

# CITY LIGHTS



# City Lights

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With Yves P. Huin



## Foreword

This Essay -as described- was triggered by my longing for the city lights of Asian Cities (Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai...) during the SARS-Cov-2 Pandemic (COVID-19). But also, by the deluge of scary acts of racism, with murders of elderly Asian-Americans, and frequent killings of “minorities” (Blacks or Hispanics) in the US. With my wife we live in an oasis of gorgeous nature, with delightful (and invisible) neighbors, in the South-Western part of the San Francisco Bay area. We are very fortunate and avoid the *sound and fury* of the crowds. But this also allows me to dream, retrieve memories from their premature burial, build images and desires. This Essay is a miniscule illustration of my hyperactive cerebral neurons. It is also a pillage of Wikipedia, Encyclopedia Britannica, and the site(s) of City Lights Bookstore and Publishers.

What was a malformed mixture of clichés took shape thanks to Yves P. Huin, whose friendship, multiple talents, critical arguments and open-minded generosity sculpted this homage to Chaplin and Ferlinghetti, who did bring Lights to my Cities.

## City Lights, The Movie and The Cinema

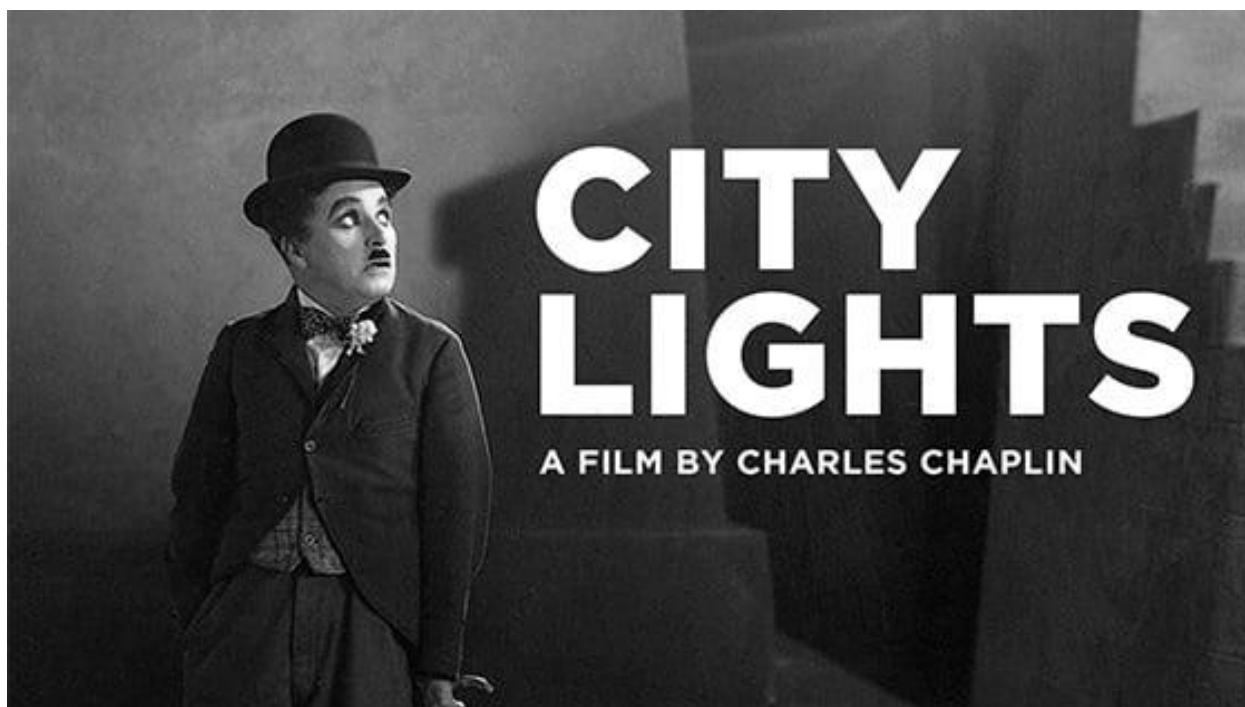
My first experience with a movie was in late 1945 in Paris, France. I was 10. My uncle Georges Barski took me there. It was a movie by Charles Chaplin: ***City Lights***. I loved it and was fascinated. *City Lights* is a 1931 American pre-Code silent romantic comedy film written, produced, directed by, and starring Charlie Chaplin. The story follows the misadventures of Chaplin's Tramp as he falls in love with a blind girl (Virginia Cherrill) and develops a turbulent friendship with an alcoholic millionaire (Harry Myers). *City Lights* marked the first time Chaplin composed the film score to one of his productions and it was written in six weeks with Arthur Johnston. The main theme, used as a leitmotif for the blind flower girl, is the song "*La Violetera*" ("*Who'll Buy my Violets*") from Spanish composer José Padilla. Chaplin lost a lawsuit to Padilla for not crediting him.

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Today, many critics consider it not only the highest accomplishment of Chaplin's career, but one of the greatest films of all time. Chaplin biographer Jeffrey Vance believes "*City Lights is not only Charles Chaplin's masterpiece; it is an act of defiance*" as it premiered four years into the era of sound films which began with premiere of *The Jazz Singer* (1927). In 1991, the Library of Congress selected *City Lights* for preservation in the United States National Film Registry as being "*culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant*". In 2007, the American Film Institute ranked it 11th on its list of the best American films ever made. In 1949, the critic James Agee called the film's final scene "*the greatest single piece of acting ever committed to celluloid*".

Years later I learned that *City Lights* -against all odds- proved to be a popular and financial success, eventually grossing over \$3 million. The British Film Institute cites it as Chaplin's finest accomplishment. *City Lights* became Chaplin's personal favorite of his films and remained so throughout his life. My uncle had made the right choice!



I love cities; I feel secure in large cities -possibly because I lived in Europe until adulthood. I did not mind missing the last metro at 01:30 in Paris and walk for 2-3

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hours to get to my room. I discovered a different light, life, and population. As a teenager, I also had ...*interesting* encounters that brought pepper and useful experience to my life. Later, as an intern in large hospitals, I experienced violence, the injustice, the risks that nocturnal hours bring to the less fortunate city dwellers; one dies during the night more often. Solitude, fear, hallucinations populate the nights of many inhabitants of large cities. But I still love city lights!

