin’s film raises the question of what language is being spoken and who is meant to understand it. The Great Dictator presents a dizzying polyphony of discourses, languages, and accents, some conforming to today’s viewer’s commonsense notions, others somewhat more puzzling. The Jews in the ghetto (in particular Mr. Jaeckel and Mr. Mann), for instance, though diegetically speaking accented Tomanian, are given English dialogue with a range of “Jewish” accent-signifiers (some borscht belt, some Brooklyn, some Eastern Europe) familiar from today’s Nazi-themed films—while neither the Jewish barber nor his love interest Hannah have a marked accent. The “Bacterial” Duce Benzini Napaloni (Jack Oakie) speaks with an exaggerated Italian accent. And yet nothing analogous exists for German: not only the Jews’ speech is anglicized, so is that of the film’s Nazis. While among the storm trooper extras American accents predominate, the higher echelons of the “Double Cross” seem mostly populated by British accents. In the case of the great dictator himself, however, this British accent famously alternates with what, for lack of a better term, we will call Hynkel-speak—a quasi language that is close to German but that does not seem to stand in for German in the film’s allegory.

Although the dictator’s gibberish of course bears a remarkable resemblance to German, it is never quite clear whether it is indeed a real language with a community of speakers. It is an idioGLOSSIA, a private language
gone public and thus always obscene, in particular because it is just mean-
inglessly “out there.” Only once does Adenoid Hynkel actually use recog-
nizable German, summoning an aide-de-camp with a “Kommen Sie rein!” Other
than that, the dictator’s idiom is a language spoken only by Hynkel
and one particular subordinate (Field Marshall Herring), a language
moreover that he segues into and phases out of. Hynkel never uses it to
communicate, to ask a question, or answer one. At one point, the dictator
quotes “an old Tomanian proverb” to his colleague Napaloni, a proverb
that turns out to be in Hynkel-speak—and yet, no other native Tomanians
use anything resembling the dictator’s gibberish. The film’s Germans
speak English; the film’s Nazis speak English, as does Hynkel’s alter ego,
the Jewish barber. On the other hand, Hynkel’s idiolect does not serve to
uniquely identify him: After he has a duck-hunting accident and is mis-
taken for the escaped barber, the Dictator berates his captors in Hynkel-
speak, but they persist in assuming that he is in fact a Jew. Conversely,
when the barber, having accidentally assumed Hynkel’s identity, addresses
the Tomanian populace in his final speech, even the ones clearly identified
as Nazis, in plain English, he releases them, the film implies, from
Hynkel’s spell.

Just what language then is The Great Dictator in? Just as the concerned
Chicagoans were premature in making too straightforward a connection
between Hynkel-speak and German, it seems, so the final speech’s critics
were too quick to point to the exact political statements made by Chaplin
in his final speech. What matters about the speech, and what produces its
effect, the film seems to imply, are not so much the points it makes, but
rather that it communicates honestly and humanely with its audience. In
this final sequence, as Jean-Loup Bourget has claimed, “praise of a lan-
guage that is both individual (coming from a mere tramp) and universal
(everybody understands him) gives way to a praise of speech. This, then, is
the English language, full of meaning and bearer of a fraternal ideology.”

It is the association of semantic meaning and fraternal ideology that will
be the central axis of my inquiry: communication, transparency, and visu-
ality are the hallmarks of the film’s Enlightenment legacy (and Chaplin’s
leftist politics), which he opposes to the pure performance of a parochial,
personalized community through language that becomes private to the
point of meaninglessness—a privacy that runs from body to body, antivi-
sual and voiced. In other words, communication that is universal, in the
sense of being reasonable and at least potentially all inclusive, automati-
cally releases the people from its “self-incurred minority,” as Kant put it in
his “Enlightenment” essay. And, recurring to a topos that goes back to
Plato, the film seems to think of that universal communication as visual
and to some extent dis-embodied. Language that depends on the body, on
the other hand, seems to derive its effectiveness not from the meanings it
transports but rather from the fact that it transports no meaning—it is its
opacity, not its clarity, that makes it effective.

The two speeches that bookend the film stage an opposition between
two kinds of human speech *tut court*. One is tethered to bodily, and by
extension *racial* categories, and amounts at its basest to a *private* (though
shared) hysterical symptom; the other transcends the body and relies on
communication rather than “acting out.” The way in which, for all the
fervor of its hatred and ridicule, *The Great Dictator* can never be quite
clear in what exactly it hates and finds ridiculous about Hitler, may stem
from the film having to admit that the dictator’s insane venting seems to
get something across, if only paradoxically, by not communicating. When
the film stages the release of the people from the “fascinations” of Fascism,
it juxtaposes communication by visual means that rely on a shared, uni-
versal vocabulary, on the one hand, and a pseudocommunication that re-
lies on a parochial, exclusive community and that relies emphatically and
exclusively on voice. But the very fact that a film in which Chaplin plays
off the universalism of the (silent) image against the parochialism of voice
is also Chaplin’s first sound film signals that *The Great Dictator* may not
be able to sustain the opposition that constitutes the center of its critique
of Fascism.

Claudia Schmolders has claimed that *The Great Dictator*’s happy end
constitutes a reversion from a regimen of visuality to a regimen of sound.15
This is certainly right insofar as the redemptive characteristics ascribed
to speech in the film’s final sequence are concerned; however, Schmolders’
proposal seems to give short shrift to the famous speech Chaplin gives as
Hynkel. That speech is, after all, not primarily a visual performance but
rather obtrusively auditory: commented on by not one, but two intradi-
egetic off-screen voices, staged in front of a gigantic microphone into
which Hynkel abreacts with almost physical force. I would suggest that
the double structure little man/big man (tramp/dictator) into which Hitler
is split in Chaplin’s film is set up not as a binary of vision and speech but
rather by two kinds of speech—embodied/parochial/voiced versus visual/
universal. Taken together the speeches map out the question of how much
of visuality’s supposed universality a talking picture might salvage and
carry over into its characters’ discourse—and how it might do so.

Accordingly, Chaplin’s film dichotomizes its twin main characters’ dis-
course along several axes—in the film’s world, speech can either commu-
nicate meaning to a universal public or remain emphatically private,
uncommunicative, attached to particular bodies, races, communities. At
the center of *The Great Dictator* lies the spectacle of the same body performing two speeches. What seems to set these two speeches apart is not what is being said, but rather that in one something is being said and in the other, earlier one, nothing is. What distinguishes Chaplin's two voices when "he speaks" is semantic meaning: Hynkel's speech is evil because it means without semantic content—it is, in a way, pure voice, sounding matter, the "grain" of the voice. The barber liberates that voice by actually speaking, by making meaning through words, by communicating. And it is this voice, a voice soliciting attention and a different kind of devotion, to which the film's last words refer. Hunched over a radio, Hannah, the hero's love interest, enjoins us to "Listen." The pure voice has given way to one whose meanings one must pay attention to.

