

## **2011 Hohendahl Graduate Essay Prize in Critical Theory**

**“Brecht, Chaplin and Marxism’s Comic Inheritance”**

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“Although many scholars have discussed the influence of film star Charlie Chaplin on critical theorists like Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, few have examined the broader political ramifications of this influence. The case of Brecht is particularly instructive as such influence spanned the playwright’s entire career, from intense fandom in the early twenties to close friendship during his exile years in Hollywood. The intertwined history of Chaplin and Brecht suggests the importance of reciprocally reading these two figures, especially considering the politico-ethical concern they inherit from their nineteenth-century forerunner, Karl Marx. If the Marx of “The Eighteenth Brumaire” is forced into satirical anger by the intrusive interruption of the lumpenproletariat, Chaplin and Brecht make this discontinuous, distracted and trampish figure the central object of their formal and narrative strategies. Beyond the teleology of Marxist science, the lumpen performs the political by exposing the repressed nonsense of social relations, thus suggesting their critique and transformation. This essay argues that Brecht’s epic theater screens these relations in a Chaplin-inflicted montage of gestures, positions and attitudes, finding a means, to paraphrase Marx, to separate from the past cheerfully.”