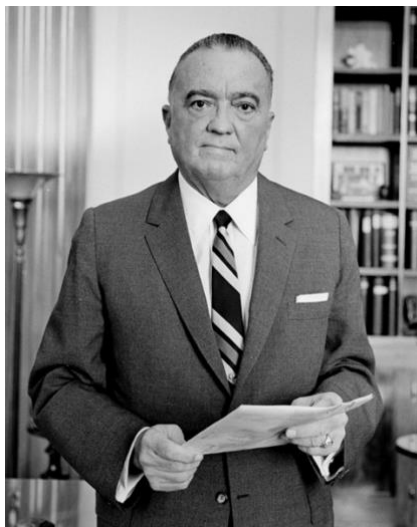
Charles Chaplin was a frequent object/subject of conversation at my family's table. My father, as a physician, was aware of his dire childhood, in poverty and hardship, with an absent, alcoholic father (who died quite young of liver cirrhosis), and a mentally "*disordered*" mother, with a Gypsy familial history. Charles was sent to a "*workhouse*" (a teaching/prison institution for pauper children in the United Kingdom) twice before the age of nine. But he managed to perform at an early age, and at 19, he was signed to the prestigious Fred Karno company -and the rest is history, described in numerous books and articles: by 1918, he was one of the best-known figures in the world!

One of the reasons that fed the admiration of my parents was some controversies that Chaplin faced in the 1940s, both in his work and in his personal life, which changed his fortunes and severely affected his popularity in the United States. The first of these was his growing boldness in expressing his political beliefs. Deeply disturbed by the surge of militaristic nationalism in 1930s world politics, Chaplin found that he could not keep these issues out of his work. Parallels between himself and Adolf Hitler had been widely noted: the pair were born four days apart, both had risen from poverty to world prominence, and Hitler wore the same toothbrush moustache as Chaplin. It was this physical resemblance that supplied the plot for Chaplin's next film, *The Great Dictator*, which directly satirized Hitler and attacked fascism. Chaplin spent two years developing the script and began filming in September 1939, six days after Britain declared war on Germany. He had submitted to using spoken dialogue, partly out of acceptance that he had no other choice, but also because he recognized it as a better method for delivering a political message. Making a comedy about Hitler was seen as highly controversial, but Chaplin's financial independence allowed him to take the risk. "*I was determined to go ahead,*" he later wrote, "*for Hitler must be laughed at.*" Chaplin replaced the Tramp (while wearing similar attire) with "*A Jewish Barber*", a reference to the Nazi party's belief

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that he was Jewish. In a dual performance, he also played the dictator "*Adenoid Hynkel*", who parodied Hitler. *The Great Dictator* spent a year in production and was released in October 1940. The film generated a vast amount of publicity, with a critic for *The New York Times* calling it "the most eagerly awaited picture of the year", and it was one of the biggest money-makers of the era. The ending was unpopular, however, and generated controversy. Chaplin concluded the film with a five-minute speech in which he abandoned his barber character, looked directly into the camera, and pleaded against war and fascism. Charles J. Maland has identified this overt preaching as triggering a decline in Chaplin's popularity, and writes, "*Henceforth, no movie fan would ever be able to separate the dimension of politics from [his] star image*". Nevertheless, both Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt liked the film, which they saw at private screenings before its release. Roosevelt subsequently invited Chaplin to read the film's final speech over the radio during his January 1941 inauguration, with the speech becoming a "*hit*" of the celebration. Chaplin was often invited to other patriotic functions to read the speech to audiences during the years of the war. *The Great Dictator* received five Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay and Best Actor. I watched it in the 1950s and loved it!



J. Edgar Hoover - © Wikipedia

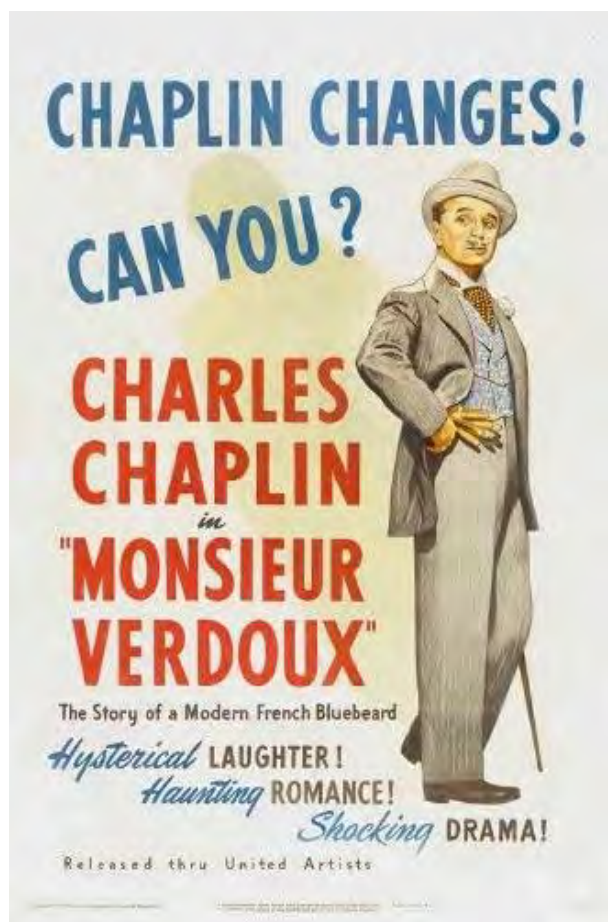
But Chaplin had a formidable, creepy, vicious enemy: the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, who had long been suspicious of



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Chaplin's political leanings, used the opportunity to generate negative publicity about him. As part of a smear campaign to damage Chaplin's image, the FBI named him in four indictments related to a case, about an unrecognized child. The historian Otto Friedrich has called this an "*absurd prosecution*" of an "*ancient statute*", yet if Chaplin was found guilty, he faced 23 years in jail. Three charges lacked sufficient evidence to proceed to court, but the Mann Act trial began on 21 March 1944. Chaplin was acquitted two weeks later, on 4 April. The case was frequently headline news, with *Newsweek* calling it the "*biggest public relations scandal since the Fatty Arbuckle murder trial in 1921*".



Chaplin claimed that the trials had "*crippled [his] creativeness*", and it was some time before he began working again. In April 1946, he finally began filming a project that had been in development since 1942. *Monsieur Verdoux* was a black comedy, the

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story of a French bank clerk, Verdoux (Chaplin), who loses his job and begins marrying and murdering wealthy widows to support his family. Chaplin's inspiration for the project came from Orson Welles, who wanted him to star in a film about the French serial killer Henri Désiré Landru. Chaplin decided that the concept would "*make a wonderful comedy*", and paid Welles \$5,000 for the idea.

Chaplin again vocalized his political views in *Monsieur Verdoux*, criticizing capitalism and arguing that the world encourages mass killing through wars and weapons of mass destruction. Because of this, the film met with controversy when it was released in April 1947; Chaplin was booed at the premiere, and there were calls for a boycott. *Monsieur Verdoux* was the first Chaplin release that failed both critically and commercially in the United States. It was more successful abroad (I saw it in Paris, to great applause!), and Chaplin's screenplay was nominated at the Academy Awards. He was proud of the film, writing in his autobiography, "*Monsieur Verdoux* is the cleverest and most brilliant film I have yet made."