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In a 1948 *Radio Announcer's Handbook*, "designed for the practicing radio man," Hitler's voice becomes an exemplar of precisely the kind of purity that seems to depend on a complete absence of all semantic signification. Hitler is among the many voices adduced by Ben Henneke, the book's author (among the others are Bob Hope and Archibald MacLeish), but unlike those others Hitler becomes a cipher for a voice that means without, or perhaps contrary to, the words it carries:

All this was discernible in the man's voice. No wonder he hypnotized a nation; as one radio executive said, he was the best salesman ever to deliver a commercial on the radio. Yet his commercials were fustian; translations of Hitler's speeches show them to be trite, dull, repetitious, and full of specious reasoning and faulty logic.17

The best antidote to the seductions of Hitler's voice is the one offered by the first speech sequence in *The Great Dictator*: translation. Once rendered in plain English, Hitler's speech cannot exercise its spell over the audience. But this raises a central question about those audiences that did not require such translation in the first place: if Hitler's vocal performance was so successful that even an American listener "found himself excited in spite of himself when Hitler launched into a patriotic diatribe,"18 then what of the German listener who was not just in the thrall of Hitler's "sales pitch," but who presumably did or could hear the "triteness," the "dullness," and the "repetitiveness" of Hitler's speeches? Henneke's
Handbook seems to suggest that in order to be Hitler’s ideal audience one should not know German but should abandon oneself entirely to his “voice control.” Hitler’s voice works on those who do not know what it is saying. But where does that leave those masses that followed not only Hitler’s voice, but seemingly also his “trite, dull, repetitious” words “full of specious reasoning and faulty logic”?

The Great Dictator, as Chaplin’s friends and admirers realized already at the time of the film’s release, remains similarly confused about Nazism and Hitler, mostly, I would submit, because it ultimately succumbs to the vicissitudes of the binary system it sets up. On the one hand, the film construes what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have called the subject-work of the “subject-state” as primarily voiced. The aggressive racial politics of dictator Hynkel’s “Double Cross” are communicable only by a voice that doesn’t actually communicate. The speaking subject at work in Chaplin’s Tomania is really just “the Great Dictaphone” (as Bourget has called the Hynkel character). Indeed, the film seems insistently to play off the community unified (against some Other: the Jews) by the voice and by the radio against the universal public appeal that the film associates with the visual (and where it locates its own project). Hynkel’s famous speech is funny precisely because it is an almost private communication between the hysterical Hynkel and the hysterically Tomanian mob, which is then translated—first by additional voices (which are reporting the speech for an English-speaking audience) and then by the filmic medium itself—but in which the translation constantly undercuts and exposes the private voice.

In fact, the film’s worry about the parochial, sectarian nature of the voice and voiced speech, their inherent connection to an ideology of the community-as-subject (which then in turn implies a set of Others), extends to the talking picture as well. But, of course, The Great Dictator is a talking picture itself and has to be if it wants to expose the dictator’s voice. Chaplin himself remarked in an interview that he didn’t want the theatergoer “to pay his way into a theatre to be preached at,” but The Great Dictator finally forces Chaplin’s mute “little tramp” (who “remains speechless by choice,” as Chaplin indicates) into a prise de la parole. It is the tramp’s speaking that is revolutionary in terms of Chaplin’s œuvre—after all, the bad guy of Modern Times (also modeled on a real person: Henry Ford) speaks, whereas the tramp remains silent. In finally breaking that silence, Chaplin’s hero attempts to reconstruct the universal reference of the moving image within the parochial determinedness of parole—he does so through insistently visual tropes and insistently universalized emotional appeals. In practice, however, the tropes deployed in the film’s attempted
unraveling of the Fascist anticommunication turn out to be standardized (and Hollywoodized) rather than universal, appealing to the same kind of political subject-community that the film attempted to undo in the first place.

In the first of The Great Dictator's speech sequences, Führer Adenoid Hynkel (the film gives him the title "Phooey," further emphasizing that meaninglessness is at the very heart of the relation between this leader and his community) addresses the people of Tomania (figure 1). Chaplin delivers the entire speech in a pseudo-German gibberish, which becomes increasingly recognizable as simply garbled English as the sequence wears on. Only after the speech has ended and the Phooey is being driven back to his palace in an open car (a sequence clearly inspired by Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will [1934]) does Hynkel break into English—asking the film's Goebbels figure Garbitsch (Henry Daniell), "How was I?" The implication is that there is something calculated about Hynkel-speak. Significantly, neither Garbitsch nor any other of Hynkel's attendants ever break into Hynkel-speak—only Field Marshall Herring (Billy Gilbert) briefly addresses his Phooey in pseudo-language.

The speech breaks into three parts. First, Hynkel "speaks" without translation. Then a voice-over explains the "meaning" of his words, which

Figure 1. Hynkel "having a seizure—in other words, giving a speech" (see note 27).
turns out to be exceedingly meager: “Adenoid Hynkel has just said: Yesterday, Tomania was down, but today she has risen.” Once the voice-over begins translating Hynkel’s discourse, that discourse itself moves from mere guttural noise to recognizable words (usually just Teutonized English). The voice-over then stops “translating” simultaneously and instead takes to summarizing entire passages.

In fact, Hynkel’s discourse is overlaid with not one but two voice-overs. The first is that of a radio announcer who sets the scene and who comments about the second voice (according to “station identification,” it is the “Pari-Mutual Network”), albeit only after that voice has appeared without previous explanation. That voice belongs to Heinrich Schtick, Hynkel’s “personal translator,” who, according to the radio announcer, “is apparently reading from a prepared manuscript.” The comedy of the scene, insofar as it does not issue directly from Chaplin’s performance, is mostly generated by the interpreter’s . . . well, interpretation of Hynkel’s speech. As Alenka Zupancic has argued, the sequence involves the constant sliding of two obviously fake discourses vis-à-vis each other, where neither can be strictly privileged—since one isn’t discourse at all, while the other simply claims to interpret that nondiscourse. We never become quite clear what exactly the problem is, though the second (American) voice seems to suggest that the interpreter is whitewashing the true content of Hynkel’s outbursts.

If this is indeed the function of the second voice-over (in itself a rather hackneyed device), it may well be a late addition to the scene—bespeaking perhaps a certain anxiety with the scene even during the film’s editing process. It would certainly constitute a misreading of the speech on the film’s part. Of course, when Hynkel fulminates against “de Juten,” a half-minute-long tirade that the interpreter helpfully condenses into “his Excellency has just referred to the Jews,” then clearly the incongruousness is meant to suggest that if the Phooey were to be translated faithfully, the full extent of his inhumanity might slip out. On that reading, however, the people of Tomania would be essentially in on the secret. After all, they presumably don’t need this translation; they already (and nonmediatedly) understand their Phooey. If, then, the translation constitutes basically a dissimulation of Hynkel’s “true” meaning, the voice-over divides the listeners into two camps: those initiates whose inhumanity is evident in that they can find meaning in the dictator’s voice, and those who have retained their morality and humanity and thus hear only nonsense in Hynkel’s discourse. Heinrich Schtick, Hynkel’s translator, on this account, is laboring to keep that second constituency in the dark about what the first understands all too well.
This is not always the film's view; at other times, Chaplin's complex heteroglossia suggests that the translation is actually a simulation of meaning. On this reading, Hynkel indeed just "referred" to the Jews, but he cannot normally refer because of the obtrusiveness of his vocal performance. This reading might make sense of one of the sequence's most hilarious moments (from which this essay takes its title). Hynkel declaims that "Demokratie schtonk! Liberty schtonk! Free sprechen schtonk!" which the interpreter renders as "Democracy is fragrant, liberty is odious, freedom of speech is objectionable." Here, the interpreter's intercession seems not so much to obfuscate meaning (meaning that itself may be schtonk\textsuperscript{25}), but rather to create or impute meaning to what is, in reality, only gibberish. Hynkel's speech gets its vocabulary, its diction, and its grammar only in translation—in its actual voiced performance, it mostly consists of noises and repetitions. What is funny about the interpolation of the translator's voice is thus not that it obviously doesn't tell us what's really being said, but that it wants to sell us on the idea that something is being said, when actually nothing is.

