

MIT Student

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Film Notes: Modern Times

The director of *Modern Times* is Charlie Chaplin. The film was released in 1936. Although the film does not explicitly state the year the story takes place, I take it to mean that Chaplin is commenting about industrialization, the hardships on the working class that are borne out of it, and how it affects his society at that time.

The city the film was set it was not specified, I think to imply that the effects of industrialization are visible in any city in the United States. However, given the diversity of filming locations throughout *Modern Times* (rundown shack by the water, the wealthy neighborhood where Chaplin's character and the Gamin sit down and fantasize about having a life together, the types of fruits that are shown in the fantasy sequence, the harbor where Chaplin's character knocks out the wedge, the road they walk down at the end of the film) all suggest that the film was shot in California somewhere.

Five adjectives or phrases to describe the sense of the city portrayed in the film: I have to admit that Chaplin's charisma and humor made it difficult to notice anything else. There was an absence of big cityscapes, and the point of view of the camera seemed very much like that of another human being getting to glimpse into the Tramp's life. The city had to be hyper-normal for a character as clownish as the Tramp to really stand out in it. The diversity of the locations gave the city a sense of its own complete universe, and that the Tramp was trying to find his way and settle down into it (only to realize at the end that he must leave the city to find his place). In this regard, the city feels very impersonal, though it appears very picturesque with its neat storefronts and department stores and wealthy neighborhoods. Even the rundown shack by the water is charming. The factory is airy and bright and clean, and does not feel oppressive. I don't think Chaplin is implying that there is anything particularly sinister about the modern times and automation, only that society as a whole experiences a bittersweet loss of innocence as a result.

One remarkable scene in this film was when Chaplin's character was force-fed by the machine during his lunch break while he was working in the factory. The convenience and elegance provided by the machine quickly descends into physical pain and loss of dignity, all while he is restrained and incapable of protecting himself. If it wasn't so funny while it was happening, the metaphor about the harmful effects of modernization would have made me sad.

Two questions I would like to think more about or discuss in class: do you think it would have been possible for the Tramp and the Gamin to have found happiness within the city? Why did they choose to remove themselves from it entirely when the Gamin could have just endured a stint in jail like the Tramp and then they would be reunited a little while later? What happened to the Gamin's sisters? Why aren't we made to care about where they ended up?

The factory scene reminds me of where the workers slaved alongside machines in *Metropolis*, all dictated by the huge clock. Both films make a point of showing that the human workers are at the mercy of the machines. In *Modern Times*, Chaplin's character is literally swallowed up by the machines and becomes a "cog in the machine" of industrialization. His factory work becomes a compulsive action and he suffers from a mental breakdown as a result of the drudgery he does.

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