The negative reaction to *Monsieur Verdoux* was largely the result of changes in Chaplin's public image. Along with damage of the Joan Barry scandal, he was publicly accused of being a communist. His political activity had heightened during World War II, when he campaigned for the opening of a Second Front to help the Soviet Union and supported various Soviet-American friendship groups. He was also friendly with several suspected communists, and attended functions given by Soviet diplomats in Los Angeles. In the political climate of 1940s America, such activities meant Chaplin was considered, as Larcher writes, "*dangerously progressive and amoral*". The FBI wanted him out of the country and launched an official investigation in early 1947.

Chaplin denied being a communist, instead calling himself a "*peacemonger*", but felt the government's effort to suppress the ideology was an unacceptable infringement of civil liberties. Unwilling to be quiet about the issue, he openly protested against the trials of Communist Party members and the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Chaplin received a subpoena to appear before HUAC but was not called to testify. As his activities were widely reported in the press, and Cold War fears grew, questions were raised over his failure to take American citizenship. Calls were made for him to be deported; in one extreme and widely published example, Representative John E. Rankin, who helped establish HUAC, told Congress in June

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1947: "[Chaplin's] very life in Hollywood is detrimental to the moral fabric of America. [If he is deported] ... his loathsome pictures can be kept from before the eyes of the American youth. He should be deported and gotten rid of at once."

In 2003, declassified British archives belonging to the British Foreign Office have revealed that George Orwell had secretly accused Chaplin of being a secret communist and a friend of the USSR. In 1949 a document known as Orwell's list revealed that Chaplin's name was included among 35 names that Orwell had given to the Information Research Department (IRD), a secret British Cold War propaganda department which worked closely with the CIA. Chaplin was not the only American actor Orwell accused of being a secret communist, as Orwell also described American civil-rights leader and actor Paul Robeson as being "*anti-white*".

Although Chaplin remained politically active in the years following the failure of *Monsieur Verdoux*, his next film, about a forgotten music hall comedian and a young ballerina in Edwardian London, was devoid of political themes. *Limelight* was heavily autobiographical, alluding not only to Chaplin's childhood and the lives of his parents, but also to his loss of popularity in the United States. The cast included various members of his family, including his five oldest children and his half-brother, Wheeler Dryden.

Filming began in November 1951, by which time Chaplin had spent three years working on the story. He aimed for a more serious tone than any of his previous films, regularly using the word "*melancholy*" when explaining his plans to his co-star Claire Bloom. *Limelight* featured a cameo appearance from Buster Keaton, whom Chaplin cast as his stage partner in a pantomime scene. This marked the only time the comedians worked together in a feature film.

Chaplin decided to hold the world premiere of *Limelight* in London, since it was the setting of the film. As he left Los Angeles, he expressed a premonition that he would not be returning. At New York, he boarded the RMS *Queen Elizabeth* with his family on 18 September 1952. The next day, United States Attorney General James P. McGranery revoked Chaplin's re-entry permit and stated that he would have to submit to an interview concerning his political views and moral behaviour to re-enter the US. Although McGranery told the press that he had "*a pretty good case against Chaplin*", Maland has concluded, on the basis of the FBI files that were released in the 1980s, that the US government had no real evidence to prevent



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Chaplin's re-entry. It is likely that he would have gained entry if he had applied for it. However, when Chaplin received a cablegram informing him of the news, he privately decided to cut his ties with the United States: "*Whether I re-entered that unhappy country or not was of little consequence to me. I would like to have told them that the sooner I was rid of that hate-beleaguered atmosphere the better, that I was fed up of America's insults and moral pomposity*".

Chaplin remained a controversial figure throughout the 1950s, especially after he was awarded the International Peace Prize by the communist-led World Peace Council, and after his meetings with Zhou Enlai and Nikita Khrushchev. He began developing his first European film, *A King in New York*, in 1954. Casting himself as an exiled king who seeks asylum in the United States, Chaplin included several of his recent experiences in the screenplay. His son, Michael, was cast as a boy whose parents are targeted by the FBI, while Chaplin's character faces accusations of communism. The political satire parodied HUAC and attacked elements of 1950s culture – including consumerism, plastic surgery, and wide-screen cinema. In a review, the playwright John Osborne called it Chaplin's "*most bitter*" and "*most openly personal*" film. In a 1957 interview, when asked to clarify his political views, Chaplin stated "*As for politics, I am an anarchist. I hate government and rules – and fetters ... People must be free.*" I APPLAUD THAT!

In the early 1970s, Chaplin concentrated on re-releasing his old films, including *The Kid* and *The Circus*. In 1971, he was made a Commander of the National Order of the Legion of Honor at the Cannes Film Festival. The following year, he was honored with a special award by the Venice Film Festival. In 1972, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences offered Chaplin an Honorary Award, which Robinson sees as a sign that America "*wanted to make amends*". Chaplin was initially hesitant about accepting but decided to return to the US for the first time in 20 years. The visit attracted a large amount of press coverage and, at the Academy Awards gala, he was given a 12-minute standing ovation, the longest in the Academy's history. Visibly emotional, Chaplin accepted his award for "*the incalculable effect he has had in making motion pictures the art form of this century*".

In 1998, the film critic Andrew Sarris called Chaplin "*arguably the single most important artist produced by the cinema, certainly its most extraordinary performer and probably still its most universal icon*". He is described by the British Film Institute

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as "*a towering figure in world culture*" and was included in Time magazine's list of the "100 Most Important People of the 20th Century" for the "*laughter [he brought] to millions*" and because he "*more or less invented global recognizability and helped turn an industry into an art*".

The image of the Tramp has become a part of cultural history; according to Simon Louvish, the character is recognizable to people who have never seen a Chaplin film, and in places where his films are never shown. The critic Leonard Maltin has written of the "*unique*" and "*indelible*" nature of the Tramp and argued that no other comedian matched his "*worldwide impact*". Praising the character, Richard Schickel suggests that Chaplin's films with the Tramp contain the most "*eloquent, richly comedic expressions of the human spirit*" in movie history. Memorabilia connected to the character still fetch large sums in auctions: in 2006 a bowler hat and a bamboo cane that were part of the Tramp's costume were bought for \$140,000 in a Los Angeles auction.