This joke, that Hynkel's discourse is always at once excessive and not quite enough, is repeated later in the film, when Hynkel gives a longer dictation to one of his buxom secretaries, who condenses his long disquisition in Hynkel-speak into a few perfunctory keystrokes on the page. Surprised, he leans down to check the page but finds everything in order (figure 2). In this sequence, then, Hynkel seems genuinely befuddled at the insubstantiality of his subverbal excretions. Next, however, Chaplin reverses the joke when the dictator's seemingly perfunctory addition "e fluten" yields a veritable barrage of keystrokes on the typewriter. There is in this scene a vision of "real" communication (in the incorruptible patter of the typewriter) and of a vocal performance that is always at variance with its transparency, a variance that even Hynkel seems to recognize. The scene thus underscores the dictator's constant lack of control over, and outright shock at, his own discourse.

At other moments, the comedy in Hynkel's speech similarly issues from the fact that the sounding matter of Hynkel's discourse suggests not meaninglessness but rather a different meaning from the one being asserted. The signifier, for those who can listen, belies its posited interpretation; or, put differently, the translation serves to displace the meaning of Hynkel's discourse. For instance, what the interpreter's discourse wants to sell us as Hynkel's reflections on his early days with Field Marshal Herring and Joe Garbitsch sounds to us like a series of statements about herrings in the garbage, the smell of herring and the smell of garbage, etc. Here, then, the reference constructed by the
translators intervention serves as a denial of the fundamental ridiculousness of Hynkel’s speech—where, crucially, that ridiculousness is a surfeit of signification. The speech means something to anyone who can listen, but that patent meaning is (unsuccessfully) obscured by the interpolation of the translator. In some sense, then, this is the precise reverse of the first configuration the scene appeared to be working with: there, correct decoding of Hynkel’s discourse was a mark of inhumanity; now, Hynkel’s listeners are misled (in some sense they are hearing the translator), and only those who listen to the actual sonic substance of Hynkel’s discourse will be immunized against its inhumanity.

This of course changes the nature and constituency of Hynkel’s listening community: the scandal of comprehension on the first construal is replaced with the idea that “they know not what they do.” After all, if Hynkel is trying to smuggle the perversity of his ideas past the translation, and if the English-language audience is at the mercy of the translation, then those who are under Hynkel’s spell know quite well what he is really saying. They and their Phooey are simply trying to keep those not of their
community out of the loop, as it were. If, however, only an English-language audience that knows what a herring and garbage are understands the lunacy of Hynkel’s discourse, then that discourse’s effect on the Tomanian audience depends on the fact that they (like Henneke’s radio executive) don’t know how to listen, or to understand correctly, what sonic matter there is. The community around the voice would thus not be predicated on an attunement between speaker and audience, but in their fundamental incomprehension of each other.

In each of these scenarios, Chaplin is putting a rather complex demand on his audience. He wants us to imagine, on the one hand, the close visual community of the “sons and daughters of the Double Cross,” which can see the dictator, and the English-speaking audience addressed by the second voice-over and in some way hoodwinked by the first. That second audience has only Hynkel’s voice to rely on and would thus have no idea about the buffoonery on stage. The English-speaking radio audience does not have the means to “see through” the sound and understand the fundamental ridiculousness of what is happening, though if they did, they would immediately see Hynkel’s true colors in a way the Tomanian audience that can actually see Hynkel cannot. The film’s audience is thus not identical with the radio broadcast’s English-speaking audience: when the translator announces that “his Excellency will now descend the stairs,” and actually he is pushed down the stairs by Herring’s backside, the film’s audience sees the buffoonery beneath the veneer of power, whereas the English radio audience witnesses indeed only his Excellency descending the stairs, a relatively seamless presentation of power.26

Whether it simulates, dissimates, or displaces: In each case, the “translation” of Hynkel’s speech serves to point to the fact that in some way “there is no there there.” The speech is effective only in and through its noncommunication—it is a hysterical acting out, a mere excretion of sound rather than lexical language. (In a contemporary review, Herman G. Weinberg called the sequence “a devastating parody of Hitler having a seizure—in other words, giving a speech.”27) And yet, the film seems quite worried about Hynkel’s meaningless speech—the first option I presented (that Hynkel is simply incomprehensible to speakers of English) would suggest that there is an audience for Hynkel’s discourse, that he can indeed be understood. The fact that, once addressed in plain English, the spell is lifted off the people of Tomania would argue against a Tomanian Sonderweg (special path)—there is no particular affinity that makes them more susceptible to Hynkel than the English-speaking talkie audience.

Nor is there a sense that Hynkel’s performance is meant to communicate nondiscursive, but affective, content. It is clear that Hynkel-speak
involves a willful abandonment of rational discourse—but is it therefore irrational affect? The film’s answer is ambiguous: there are scenes in which Hynkel segues into his idiolect in moments of exasperation or frustration (usually involving hapless Field Marshal Herring); there are others (in particular when dictating to his secretaries) in which he seems perfectly calm while speaking his private language, and segues into English when aggravated. Even at his most agitated, Hynkel’s outbursts are capable of quoting English phrases (for instance, when Herring reacts to Napaloni’s invasion of Osterlich by saying he “can’t believe it,” Hynkel repeats that phrase during a lengthy and particularly incomprehensible tirade). And most importantly: no one seems to pick up Hynkel-speak from a Hynkel speech: if his speeches contain “passion,” we never see him impart that passion to an audience. The point of Hynkel-speak is not that it is “about” an emotion (hatred, say, or frustration)—Hynkel-speak is “about” nothing.²⁸

If there is a void, a nothing at the heart of Hynkel’s performance (as Max Picard claimed about his model²⁹), then why and how is that nothing dangerous according to Chaplin’s film? The answer seems to be that the nothing cannot be captured in speech (hence the hilarity of the translator’s attempts), but that the nothing nevertheless has substance and can mean, bypassing semantic signification (witness the example of schtonk), and can reach its target even in meaninglessness. Although there is something calculated in Hynkel’s outbursts, his discourse itself is pure voice: mediated or not, it issues directly from his body, short-circuiting language, subjectivity, or rhetoric. There is a moment early in the speech, in which Hynkel “speaks” in tones reminiscent of a cat regurgitating a fur ball—eventually, he begins to actually choke and starts coughing violently. What is interesting about this moment is that the joke depends on Hynkel’s initial coughing not being coughing at all but speech. His speech is so much like a mere bodily effect that it can almost unnoticeably collapse into something like a cough. But in order for this collapse to happen, there also has to be an insistence that his coughing is (at least sometimes) like speech, or at least a voice—a voice that in its purity is indistinguishable (at least for the enlightened observer) from the body that produces it.

