

90 years of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*

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Ninety years ago, Charlie Chaplin's comedy-drama *Modern Times* hit movie theaters in the United States and internationally. The film had its world premiere in New York City on February 9, 1936.

Modern Times is remarkable for its ... "modernity." The themes it addresses—the relationship of the working class to advanced technology, workers' protests and socialist intervention, exploitation in the industrial slaughterhouse, police repression, unemployment and poverty—all remain unresolved questions.

Presently, a fascist gangster in the White House wages criminal imperialist wars abroad and advances efforts to establish a dictatorship in the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy at home. Mass layoffs, wage cuts, slashing of critical social programs and spending constitute a brutal war on the working-class sending millions deeper into poverty.

Modern Times continues to be a film very much of "modern times."

The plot

Modern Times follows a factory worker (Charles Chaplin) in a nameless American city as he struggles to survive the modern, industrialized capitalist world racked by economic depression and social convulsions. Eventually joined by a young orphan, "The Gamin" (Paulette Goddard, who married Chaplin that year), the two protagonists form a strong bond in their efforts to overcome the hardships of contemporary life and achieve some sort of stability and happiness.

In the inimitable style developed by Chaplin over the preceding two decades, *Modern Times* elicits both laughter and tears from viewers. He brilliantly weaves together episodes of comedy in the best slapstick tradition with moments of deeply human drama. One does not easily forget the film's iconic sequences, revered by generations of filmmakers and cinephiles (including, of course, the imperishable roller skating sequence!).

Opening *Modern Times*, a scene of hundreds of sheep herded to the slaughterhouse fades into hundreds of workers flooding into a factory for their shift. Inside, Chaplin's factory worker and his coworkers labor at a breakneck pace on the assembly line. A company president who could serve as Henry Ford's double uses high-tech video surveillance to spy on the workers.

An inventor presents a new "feeding machine" intended to eliminate workers' lunch breaks. Chaplin is chosen to demonstrate this "remarkable" invention. The machine goes haywire and he is left on the floor covered in dessert cake and soup.

He eventually suffers a nervous breakdown and is sucked into the machinery of the assembly line, riding through the mechanism like an amusement park water slide. This image has become one of the most famous cinematic moments of the twentieth century. Concluding the episode, he squirts oil in the company president's face before the police drag him out.

Released from the hospital jobless, Chaplin picks up a red flag fallen off

the back of a moving truck and suddenly finds himself at the head of a workers' march for "unity" and "liberty." He is immediately arrested and jailed as a "Communist leader."

While imprisoned, he foils a jail break and receives a "comfortable cell" more inviting than anything in the outside world. When pardoned by the state, he protests, "But I am so happy here."

The Gamin is introduced as she steals bananas to feed her family. Her single father searches desperately for work and is murdered by police at a demonstration of unemployed workers. She meets Chaplin while being arrested for stealing a loaf of bread.

After escaping the police, the two sit in front of a picture-perfect middle-class home and dream of a stable, happy life. They make a pact to achieve this dream, but police repression, joblessness, strikes and a merciless social order gets in their way at every step. Much hilarity, tragedy and touching drama follow.

In the end, sitting shoulder to shoulder at the side of an empty dessert road, The Gamin asks, crying, "What's the use of trying?" Chaplin pulls her close, sits tall, raises his clenched fist and declares, "Buck up—never say die. We'll get along!" The confidence returns to her face; they link arms and proceed down the empty road toward the unknown.

Modern Times is a work filled with great humanity, tragedy, humor, opposition to injustice and overwhelming optimism. There is a deep sympathy for all those cast aside, spat on and abused by bourgeois society, a determination to directly confront the rotten way of things, and a confidence that people will overcome the inequality and brutality forced upon them by society.

Chaplin the man and the artist

Chaplin's unmatched ability to blend comedy and tragedy stemmed from his own social and artistic background. Born in 1889 in South London, Chaplin grew up in poverty and hardship. His parents were music-hall entertainers. His father, suffering from alcoholism, left the family early in Chaplin's life.

Following the loss of her singing voice, Chaplin's mother, Hannah, found only temporary, low-paying work as a nurse and dressmaker. Chaplin, his older brother Sydney and Hannah moved from one hovel to the next, fighting tirelessly to put food on the table. The family was forced to enter the Lambeth Workhouse when Chaplin was seven years old.

Despite these conditions, Hannah made sure that the boys were properly educated and introduced to art and culture. She was permanently institutionalized in 1905 after numerous mental breakdowns and Chaplin was left alone at 14. The teenager struggled through menial jobs and eventually survived through performance. He worked as a child entertainer in music halls then as a vaudeville comedian, work that brought him to the United States where, in 1914, he started his work in the cinema.

Chaplin created his iconic Tramp character during this time. This

lovable vagrant who finds love, humor, hope and tragedy in an unjust social order made him the most famous man in the world. The character was, and remains today, a kick in the pants to official bourgeois society wherein the unemployed, propertyless man is reviled and scorned. It is especially disconcerting to the powerful when this “bum” elicits howls of laughter by kicking a policeman’s backside.