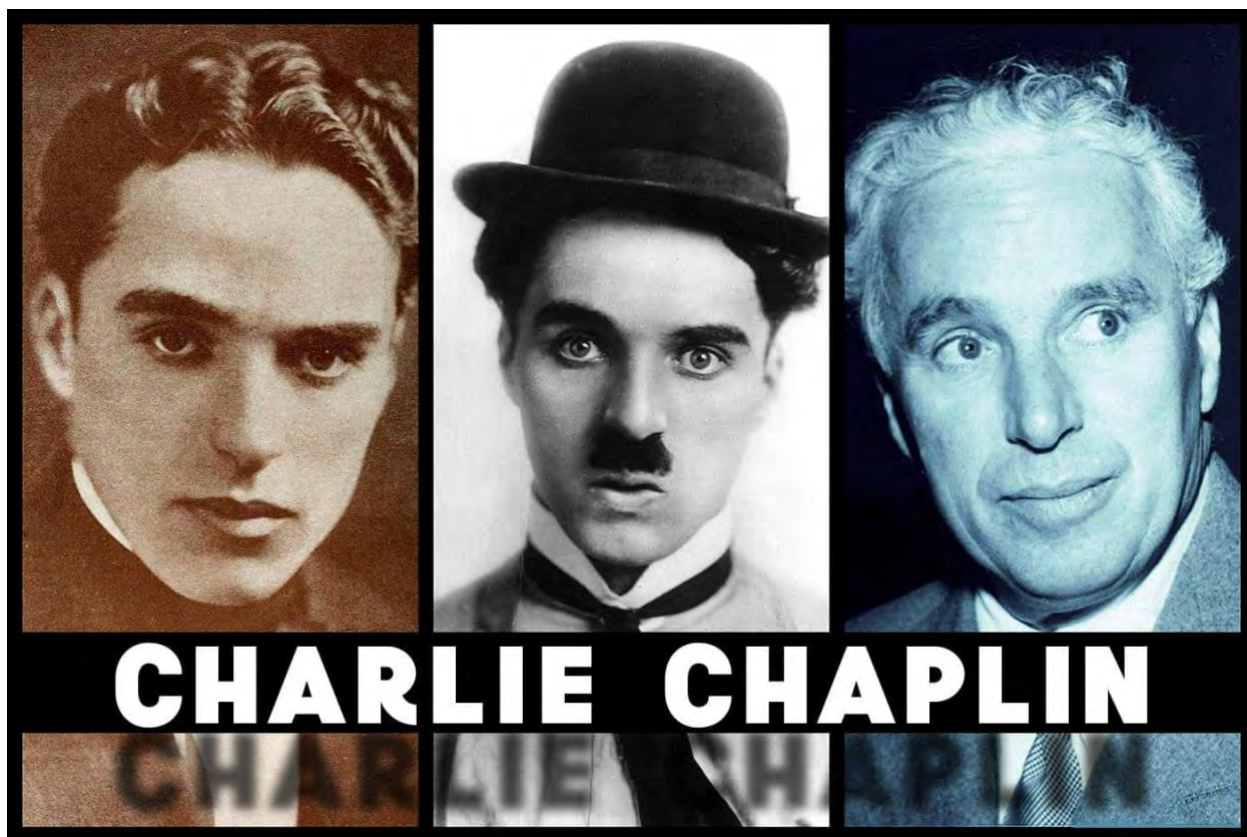
As a filmmaker, Chaplin is considered a pioneer and one of the most influential figures of the early twentieth century. He is often credited as one of the medium's first artists. Film historian Mark Cousins has written that Chaplin "*changed not only the imagery of cinema, but also its sociology and grammar*" and claims that Chaplin was as important to the development of comedy as a genre as D.W. Griffith was to drama. He was the first to popularize feature-length comedy and to slow down the pace of action, adding pathos and subtlety to it. Although his work is mostly classified as slapstick, Chaplin's drama *A Woman of Paris* (1923) was a major influence on Ernst Lubitsch's film *The Marriage Circle* (1924) and thus played a part in the development of "*sophisticated comedy*". According to David Robinson, Chaplin's innovations were "*rapidly assimilated to become part of the common practice of film craft*". Filmmakers who cited Chaplin as an influence include Federico Fellini (who called Chaplin "*a sort of Adam, from whom we are all descended*"), Jacques Tati ("*Without him I would never have made a film*"), René Clair ("*He inspired practically every filmmaker*"), Michael Powell, Billy Wilder, Vittorio De Sica, and Richard Attenborough. Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky praised Chaplin as "*the only person to have gone down into cinematic history without any shadow of a doubt. The films he left behind can never grow old.*"

Chaplin also strongly influenced the work of later comedians. Marcel Marceau said

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he was inspired to become a mime artist after watching Chaplin, while the actor Raj Kapoor based his screen persona on the Tramp. Mark Cousins has also detected Chaplin's comedic style in the French character Monsieur Hulot and the Italian character Totò. In other fields, Chaplin helped inspire the cartoon characters Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse and was an influence on the Dada art movement. As one of the founding members of United Artists, Chaplin also had a role in the development of the film industry. Gerald Mast has written that although UA never became a major company like MGM or Paramount Pictures, the idea that directors could produce their own films was "*years ahead of its time*".



The Three Ages of Charles Chaplin - © Wikipedia Commons

In the 21st century, several of Chaplin's films are still regarded as classics and among the greatest ever made. The 2012 *Sight & Sound* poll, which compiles "*top ten*" ballots from film critics and directors to determine each group's most acclaimed films, saw *City Lights* rank among the critics' top 50, *Modern Times* inside the top 100, and *The*

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*Great Dictator* and *The Gold Rush* placed in the top 250. The top 100 films as voted on by directors included *Modern Times* at number 22, *City Lights* at number 30, and *The Gold Rush* at number 91. Every one of Chaplin's features received a vote. In 2007, the American Film Institute named *City Lights* the 11th greatest American film of all time, while *The Gold Rush* and *Modern Times* again ranked in the top 100. Books about Chaplin continue to be published regularly, and he is a popular subject for media scholars and film archivists. Many of Chaplin's film have had a DVD and Blu-ray release.

Cinema is now a formidable industry -even in the times of electronic media, the Internet, and others on the horizon. It is also -sometimes- an art, and Charles Chaplin wrote and demonstrated the main chapter about that artistic side of cinematography. We must be grateful to him.

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Cinema was born in France, and it is still a successful industry and art in the country. The French School had many incarnations; we all remember and cherish a French movie, actor or actress. But French cinema -possibly more than any other national art- has been strongly influenced by and dependent on French literature. All French movie directors were/are lettered; all scenarios could be (and often are) published as books. The symbiosis between books/literature and cinema/ images is omnipresent.