As Adriana Cavarero has observed, the philosopher’s logos has, since Aristotle, been thought as phone semantike—it is sound that signifies: “The phone of the metaphysician is inextricably bound to signification or to signing. Without this bond, the voice is an empty sound because it is emptied of its semantic function.”³⁰ Hynkel’s oratory is precisely such an empty sound. The sound and the fury of the Phooey’s voice are not objectionable
primarily because of what they say, but because they don’t properly signify at all. Their sounds are not expressive of ideas or feelings; they are abreactive, ejaculatory.

But the body-politics of *The Great Dictator* may still owe more to philosophical tradition. For Aristotle, that part of the voice that does not signify, the “a-logic and a-semantic phonation” that he calls “mere voice,” not only issues from the body, the animal part of the rational animal, it also speaks particularly to the body. Aristotle, in the *Politics*, notes that “mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals”—what it manages to express, to impart and to “communicate” (in however limited a fashion) are the simplest of affects rather than rational thought: “For their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further.” Logos, the semantic content of speech, travels from mind to mind, speaks ratio for another’s ratio, but phone conversely is often suspected of primarily communicating the body to another body while bypassing ratio altogether.

Something quite similar seems to be true in *The Great Dictator*: the universal logic of images is opposed to the kind of affective content that travels “beneath” semantic content in the phonetic output from body to body. While animal and semantic voice are not starkly dichotomized in *The Great Dictator*, the semantic aspect of Hynkel’s discourse is in question throughout the film (and leads to the dictator’s demise); the only thing that seems to reliably furnish its content is the “mere voice” of the animal projecting and inspiring pleasure and pain. What is more, Hynkel’s voice seems to be more rawly physical yet: Given his gibberish, we can never get a sense of how exactly his speeches can be as effective as they are to their listeners. The only effects the film demonstrates (in visual fashion) are the effects of the pure physicality of his voice, which are shown to in turn affect the physical world rather than the mind—its force literally distends microphones, blows the poor barber across the shtetl streets, and lashes about Field Marshal Herring.

In the terms proposed by Cavarero, then, *The Great Dictator* appears not only as an extension of the Enlightenment project, granting public lexical meaning the power to displace private emotion in the name of progress—it also reveals itself to be imbued with a Platonic legacy that distrusts above all the enunciating embodied voice. The film views public, meaningful communication as above all the province of the visual. Just as, on the Platonic picture, men are to turn away from the physical world and the body toward the (visual) contemplation of the ideas, *The Great Dictator* associates embodiment with voice, and opposes the two to
universality, which it conceives of as primarily visual. The move from voiced meaning to visual meaning is thus the same as that from particularity to universality.

The juxtaposition of parochialism and universalism also extends to the film’s characterization of “the Jews.” Unlike Hynkel’s listening community, they come to represent not just another particular group but rather universal communicative reason itself. Consider for example the sly allusion contained in the storefront signs of the ghetto set (figure 3): The signs are not in Yiddish or Hebrew, which may seem surprising given that the Jews are the only community that is not “translated” into the film—Germans become Tomanians, and Italians Bacterians, but Jews remain Jews. The ghetto is given cultural specificity, even its own language—but that language turns out to be Esperanto (as the signs for Cigaroj, Libroj, Terpumoj, and the like make clear). As many a commentator has pointed out, Esperanto is the invention of a Polish Jew, a point often meant to re-introduce the cultural specificity and referentiality that recourse to an invented universal language seems to undercut. I would suggest, par contre, that, in giving the Jews Esperanto to write (if not to speak), they come to stand not so much for an actual people beset by political persecution, but rather they stand in for the Enlightenment project of progress through

Figure 3. The ghetto set, with signage in English and Esperanto.
communication.33 It is not the Jews who are targeted in Chaplin’s ghetto sequences, it is the power of communicative reason, the ideas of universality, and publicity tout court.

Though the film’s Jews are explicitly identified as such and though they live in a ghetto, there is little emphasis on Jews as culturally or socially distinct—they simply seem to fall in for the downtrodden of Chaplin’s earlier anticapitalist pictures. Conversely, the film’s Nazis are not “really” Nazis either. Their racism is a mere masquerade, a distraction, as both Hynkel and Garbitsch make explicit. To take people’s minds off the bread made with “only the best sawdust,” Hynkel needs to fulminate against the Jews. *The Great Dictator*, then, follows the line suggested in early anti-Nazi satire, in particular John Heartfield’s famous graphic explanation of “the true meaning of the Hitler salute,” in which the dictator’s raised hand accepts a large bundle of cash from a capitalist looming hugely behind him. Nazism’s pomp and circumstance thus simply attempt to obfuscate the fact that it is really an extreme capitalism. The film’s Jews are really nothing other than the expropriated in another garb, and the film’s Nazis are really nothing other than the expropriators. Uwe Naumann has pointed out that, in the dichotomized worlds the film presents, the dictator’s palace, on the one hand, and the ghetto, on the other, are really iterations of the theme of “huts” and “palaces.”34 Similarly, nothing in the film makes its ghetto specifically Jewish—it seems to be simply the film’s social Esperanto for “the disenfranchised.”

It is centrally important to *The Great Dictator*, and in particular to the antidote it hopes to offer for Hynkel’s pernicious voice in its final sequence, that Chaplin integrates the talking picture into the same dichotomy between parochial sound and universal visual image. In his article “Rejection of the Talkies,” Chaplin explains his resistance to the new medium of the talking picture in terms strikingly similar to the ones we have been tracing in *The Great Dictator*: communication, universality, and publicity. Referring to “the hysteria attending the introduction of speech,” he claims for silent film a universality and felicitous communication that the topicality of time and place characteristic of the talkies constitutively undercuts:

The silent picture, first of all, is a universal means of expression. Talking pictures necessarily have a limited field, they are held down to the particular tongue of particular races.35

Chaplin goes on to highlight the importance of pantomime, which, he claims, “has always been the universal means of communication.” A reading of the speaking body is here held up as a universal and immediate
form of communication: “Pantomime serves well where languages are in the conflict of a common ignorance.” In the case of Chaplin’s tramp character of the 1920s and early 1930s, this body is furthermore emphatically semantic—it is an expressive, insistently legible, and clear medium. The tramp’s body speaks of the pleasures and pains, satisfactions and injustices, of the social world—it enacts a social physiognomies in the service of a progressive social agenda. Once this very agenda forces Chaplin into the arena of sound film, he is faced with what Paul Warshow has called the “self-contradictory, impossible task” of blending the conventions of silent film with dialogue and conventional sound. The body transforms from the reservoir of social truth into a standing reserve of irrational and exclusive community: the voice and the body to which it is attached become now defined as particulars, are associated with “particular tongues of particular races.”

On Chaplin’s account, then, the body can do both: appeal to a universal response and interpellate only a particular community. In Chaplin’s “Rejection of the Talkies,” this distinction coincides with a body that communicates visually and a body that thrusts itself upon a listener through limited and limiting vocality. The Great Dictator stages this opposition in a second speech sequence, the only one to bring the film’s two identical bodies into close physical proximity: Hynkel and the little barber meet—not face to face but rather voice to face. As the barber and Hannah prepare for their night on the town, Hynkel delivers a speech that is broadcast throughout the ghetto via loudspeaker. The sequence starts with the barber at his most classically tramplike, donning the trademark bowler hat and the walking stick and assuming some of the tramp’s characteristic mannerisms. The barber’s body language thus approaches the visual vocabulary of Chaplin’s silent comedies, an effect heightened by all diegetic noise being drowned out by Hynkel’s obtrusive fulminations as the sequence wears on. As the barber struggles against the voice as though against a physical presence (holding onto walls for support, retrieving his hat blown off his head by Hynkel’s voice), the overwhelming presence of the dictator’s voice paradoxically turns the film into a silent one for a moment. Hynkel’s voice becomes an extremely unpleasant Wurlitzer organ, the soundtrack to a set of silent images.

What is more, the barber does not strictly speaking react to the dictator’s speech as though it were a physical force—he reacts to his voice; he is buffeted about by the cadences, the outbursts, the sheer physicality of the voice, not by its references to de Jutens or a blitzkrieg. As in Henneke’s characteristic of Hitler’s “voice control,” it does not seem to matter what this voice says. As the barber tries to retrieve his hat from the sidewalk,
a sudden burst of Hynkelian noise, like a gust of wind, from the loudspeaker flattens him against a wall. The fact that it is the voice that the ghetto’s denizens interact with, not anything that voice says, is particularly interesting, given that this speech has a much more specific audience than Hynkel’s first. As Hynkel explains to Garbitsch, “What I say tonight will not be directed at the sons and daughters of the Double Cross, but to the children of Israel.”

The “silent” sequence of the barber’s physical struggle against the mediated onslaught of Hynkel’s voice is intercut with shots of Hynkel’s face in close-up, which, in terms of their framing and timing, are essentially devoid of all comedy—gone are the bizarre gestures, the seemingly accidental vocal ticks, and the unintentionally hilarious grimaces of the dictator’s first speech. There is no new information in these shots; the dictator stares straight into the camera, and his clownish antics have become pared down and ruthlessly efficient. Yet even this unusually seamless production of a Hynkelian display of power works in terms of the dichotomy of vocality and visuality: on the one hand, we find here Max Picard’s image of Hitler’s face as a road sign fully realized—and yet, on the other, the way it turns text into image, moreover one that is essentially static rather than indicative of some sort of process or development, may remind us of nothing so much as intertitles.

Here, then, the purity of the “silent” film image is juxtaposed with the obtrusive onslaught of a particular voice, a voice that, while dis-embodied and mediated by loudspeakers, nevertheless is terrifyingly physical and irrupts into the tramp’s world with the force of a natural disaster. Yet The Great Dictator, as a sound film, cannot sustain this stark dichotomy: as Lutz Koepnick has argued, “[U]nlike the majority of anti-Nazi-features, The Great Dictator challenges Nazi media cultures on its own grounds.”

If the dictator’s voice can find an antidote, it cannot be visual but has to be vocal—somehow, the film needs to find its way to a universal voice.

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The problem of translation, be it linguistic or medial—that is, the question of how to return from one “particular tongue” to one that transcends the “particular races”—may well constitute the central anxiety of The Great Dictator’s closing scene. The film has set itself up for this problem, insisting that if real, communicative speech were to take the place of Hynkel’s half-hysterical, half-cynical ejaculations, those cheering him would somehow be roused from their mindless devotion. In its climactic
sequence, the Jewish barber takes the place of the great dictator, Chaplin takes the place of Chaplin, and then . . . he has to speak. In a sequence he labored over for months in the course of The Great Dictator’s mammoth shoot, Chaplin is at pains to make clear just how different the barber’s address is from Hynkel’s, but, perhaps owing to the film’s own lack of clarity as to just what makes Hynkel’s discourse so pernicious, this second speech recurrently collapses into the tropes of the first.

Unlike Hynkel’s speech, the barber’s is presented without commentary. Rather than be introduced by one voice, translated by another, which is then in turn commented on by the first, the fake Hynkel is introduced by Garbitsch, to whom he responds in much of his improvised speech. From the very outset, then, the speech is conceived as a dialogue: it has addressees, interlocutors, and a “message” to get across, and is as insistently public as Hynkel’s language is private and obscene. And it is actually its felicity that is in question, that hangs in the balance at the film’s climax, whereas Hynkel’s verbal acrobatics constituted more or less a fait accompli (or, in the case of the radio address, a force of nature) that had to be dealt with one way or another. Indeed, it is another one of the film’s indictments of the dictator’s speech that his elocution has no conditions of felicity: since it isn’t real communication, it can neither succeed nor go wrong, Hynkel’s “How was I?” notwithstanding. But where Hynkel’s speech is simply an event, meaningless in and for itself, the barber’s climactic speech is one last desperate attempt at making sense.

This desperation, however, creates a different set of problems for the film. For one thing, the barber’s speech is played absolutely straight, without any attempt to break the seriousness of the scene: Chaplin’s body seems straitjacketed to prevent any kind of physical comedy; even the tramp’s body is denied in the interest of the purity of his lexical meaning. This absolute humorlessness may seem incidental, and indeed a moment of utter seriousness appears unavoidable in any comedy about Hitler. However, the film’s comedy is central to the points it has to make about communication, community, and publicity.

After all, The Great Dictator persistently characterizes Hynkel (and that means primarily his body) through his inability to communicate. In one famous sequence (repeated thrice in the film) the Hitler/Hynkel salute is exposed (not entirely implausibly) as a negation of interpersonal communication. Benzini Napaloni, the dictator of Bacteria, has just stepped out of his train and extends his hand to Hynkel. Hynkel, however, is engaged in the Hynkel salute; when both realize their mistake, they switch positions (figure 4). As Tilman Allert has noted, this strange salute “intensifies the estrangement and sense of uncertainty that is usually overcome or
bridged during the act of greeting." Hynkel’s (nominal) attempt at initiating contact results in a breakdown of contact: the Hynkel salute highlights the bodily self-enclosedness and isolation that parallel Hynkel’s linguistic, or rather phonic, self-enclosedness in his speeches. Significantly, however, the moment is not a particularly profound or reflective one—it
is above all a moment of slapstick. Much or perhaps all of the slapstick generated by Hynkel revolves around his inability to communicate with others and his environment. While certainly most of the humor surrounding the barber is slapstick and physical, as well, there is an element of linguistic play to his comedy: to take one famous line, when asked whether he is “Aryan,” the barber unwittingly exposes the meaninglessness of the concept by replying “I’m vegetarian.” Whereas Adenoid Hynkel is thus funny by not communicating, the barber is funny in and through communication.42