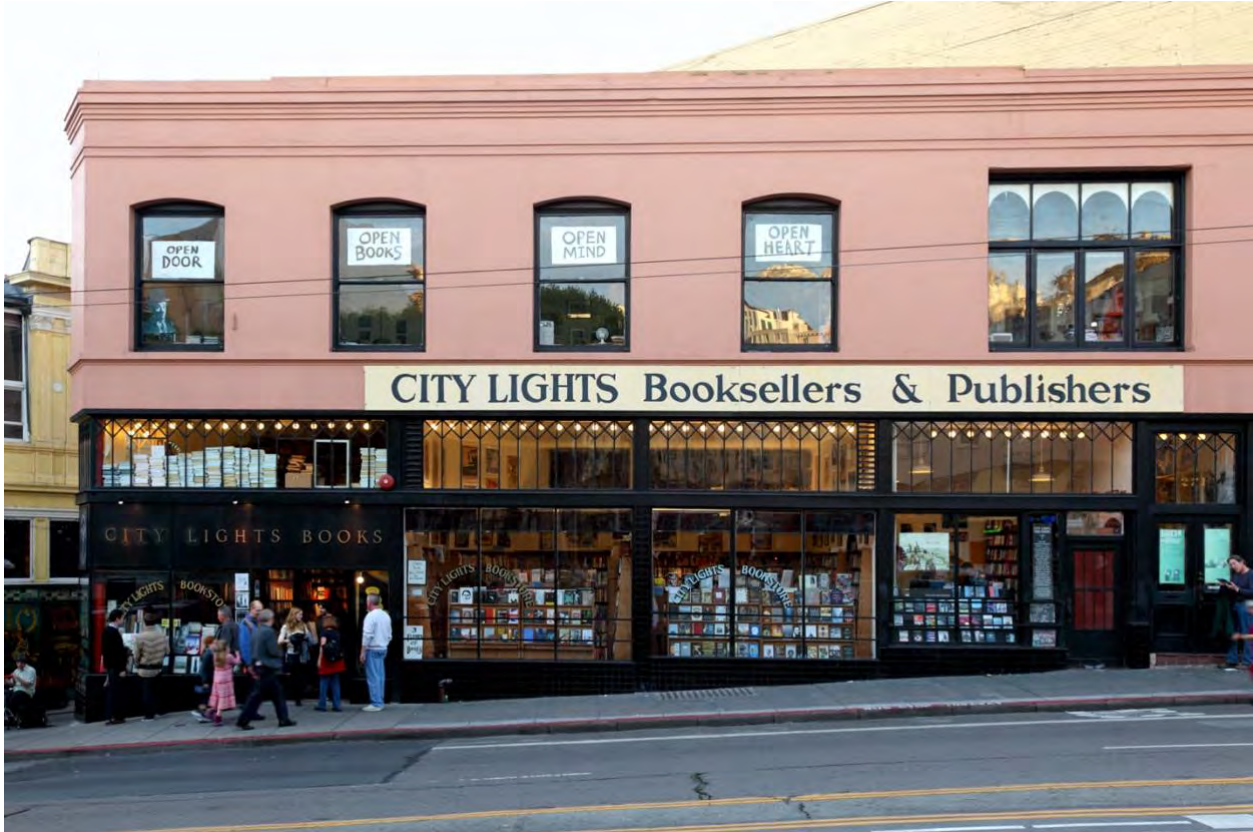
Before I discovered cinema -and Charles Chaplin- I had already developed an inextinguishable thirst for reading; it has only increased with age! I *need* books; I need them to make me feel human.



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# City Lights, The Bookstore



© City Lights Bookstore

Herbert Kaufman was an allergist who practiced in San Francisco. His medical office occupied a small house on 2384 Post Street, in the quiet area of Pacific Heights, a block away from the UCSF-affiliated Mount Zion Hospital. He was a friendly *protégé* of Marion Sulzberger, the greatest dermatologist of the century -and a close friend of my family (including me). Marion had informed Herb Kaufman that I could be available to teach in post-graduate Continuing Medical Education sessions, knowing that Herb was regularly running such mini-courses sponsored by UCSF, and required by the California Medical Licensing Board. California made sure that its physicians were kept informed on the latest development of medical sciences!



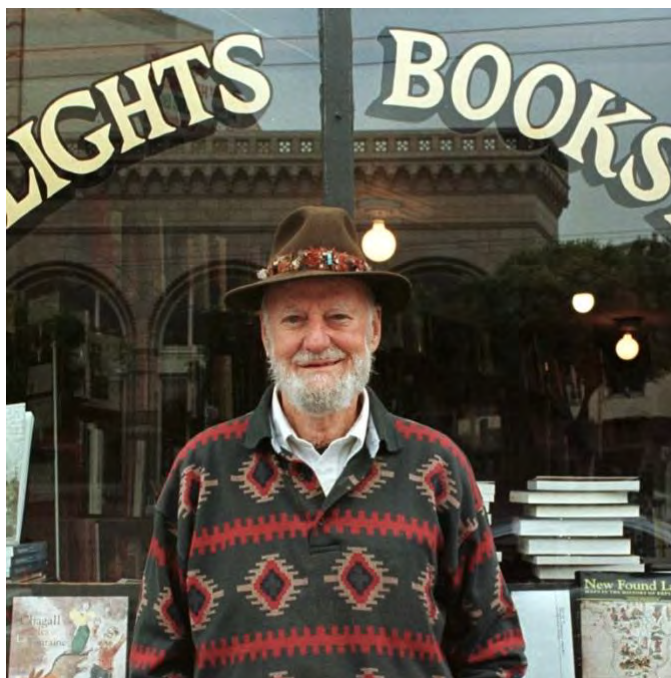
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This led to a series of telephone conversations that resulted in an invitation to be Faculty in a Post-Graduate Course in Pediatric Allergy at the Pacific Medical Center, in San Francisco on June 24-25, 1972. Dr. Kaufman could provide a round-trip ticket CDG-SFO-CDG in coach, but nothing else: no honorarium, and no hotel room; but he offered free access -after office hours- to his medical office cute mansion: a real treat! The meeting would take place a few blocks from the Post Street address, a short walking distance.

I confessed to him that I had a lulling-to-sleep habit: I MUST read a new book (either start it or continue) until my eyelids feel like lead. And I did not bring any printed sleep-inducer... *"No problem"* Herb replied, "Just take the bus to **City Lights Bookstore**". Which I did. And there was the owner Lawrence Ferlinghetti whose acute, experienced audition triggered a *"Que puis-je faire pour vous?"* Parisian welcome! This ignited a friendship that survived long -then longer- absences, but each resurrection was immediate and sparkling.

Hereunder he is!



Lawrence Ferlinghetti - © City Lights Bookstore

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A few days ago, I got the sad news:

*March 24, 1919 (Yonkers, New York) – February 22, 2021 (San Francisco, California)*

*We are sad to announce that Lawrence Ferlinghetti, distinguished American poet, artist, and founder of City Lights Booksellers and Publishers, has died in San Francisco, California. He was 101 years old.*

*Ferlinghetti was instrumental in democratizing American literature by creating (with Peter D. Martin) the country's first all-paperback bookstore in 1953, jumpstarting a movement to make diverse and inexpensive quality books widely available. He envisioned the bookstore as a "Literary Meeting Place," where writers and readers could congregate to share ideas about poetry, fiction, politics, and the arts. Two years later, in 1955, he launched City Lights Publishers with the objective of stirring an "international dissident ferment." His inaugural edition was the first volume of the City Lights Pocket Poets Series, which proved to be a seminal force in shaping American poetry.*

*Ferlinghetti is the author of one of the best-selling poetry books of all time, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, among many other works. He continued to write and publish new work up until he was 100 years old, and his work has earned him a place in the American canon.*

*For over sixty years, those of us who have worked with him at City Lights have been inspired by his knowledge and love of literature, his courage in defense of the right to freedom of expression, and his vital role as an American cultural ambassador. His curiosity was unbounded, and his enthusiasm was infectious, and we will miss him greatly.*

*We intend to build on Ferlinghetti's vision and honor his memory by sustaining City Lights into the future as a center for open intellectual inquiry and commitment to literary culture and progressive politics. Though we mourn his passing, we celebrate his many contributions and give thanks for all the years we were able to work by his side.*

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This Biography followed the announcement:

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti was a prominent voice of the wide-open poetry movement that began in the 1950s, Lawrence Ferlinghetti writes poetry, translation, fiction, theater, art criticism, film narration, and essays. Often concerned with politics and social issues, Ferlinghetti's poetry counters an elitist conception of art and the artist's role in the world. Although his poetry is often concerned with everyday life and civic themes, it is never simply personal or polemical, and it stands on his grounding in tradition and universal reach.*

*Ferlinghetti was born in Bronxville, New York on March 24, 1919, son of Carlo Ferlinghetti, an immigrant from Brescia, Italy, and Clemence Mendes-Monsanto. Following his undergraduate years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he took a degree in journalism, he served in the U.S. Navy in World War II. He was a commander of three different submarine chasers in the Atlantic and saw action at the Normandy invasion. Later in the war, he was assigned to the attack transport USS Selinur in the Pacific. In 1945, just after the atomic bomb obliterated Nagasaki, he witnessed firsthand the horrific ruins of the city. This experience was the origin of his lifelong antiwar stance.*

*Ferlinghetti received a Master's degree in English Literature from Columbia University in 1947 and a Doctorate de l'Université de Paris (Sorbonne) in 1950. From 1951 to 1953, after he settled in San Francisco, he taught French in an adult education program, painted, and wrote art criticism. In 1953, with Peter D. Martin, he founded City Lights Bookstore, the first all- paperback bookshop in the country. For over sixty years the bookstore has served as a "literary meeting place" for writers, readers, artists, and intellectuals to explore books and ideas.*

*In 1955, Ferlinghetti launched City Lights Publishers with the Pocket Poets Series, extending his concept of a cultural meeting place to a larger arena. His aim was to present fresh and accessible poetry from around the world in order to create "an international, dissident ferment." The series began in 1955 with his own Pictures of the Gone World; translations by Kenneth Rexroth and poetry by Kenneth Patchen, Marie Ponsot, Allen Ginsberg, and*

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*Denise Levertov were soon added to the list.*

*Copies of Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* were seized by authorities in 1956 and Ferlinghetti was arrested and charged with selling obscene material. He defended *Howl* in court, a case that drew national attention to the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat Generation writers, many of whom he later published. (With a fine defense by the ACLU and the support of prestigious literary and academic figures, he was acquitted.) This landmark First Amendment case established a legal precedent for the publication of controversial work with redeeming social importance.*



Lawrence Ferlinghetti: "Oh Pocahontas, Pocahontas!" (1987) - © Poetryfoundation.org

*In the 1960s, Ferlinghetti plunged into a life of frequent travel--giving poetry readings, taking part in festivals, happenings, and literary/political*

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*conferences in Chile, Cuba, Germany, the USSR, Holland, Fiji, Australia, Nicaragua, Spain, Greece, and the Czech Republic--as well as in Mexico, Italy, and France, where he spent substantial periods of time. A resolute progressive, he spoke out on such crucial political issues as the Cuban revolution, the nuclear arms race, farmworker organizing, the Vietnam War, the Sandinista and Zapatista struggles, and the wars in the Middle East.*

*Ferlinghetti's **paintings** have been shown at a number of exhibitions and galleries in the U.S. and abroad. In the 1990s he was associated with the international Fluxus movement through the Archivio Francesco Conz in Verona. His work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally, including a 2010 retrospective at the Museo di Roma in Trastevere, Italy, and a group exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2016. His works are in the collections of the Smithsonian Museum of American Arts and the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, and most recently exhibited at a show at San Francisco's Rena Bransten Gallery in March 2019.*

*He was named San Francisco's Poet Laureate in August 1998. He has been the recipient of numerous awards: the Los Angeles Times' Robert Kirsch Award, the BABRA Award for Lifetime Achievement, the National Book Critics Circle Ivan Sandrof Award for Contribution to American Arts and Letters, the American Civil Liberties Union's Earl Warren Civil Liberties Award, the Robert Frost Memorial Medal, and the Authors Guild Lifetime Achievement Award.*

*In 2003, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 2005 the National Book Foundation gave him the inaugural Literarian Award for outstanding service to the American literary community. In 2007 he was named Commandeur, Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. In Italy, his poetry has been awarded the Premio Taormino, the Premio Camaione, the Premio Flaiano, and the Premio Cavour.*

*Ferlinghetti's "A Coney Island of the Mind" (1958) continues to be one of the most popular poetry books in the U.S., with over 1,000,000 copies in print. A prolific author, Ferlinghetti has over a dozen books currently in print, and*



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*his work has been translated into many languages. Among his poetry books are These Are My Rivers: New & Selected Poems, 1955-1993 (1993), A Far Rockaway of the Heart (1997), How to Paint Sunlight (2001), Americus Book I (2004), Poetry as Insurgent Art (2007), Time of Useful Consciousness (2012), and Blasts Cries Laughter (2014), all published by New Directions. His two novels are Her (1960) and Love in the Days of Rage (2001). City Lights issued an anthology of San Francisco poems in 2001. He is the translator of Paroles by Jacques Prévert (from French) and Roman Poems by Pier Paolo Pasolini (from Italian.) In 2015 Liveright Publishing, a division of W.W. Norton, published his Writing Across the Landscape: Travel Journals (1960-2010). In 2017, New Directions published an anthology of his work titled Ferlinghetti's Greatest Poems, and his latest book is a novel, titled Little Boy published by Doubleday in 2019.*



Lawrence Ferlinghetti - © flickr.com

*Ferlinghetti passed away in the evening on Monday, February 22nd at his home in San Francisco. He was 101. RIP*

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*"City Lights,"* as name for the bookstore, was the inspiration of Peter D. Martin, who relocated from New York City to San Francisco in the 1940s to teach sociology. He first used City Lights— in homage to the Chaplin film —in 1952 as the title of a magazine, publishing early work by such key Bay Area writers as Philip Lamantia, Pauline Kael, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, and Ferlinghetti himself, as *"Lawrence Ferling"*. A year later, Martin used the name to establish the first all- paperback bookstore in the U.S., at the time an audacious idea.

The site was a tiny storefront in the triangular Artigues Building located at 261 Columbus Avenue, near the intersection of Broadway in North Beach. Built on the ruins of a previous building destroyed in the fire following the 1906 earthquake, the building was designed by Oliver Everett in 1907 and named for its owners. City Lights originally shared the building with a number of other shops. It gradually gained more space whenever one of the other shops became vacant, and eventually occupied the entire building.