Verbal wit in The Great Dictator is almost exclusively the little barber’s province—all that the Nazi grandees seem capable of are quick sarcastic asides. But it is, of course, not only a verbal lexicon that both Hynkel and the barber have at their disposal. Both also display marked differences in their body language. Chaplin’s own theorizations on the transition from silent to sound film posit body language as the universal form of communication, as opposed to the particular and exclusionary communication of voiced language. And, indeed, the barber’s movements (in keeping with the vocabulary established in Chaplin’s tramp comedies) are insistently communicative: they astutely register their environment, protest and evade threats (in particular the barber’s nimbleness in escaping again and again from the storm troopers’ clutches), and are insistently interactive. Hynkel’s movements are no less eloquent and no less immediately readable—after all, Chaplin seems to think, much like Max Picard, that visually Hitler/Hynkel broadcasts the very insufficiency his voice manages to hide. In fact, one central gag in the film relies on both barber and dictator to be essentially Chaplinesque in their bodily movements (in particular in their difficulty with the object world, their sudden bouts of panic)—what may be the film’s last comedic moment, a throwaway bit involving a broken chair, is played in a way that the Chaplin involved in its transactions could just as well play the dictator or the barber. This may well be why the dictator’s radio address is framed in extreme close-up: it is the sequence that most forcefully distinguishes between the world of Hynkel and the world of the tramp—and it therefore represses anything tramplike in the dictator’s body language. There is nothing characteristically Chaplinesque about Hynkel’s frenzied glare into the camera—no arms, legs, and hands to betray his kinship to the little barber. However, unlike the barber, Hynkel’s movements communicate in spite of themselves or at least contrary to the dictator’s intentions. What they broadcast is the very opposite of the barber’s nimble interactions: Hynkel’s movements telegraph his bodily self-enclosure, his inability to interact or communicate.
Not all of this self-enclosure is beyond the dictator’s control, however. The dictator’s lack of interactivity asserts itself in his theatricality. The barber becomes an audience surrogate insofar as he is not performing for an audience—the dictator performs to the point of obscenity. A strange factor in the dictator’s bodily movements is a certain tinge of ribaldry that is altogether missing from the tramp’s exertions. During his opening speech, Hynkel pours water into his pants, presumably to cool his loins; his encomia to de Aryan maiden, her ullstein, and puppchen Herring are infused with a certain coquetry; and his iconic ballet with the globe becomes downright lewd—as Lawrence Kramer has pointed out, during the sequence it is Hynkel’s rear end that enters into the most serious flirtations with the globe. This overweening theatricality is the visual cognate to the dictator’s omnipresent voice: both are obscene, since for Hynkel declarations of hatred and sexual heat seem to be indistinguishable. The dictator seems to be unable to refer to de Juten without making a sort of snorting noise—the same with which he attempts to foist himself upon his secretary. The barber’s body language is primarily reactive and in close, often hilarious, dialogue with its environment—the dictator’s body language, to the contrary, is concerned primarily with discharge.

All comedy of interaction, of meaning, of language comes to a halt in the film’s final sequence. When he is finally allowed to speak, the barber/tramp can no longer be funny. Not only, then, is his voice supposed to transcend its voiceness and return to the “universal” communication Chaplin ascribes to pantomime; he is also to transcend the comedic, but in the direction of speech. Combined with the very lack of framing voices, the lack of commentary and translation, this attempt at pure immanent meaning delivers the speaker’s fate perhaps too far into the hands of the speech itself. Since it cannot mean, because of a shared context, a bodily affect, or its pure sonority (all of which are associated with Hynkel’s discourse), the speech is anxious to become pure speech, divested of body, context, and sounding matter, and indeed it turns increasingly to visual metaphors to make its point. But it is at this point that the de-privileged, dangerous terms all make their reappearance—the very metaphoricity of the speech, its insistently rhetorical character, opens it up to a different kind of slippage. The barber’s speech does not leave verbal communication for the insinuations of pure voice; it does, however, within the realm of lexical, communicative language, fall back into the mode of Hynkel-speak, becoming once again exclusive, parochial, and emphatically bodily. In attempting to skirt sonority, the speech relies on rhetorical tropes, in order to dispel the voice it falls prey to figurative language—and in so doing reintroduces the repressed terms medium (in the guise of technological relay), body (in the guise of sentimentality),
and particularity/context (in the guise of its emphatic appeal for a [visual] community). As such, the barber’s speech reaches for the universality of comprehensibility, appeal, and grammar that Chaplin attributes to pantomime, but its paradoxical attempt to have a nonspoken speech (and its insistence on making us understand and agree with each and every part of the speech) only highlight that Chaplin has had to drive out the devil with Beelzebub—one parochial, particularizing discourse disrupts the other.

The Great Dictator’s final speech functions broadly as the antidote to the film’s first. In many ways it explicitly restages Hynkel’s two speeches, most centrally by having Chaplin intermittently address the camera directly (though with neither the insistence nor the intense close-ups of the Hynkel’s radio address). In many film comedies of the 1920s and 1930s, the address to the camera was a technique for enlisting a community with an (and, on Chaplin’s universalist construal, any) audience, a sort of winking acknowledgment that character and audience were in some way in on the same joke.41 The insistence with which Chaplin here preaches to the camera seems to bespeak the film’s general unease with the Hynkel speech that constitutes its most inspired comic bit. After all, it raises a question of what Chaplin’s earlier address to the audience as Adenoid Hynkel might have signified. It is quite understandable why the film should establish a common ground between the audience and the tramp character of the Jewish barber, but what common ground could it possibly solicit with the mad dictator, who is in his own way as mute as Chaplin’s earlier tramps (with the crucial difference that, in the case of the tramp, “my screen character remains speechless by choice”44)? And since this is not merely a characteristically Chaplinesque technique, but more importantly a characteristically filmic one, the question arises as to what extent the pedagogical energies of cinema differ once used for information rather than for Hynkel’s incomprehensible propaganda.

Not surprisingly, then, the speech turns most centrally on the tension between the medium’s potential and its actual use. Technology, Chaplin’s barber insists, ought to aid in the creation of a public sphere, ought to aid in communication—this, he says, is “the way of human progress.” Chaplin’s optimism here revolves around the insistent technological address to a hearer. Unlike Hynkel’s exertions, to which the audience was at best witness, at worst a dupe, this speech acknowledges its role in the kind of publicity and communicative reason that it hopes to bring about:

The airplane and the radio have brought us closer together.
The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men; cries out for universal brotherhood; for the
unity of us all. Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world, . . . To those who can hear me, I say, do not despair. The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed, the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress.

Unlike the dictator’s harangue, this speech is self-consciously public: the speaker emphatically understands himself as a speaker (“my voice is reaching millions”), the audience is to understand itself as audience (“To those who can hear me”), and the barber makes clear that he is hoping to bring about “universal brotherhood” in and through the means of communication.