In 1953, as Ferlinghetti was walking past the Artigues Building, he encountered Martin out front hanging up a sign that announced a "Pocket Book Shop." He introduced himself as a contributor to Martin's magazine City Lights and told him he had always wanted a bookstore. Before long he and Martin agreed to a partnership. Each man invested \$500. Soon after they opened, they hired Shig Murao as a clerk. Murao worked without pay for the first few weeks, but eventually became manager of the store and was a key element in creating the unique feel of City Lights. In 1955, Martin sold his share of the business to Ferlinghetti for \$1000, moved to New York and started the New Yorker Bookstore which specialized in cinema.

In the late 1960s, Ferlinghetti hired Joseph Wolberg, former philosophy professor at SUNY Buffalo, to manage the bookstore. Wolberg is credited with organizing the once chaotically messy shelves and for convincing a cheap Ferlinghetti to install anti-shoplifting metal detectors. Through his connection to City Lights, Wolberg produced records for Beat poets such as Charles Bukowski and Shel Silverstein.

In 1971, Ferlinghetti persuaded Nancy Peters – who was working at the Library of Congress – to join in a project with him, after which she began full-time work at City Lights. She said: *"When I joined City Lights in 1971, and started working with*

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*Lawrence, it was clear that it had been very much a center of protest, for people with revolutionary ideas and people who wanted to change society. And when I first began working at the little editorial office up on Filbert and Grant, people that Lawrence had known through the whole decade of the '60s were dropping in all the time, like Paul Krassner, Tim Leary, people who were working with underground presses and trying to provide an alternative to mainstream media. This was a period of persecution, and FBI infiltration of those presses”.*

In 1984, the business was in a financial crisis and Peters became a co-owner of it. Ferlinghetti credits her for the subsequent survival and growing success of the business. In 1999, with Ferlinghetti, she bought the building they worked in.



Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights in 2007 - © City Lights Bookstore

In 2001, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors made City Lights an official historic landmark – the first time this had been granted to a business, rather than a building – citing the organization for *"playing a seminal role in the literary and cultural development of San Francisco and the nation."* It recognized the bookstore as *"a landmark that attracts thousands of book lovers from all over the world because of its strong ambiance of alternative culture and arts"*, and it acknowledged City Lights Publishers for its *"significant contribution to major developments in post-World II literature."*

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The building itself, with its clerestory windows and small mezzanine balcony, also qualified as a city landmark because of its "distinctive characteristics typical of small commercial buildings constructed following the 1906 earthquake and fire." The landmark designation mandates the preservation of certain external features of the building and its immediate surroundings. Peters commented (referring to the effect of dotcom and computer firms), "*The old San Francisco is under attack to the point where it's disappearing.*"

By 2003, the store had 15 employees. Peters estimated that the year's profits would be only "maybe a thousand dollars." In 2007, after 23 years as executive director, she stepped down from the post, which was filled by Elaine Katzenberger; Peters remained on the board of directors. Peters said of her work at City Lights: "*When I started working here, we were in the middle of the Vietnam War, and now it's Iraq. This place has been a beacon, a place of learning and enlightenment*".

As of 2017, City Lights is a general bookstore, specializing in fiction and poetry, cultural studies, world history, and politics. It offers three floors of new-release hardcovers and paperbacks from all major publishers, as well as a large selection of titles from smaller, independent publishers. City Lights is a member of the American Booksellers Association.

In 1955, Ferlinghetti launched City Lights Publishers with his own *Pictures of the Gone World*, the first number in the Pocket Poets Series. This was followed in quick succession by *Thirty Spanish Poems of Love and Exile* translated by Kenneth Rexroth and *Poems of Humor & Protest* by Kenneth Patchen, but it was the impact of the fourth volume, *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) by Allen Ginsberg that brought national attention to the author and publisher.

*City Lights Journal* published poems of the Indian Hungry generation writers when the group faced police case in Kolkata. The group got worldwide publicity thereafter.

Apart from Ginsberg's seven collections, a number of the early Pocket Poets volumes brought out by Ferlinghetti have attained the status of classics, including *True Minds* by Marie Ponsot (1957), *Here and Now* by Denise Levertov (1958), *Gasoline* (1958) by Gregory Corso, *Selected Poems* by Robert Duncan (1959), *Lunch Poems* (1964) by Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems* (1967) by Philip Lamantia, *Poems to Fernando* (1968) by Janine Pommy Vega, *Golden Sardine* (1969) by Bob Kaufman, and *Revolutionary*



*Letters* (1971) by Diane di Prima.

In 1967 the publishing operation moved to 1562 Grant Avenue. Dick McBride ran this part of the business with his brother Bob McBride and Martin Broadley for several years.

In 1971, Nancy Peters joined Ferlinghetti as co-editor and publisher. He praised her as "*one of the best literary editors in the country.*"

Over the years, the press has published a wide range of poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction, and works in translation. In addition to books by Beat Generation authors, the press publishes literary work by such authors as Charles Bukowski, Georges Bataille, Rikki Ducornet, Paul Bowles, Sam Shepard, Andrei Voznesensky, Nathaniel Mackey, Alejandro Murguía, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ernesto Cardenal, Daisy Zamora, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Juan Goytisolo, Anne Waldman, André Breton, Kamau Daáood, Masha Tupitsyn, and Rebecca Brown. In 1965, the press published an anthology of texts by Antonin Artaud, edited by Jack Hirschman.

Associated from the outset with radical left-wing politics and issues of social justice, City Lights has in recent years augmented its list of political non-fictions, publishing books by Noam Chomsky, Michael Parenti, Howard Zinn, Cindy Sheehan, and Ward Churchill.

## Howl

Ferlinghetti had heard Ginsberg read *Howl* in 1955 at the Six Gallery; the next day, he offered to publish it along with other shorter poems. William Carlos Williams — who was Ginsberg's childhood Pediatrician and himself a future Pocket Poet with a 1957 edition of his early modernist classic, *Kora in Hell* (1920) — was recruited for an introduction, perhaps to lend literary justification to *Howl's* depictions of drug use and homosexuality. Prior to publication, Ferlinghetti had asked, and received, assurance from the American Civil Liberties Union that the organization would defend him, should he be prosecuted for obscenity.

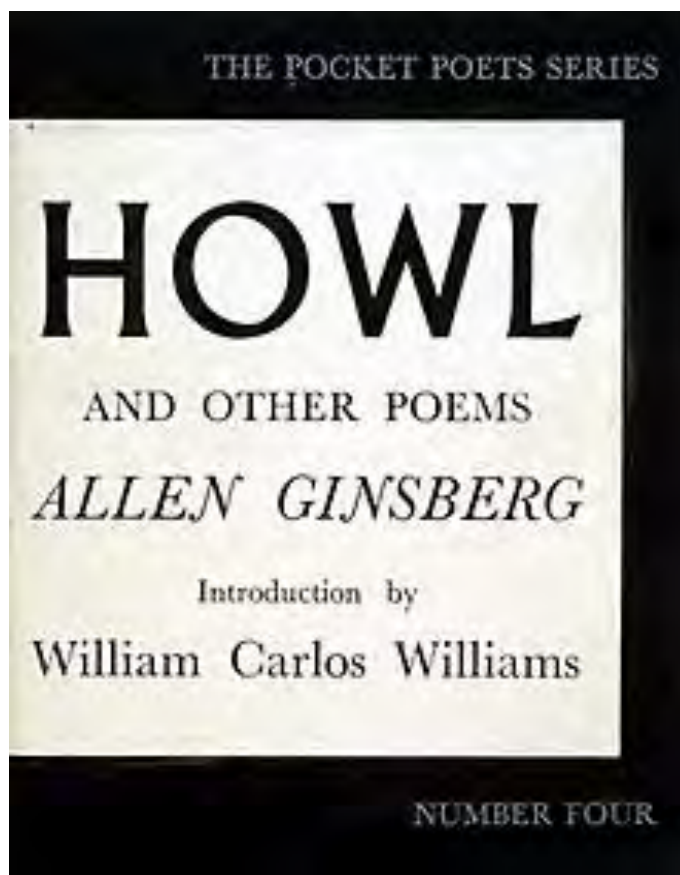
Published in November 1956, *Howl* was not long in generating controversy. In March 1957, local Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee seized a shipment from England of the book's second printing on grounds of obscenity, but he was compelled to



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release the books when federal authorities refused to confirm his charge. But the troubles were just beginning, for in June of that year, local police raided City Lights Bookstore and arrested store manager Shigeyoshi Murao on the charge of offering an obscene book for sale. Ferlinghetti, then in Big Sur, turned himself in on his return to San Francisco. Both faced a possible \$500 fine and a 6-month sentence. (Ginsberg was in Tangiers at the time, and not charged.) The ACLU posted bail, assigned defense counsel Albert Bendich to the case, and secured the pro bono services of famous criminal defense lawyer J. W. Ehrlich.



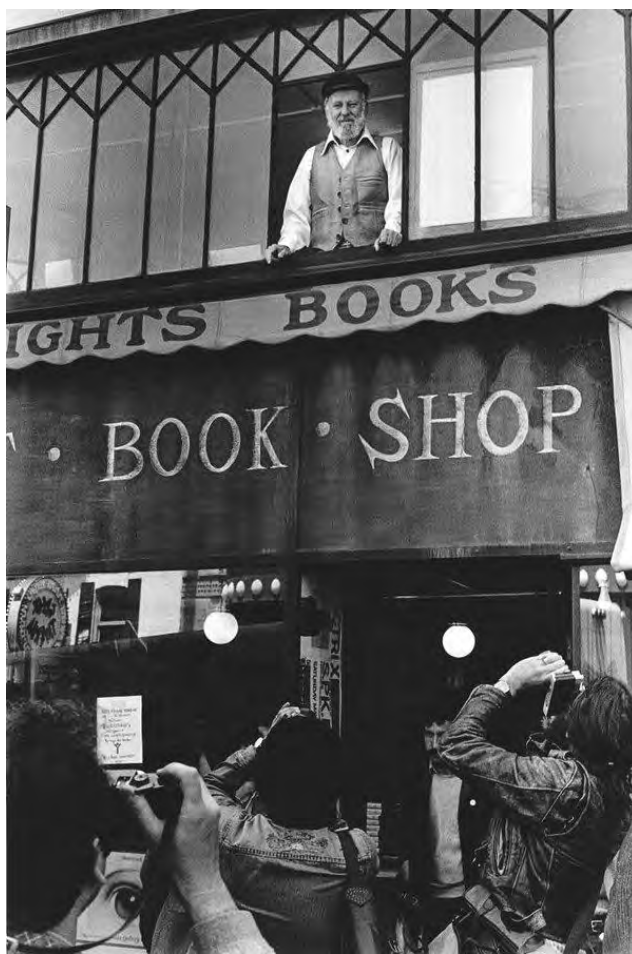
*Howl and Other Poems* was published in the fall of 1956, as number four in the Pocket Poets Series from City Lights Books

The municipal court trial, presided over by Judge Clayton W. Horn, ran from August 16 to September 3, 1957. The charges against Murao were dismissed since it couldn't be proved that he knew what was in the book. Then, during the trial of Ferlinghetti,

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respected writers and professors testified for the defense. Judge Horn rendered his precedent-setting verdict, declaring that *Howl* was not obscene and that a book with "the slightest redeeming social importance" merits First Amendment protection. Horn's decision established the precedent that paved the way for the publication of such hitherto banned books as D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. The media attention resulting from the trial stimulated national interest, and, by 1958, there were 20,000 copies in print. Today there are over a million. Ginsberg continued to publish his major books of poetry with the press for the next 25 years. Even after the publication by Harper & Row of his *Collected Poems* in 1980, he would continue his warm association with City Lights, which served as his local base of operations, for the rest of his life.



Ferlinghetti above the Bookstore - © City Lights Bookstore

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As I wrote above, I always loved books and cannot imagine my (short) future without one -or many- to read. *"There is no friend as loyal as a book."* wrote Ernest Hemingway. And *"Books can be dangerous. The best ones should be labeled 'This could change your life'"* (Helen Exley); that's why all powerful, coercive institutions banned, destroyed, burned books -from the Churches to dictatorships, or even, right now, many so-called "democracies".

This is also why the *"City Lights"* bookstore was and remains so important, for me, for history, for San Francisco, for freedom, for our future. The goons in Myanmar, the moronic *"Proud Boys"* militia in the US, Donald J. Trump (who claims to *never* read books!), the Nazis, the Spanish Inquisition, and all the creeps who want to suppress thinking and expression of dissent forbid, trash, burn books. *"To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark."* (Victor Hugo).

Ferlinghetti and his team were promoting, publishing, disseminating the ideas and thoughts that had been mine since childhood. Maybe that's why I felt such a connection; maybe that's why I miss -and shall never forget- Lawrence Ferlinghetti. His poems will help:

### I am waiting...

I am waiting  
to get some intimations  
of immortality  
by recollecting my early childhood  
and I am waiting  
for the green mornings to come again  
youth's dumb green fields come back again  
and I am waiting  
for some strains of unpremeditated art  
to shake my typewriter

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and I am waiting to write  
the great indelible poem  
and I am waiting  
for the last long careless rapture  
and I am perpetually waiting  
for the fleeing lovers on the Grecian Urn  
to catch each other up at last  
and embrace  
and I am awaiting  
perpetually and forever  
a renaissance of wonder

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti*





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