The screenplay thus explicitly foregrounds and acknowledges the film’s (and the speech’s) status as mass communication, and it seeks to, in a sense, recuperate the communication from the mass. The anxiety about the filmic medium (or media tout court) that runs through The Great Dictator is here dispelled by distinguishing the “very nature of these inventions” and the uses to which these “inventions” have been put. Hynkel’s hyperactive race around his palace (from the artists, to the technicians, to his piano, to his desk where he writes, etc.) comes dangerously close to making him a figure for the film director chasing from art department to the editing room, the writer’s room, etc. (particularly potent in the case of a director as overextended as Chaplin, who wrote, scored, and directed the film). Now, however, filmic technique is divested of any potential dictatorial associations. The forced integration of film’s different media (music, sound, special effects, screenplay) that serves to identify director and dictator in the palace sequence is dislodged not by opening the aesthetic material to difference but rather by focusing entirely on the figure of the director/star and on what he is hoping to communicate.

This will to communicate seems to overcome the very means of its technological mediation without denying this mediation—where the dictator is perpetually encircled by a cocoon of microphones, the barber is, as the scene continues, increasingly framed without any such technological accoutrements. His speech is not (at least as the film seems to think of it) an effect at all. Chaplin originally filmed a different ending without a speech that had the SS (Schutzstaffel, “Protective Echelon”) break into dance at the barber’s unwitting instigation. In this ending, then, it would have been the instability of the system itself that undoes it, and the job of the director would have consisted in assembling materials that would showcase this instability. There would be no emphatic need for a communication to undo Hynkel’s spell, there would be no need for translation.
Although Chaplin’s reasons for abandoning this ending and relying on his own speech instead are various, one is certainly that the dance ending in essence relies on the same comedic trappings that have been shown to keep the farcical Hynkel state running smoothly. In other words, the movie’s point in switching Hynkel and the barber is that in some sense it doesn’t matter who occupies the empty shirt at the center of the Fascist state; that the barber unwittingly undoes that state would serve to undercut Chaplin’s critique. Eschewing the physical comedy of a dance number in favor a political speech (and an emphatically unfunny one at that), the film can maintain the binaries it has been relying on in its critique. Nevertheless, this raises a different specter for the film: sentimentality.

Indeed, Chaplin’s speech becomes highly problematic in the Aristotelian matrix deployed in the film’s first two public speeches; its juxtaposition of a-semantic animal vocality and the signifying phone semantike, revolved around a semantic appeal to ratio, on the one hand, and a sentimental-emotional appeal to the body, on the other. The speech, of which he was inordinately proud and which he not only performed as a radio lecture during the war but which he reproduced in toto in his 1964 autobiography,45 is not so much emphatically communicative (although its mise-en-scène is, as we have seen) as it is emphatically affective. In other words, it hopes to evoke feelings rather than convey information. These two aspects of the scene dismayed Chaplin’s left-leaning friends when the film was released: its unabashed reliance on cliche6 (an excess of emotion) and its fundamental confusion as to what it regards as the root of the Fascism that it sets out to undo. Indeed, Chaplin’s barber invokes hatred and greed, suggesting a reading of Hynkel as a scion of big capital (not an uncommon view among many of Chaplin’s friends), but he similarly invokes the evil of nationalism, suggesting that perhaps those who follow Hynkel desire being misled; he then inveighs against “machine men with machine hearts,” suggesting something like a Modern Times’ critique of capitalism.

Most fundamentally, though, it is the barber’s invocation of the “despair” and “misery” of his audience that makes Chaplin’s interpretation of Fascism hard to read. The barber proclaims, “To those who can hear me, I say, do not despair. The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed, the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress.” But who does he proclaim it to? Who is the proclamation’s audience? Within the logic of the film, the remark is addressed at Hannah and her fellow Jews with whose plight at the hands of the Tomanian invaders the barber’s speech is constantly crosscut. However, the speech that is supposed to be “our only hope” is clearly meant to be addressed to the people of Tomania, to exorcise their fascination with the “great little man” Hynkel by exposing
him to be just the little man. But here Chaplin seems to imply that the Tomanian people suffer under Hynkel. (An early conversation between Hynkel and Garbitsch about food rations and a later joke about sawdust in bread have laid the groundwork for this claim.47)

This would mean that the people of Tomania, including the “sons and daughters of the Double Cross,” are nothing but victims of Hynkel. Their community with their Phooey is entirely fictive—enraptured by his voice, they eat sawdust. The film thus seems to discount the possibility (quite actual, as we know today) that there is an active “working towards the Phooey” (to purloin Ian Kershaw’s famous phrase48), a desire to be deceived by this little man, on the part of the Tomanian people. As I’ve showed in the case of the first speech, the film is fundamentally ambivalent about the role of the audience (within the film and, in its anxieties about the filmic medium, the film’s own audience, as well).

What matters here is not that Chaplin’s film is somehow inconsistent in reading the phenomenon of Fascism—there are plenty of historians of whom the same can be said. What is interesting, however, is that these invocations of victimization, of despair, hatred and deceit carry not just communicative valences but sentimental ones, as well. The barber’s audience is an audience of victims: one and all, they are to understand themselves in sentimental terms. The barber’s universal appeal does not dispel the spell of Hynkel’s voice, then, but rather communicates a different kind of bodily affect to his victims.

The barber’s discourse is fundamentally melodramatic: he appeals for shared emotion, a community of affect structured around a shared vocabulary of visual cues. After all, thanks to the filmic legerdemain par excellence, the crosscutting between simultaneous sequences of events, the entire speech sequence is pure melodrama. From the Jew gunned down in the ghetto to Hannah roused from the ground by the radio loudspeaker, the sequence lives off the tropes of Classical Hollywood cinema—it turns the Jews into stereotypical Hollywood victims, the storm troopers into stereotypical Hollywood baddies, and its timely message about the evils of Fascism into a stereotypical happy ending. Its anxieties about mass media thus ultimately serve to usher the film into the most highly conditioned and formulaic filmic vocabulary available to Chaplin. And while his little man most decisively leaves behind his tramp character in delivering this speech (Chaplin never again played the tramp on screen), the sequence really folds the SS goons into the evil child-service workers, strikebreaking riot police, and construction-site foremen of his earlier films.

The barber’s moral indignation (unlike Chaplin’s, one presumes) is thus no different from that expressed by his little tramp when goons take away
The Kid. The very tropes on which Chaplin relies to assert the difference of Fascism as a phenomenon serve to fold the film’s attack back into Chaplin’s more general critique of capitalism, coldheartedness, etc. The film’s relapse into (both linguistic and visual) tropology thus comes to undermine the opposition that its critique of Fascism has relied on: By relying on the supposedly universal visual vocabulary of the Hollywood film, Chaplin interpellates a particular community of viewers and solicits a particular kind of emotional response from them. His oratory and whatever he manages to get across between the lines is no less conspiratorial than what Hynkel and his apparatus attempted to smuggle past the listeners of the “Pari-Mutual Network.” Instead of a radical widening of the scope of his address, the barber’s speech simply conscripts us into a different listening community.

Just as the subsumption of The Great Dictator’s Jews into the “little people” of Chaplin’s pop socialism rendered the film incapable of addressing the particular problem of the Nazi persecution of Jews, so the visual melodrama, a universalism that collapses back into the parochial and particular, erases the historic specificity of the phenomenon the film seeks to thematize. Chaplin’s film wants to win over, to communicate—but in the end is caught in its own echo chamber, preaching to the choir. Its visual audience is the film’s prime moral resource: We are the ones who can see through Hynkel. We are the ones who are capable of being moved by the barber’s appeal. But if the film is ambivalent about its audience, that is because we are supposed to be able to be just about anybody (we are supposed to be a potentially universal audience), but the film constructs us as a Hollywood audience, no more or less parochial than “the sons and daughters of the Double Cross.”

Perhaps the pivotal moment of the entire film encapsulates this ambivalence. It occurs right before the barber begins his speech. His friend, the good Nazi Schultz, tells him that “You must speak” and that “It is our only hope.” The barber repeats the word “hope,” and his flickering gaze turns straight into the camera. This visual mode of address to the audience (often accompanied with a wink) is, as we have noted, a common motif in comedies of the 1920s and 1930s. The complicity implied by this (usually mute) gaze is now to be turned into speech. The way the scene is staged makes it clear that the barber is (at least for this one moment) gazing at us, the film audience, and not the roaring crowd before the rostrum, which he also looks at before he hesitantly rises to finally deliver his address. While the crowd is thus a problem, the film seems to think of the audience and its mute complicity with the little tramp character as the moral reservoir the tramp can draw on in order to break his silence.
At this very moment (essentially coinciding with the barber’s repetition of “hope”), the soundtrack opens on a lyric motif, which soon (once the barber has started addressing Hannah) transforms into the Lohengrin Overture, which had earlier accompanied Hynkel’s preposterous ballet with the globe. The musical cue that underscored the megalomaniacal (and profoundly ridiculous) messianism of Hynkel now seems intended to give the scene the tone of a resurrection, as Hannah (beaten down by a Nazi thug) rises and, at the barber’s insistence, looks into the heavens. For Cavarero, the metaphysics (and politics) that looks with distrust upon the human voice as overly bodily and fundamentally obfuscatory, privileges metaphors of vision: the truth is to be extrapolated from the phone and is to be turned into the idea of theoria—it is to be seen with an ever greater degree of clarity. It cannot surprise, then, that in its moment of clarification, the honest, communicative, semantic voice directs attention away from itself and onto the field of vision:

Hannah, can you hear me? Wherever you are, look up, Hannah! The clouds are lifting! The sun is breaking through! We are coming out of the darkness into the light!

Chained to the phonetic medium of the radio address, the barber’s voice appeals to something visual for redemption from the seductions of the voice. The filmic audience, who can both see and hear, is asked once again to think in terms of (a) an audience who can hear only the fake Hynkel and (b) an audience that can see him—Chaplin’s intense delivery (pitched increasingly not at any one audience, diegetic or extradiegetic, but rather at a universal audience) seems meant to supplement the voice, to lend it support. Clarity of thought and communication is associated with vision, confusion, and double entendre with the voice. But here a final problem arises: the Jewish barber addresses the people only because of the film’s most central double entendre: the méprise of Chaplin for Chaplin, of the Jewish barber for Hynkel. The central plot device of the film is a failure of vision. Just as schtonk is fundamentally ambiguous and can refer to any number of adjectives, emerging only in its ambiguity as pure voice at all, the fundamental ambiguity of the possessors of said voice grounds the possibility of communicative speech. Within the logic of the film, it seems that without the visual slippage that allows dictator and tramp to take each other’s place, no clarity of speech could release the masses from Hynkel’s spell.

It is the very mendacity of the body that enables the movie to exorcise the demon of Fascism—to cure sound by means of sound. It is precisely because the body does not communicate its meanings straightforwardly,
precisely because a great “Aryan” dictator and a little “vegetarian” barber do not betray their respective essences under visual scrutiny that the little-man barber can dispel the illusions of the (identical) great man. At the very center of this fable about the clarity of communication, about the humanity of meaning, is an insistence that it is also human for a body not to mean anything. The doppelganger effect of The Great Dictator points not simply to the uncanny nature of the historical Hitler, nor is it simply a comedic trope meant to unmask the “great little man”—it is, strangely enough, a sentimental trope. And it is a sentimental trope that depends crucially on the means of the dramatic medium, which alone enables the same body to become the target of the film’s ire and its moral center. Visuality grounds the film not because it is, as Chaplin maintained in his 1931 article, universal, but rather because it is insistently particular. And it is not by the universal comprehensibility of the “mimic” qualities that visuality redeems the film’s voice but rather by an insistence on their impenetrability.

—Stanford University

NOTES


17. Ibid., 25.

18. Ibid.


22. Chaplin himself is reported to have commented that “my speech makes as much sense as his do” (quoted in Herman G. Weinberg, ed., Saint Cinema: Selected Writings, 1929–1970 [New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1970], 97).


25. I am assuming here that “schtont” is indeed an adjective rather than a verb—even though its proximity to the German stinken might suggest otherwise. It is interesting to note that Hynkel’s speech, insofar as it can be understood at all, seems to contain hardly any verbs whatsoever. We never get a sense what “the Aryan maiden,” “de Juten,” “de groetze Armie in de Welt,” etc., do, or have done, or will do—Hynkel’s is a reified discourse that can only refer limply to commonplaces or clichés but cannot convey connections, partly, we may assume, because those connections, if made, would undercut his communion with the audience. Significantly, the only full sentence we get in the speech is if we hear the statements about “puppchen Herring” and “Herr Garbitsch” in English—and, indeed, here we find out that Hynkel’s claims about his early days with his comrades boil down to statements about herring smelling in the garbage.

26. The author is indebted to David Copenhaver for this point.

27. Weinberg, Saint Cinema, 97.
28. Theodor Adorno seems to suggest that this is true for real-life anti-Semitic radio, as well, which he calls “pseudo-emotional” rather than actually affective (Sociologische Schriften I [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983], 398).


33. Hannah Arendt famously held the very opposite view: rather than see The Great Dictator’s Jewish barber character as simply another iteration of the (universal) tramp character, she suggests that the tramp character as a whole may have been “born of the Jewish pariah mentality,” and may have been obviously Jewish all along (“The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” Jewish Social Studies 6, no. 2 [1944]: 99–122, quotation on 101).


36. Ibid.


39. Deleuze, cinema 2, 218.


44. Chaplin, “Rejection of the Talkies,” 65.


46. In 1941, Klaus Mann charged that Hollywood ventured “on the most appalling topic of human history” with its “all-familiar patterns and devices,” naming among other films Chaplin’s Dictator (“What’s Wrong with Anti-Nazi Films?” Decision 2, no. 2 [1941]: 27–35, quotation on 34).

47. This serves to further the identification of Jews with the “little people,” and the similarities between the dictator and the Jewish barber risk pointing not to an “Aryan” dictator who looks exactly like the Jewish barber but rather to an arriviste dictator who, in the figure of the barber, is confronted with his own repressed petit bourgeois origins.
Ivan Kalmar, similarly, has called the little barber a “classic Hollywood Jew: an honest, hard-working small businessman, unjustly discriminated against by Jew-haters, even though he has hardly any distinctively Jewish characteristics” ("Chaplin," 131).


49. Cavarero, For More Than One Voice, 111.