Between 1914 and 1921, Chaplin became a leading figure in Hollywood directing over 50 short films. Each movie represented a maturing and improving on the blending of slapstick humor and pathos. In 1919, Chaplin joined forces with actors Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and director D. W. Griffith to form United Artists, placing creative and financial control of motion pictures in the hands of the artists.

The Kid (1921) was Chaplin’s first feature-length film and demonstrated that his style could function in the changing cinematic environment in the 1920s. *The Gold Rush* (1925), *The Circus* (1928) and *City Lights* (1931) further developed this style, touching ever more overtly on social problems, and only raised Chaplin’s artistic status. On all his films, Chaplin stove for perfection, working as writer, lead actor, producer, musical composer and director.

Production and artistic significance

The genesis of *Modern Times* came out of Chaplin’s 16-month world tour following the premier of *City Lights* in 1931. During his trip, Chaplin witnessed firsthand the economic and political consequences of the Great Depression.

Hundreds of millions of people across the globe were unemployed and thrown into poverty while capitalist governments bailed out the corporations and banks. Those employed were mercilessly exploited. Fascism was on the rise in Europe. Military rearmament was underway and a new war was on the horizon.

Conversely, the gains of the 1917 Russian Revolution still had a tremendous impact on masses of workers despite the betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy. In the United States, millions of radicalized workers, often led by socialists and left-wingers, struck and protested between 1931 and 1936 across critical industries. The situation was no less explosive in all the other major imperialist centers.

Chaplin observed these events and sought to address the overwhelming social and political problems. It is reported that during a conversation with Mahatma Gandhi, in which they discussed modern technology, Chaplin, opposed to Gandhi’s condemnation of all modern technology, commented that “machinery with only consideration of profit” had put people out of work and ruined lives.

Modern Times marked a significant development in Chaplin’s work. More directly than ever before, Chaplin confronted the glaring social and, for the first time, political issues of contemporary life. The Tramp character was transformed into the “Factory Worker” at war with industrial capitalism.

Prior to production, Henry Ford demonstrated the assembly line to Chaplin. A reporter later related to Chaplin the brutal working conditions of the assembly line and that young workers recently migrated from rural areas to the cities were dropping like flies from nervous exhaustion.

Significantly, a sequence cut from the released print of *Modern Times* depicted Chaplin’s worker drafted into the army to fight a war overseas. In 1937, Japan invaded China marking the opening stages of the Second World War which would erupt two years later.

On the technical level, *Modern Times* was Chaplin’s first foray into sound filmmaking. The movie employed sound technology, but to a much more limited extent than every other major Hollywood production at the

time. Chaplin understood that addressing the changing social, economic and political period required embracing and mastering new technology. However, he refused to give the factory worker-tramp character a voice, understanding that this would ruin the characters’ appeal and connection to working people all over the world.

Reception and persecution

Modern Times was received with great enthusiasm and praise. The picture earned \$1.8 million in North American theatrical rentals during its release, becoming one of the top-grossing films of 1936. It was the most popular film at the British box office in 1935–36.

In some quarters, Chaplin’s movie was denounced for its unflattering portrayal of capitalist society. Most notoriously, Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels banned the movie from exhibition in Germany because of its “advocacy of communism.”

The film’s success placed Chaplin higher up on Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover’s watchlist. He had been a person of interest since 1922 for allegations that he associated with radicals, made contributions to left-wing labor organizations and intended to insert radical ideas into his films. Chaplin’s generally left-wing views, sympathies with the Russian Revolution and status as a “friend of the Soviet Union” put a target on his back.

Modern Times was followed by two remarkable works, *The Great Dictator* (1940) and *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), which addressed political questions head on, the former satirizing and condemning fascist gangsterism and the latter speaking forcefully against the brutalities of capitalism in its own unique manner. These movies sealed Chaplin’s fate with the American state apparatus. He was hounded by the FBI and its hired press at the beginning of the McCarthyite purges. The witch hunt focused on a manufactured sex scandal, utilized to tarnish the beloved comedian’s image and, eventually, bar Chaplin from reentering the country in 1952 after a tour to promote his new movie *Limelight*.

However, the witch-hunt ultimately failed to turn masses of workers and youth away from the great filmmaker. Chaplin was one of an unmatched collection of filmmakers, writers, painters, musicians and more who, to quote David Walsh in the recently published *Art and the Influence of Revolution*, “shared a commitment to realism, not as an artistic school, but as a philosophy of life; a deep feeling for the world ‘of three dimensions’ as it is and a determination to bring out its most essential characteristics.”

In the present period of tremendous inequality and social struggles, Chaplin’s defiance, optimism and humanity retain enormous relevance. To laugh in the face of adversity, not to shy away and ignore the immense problems of life, was Chaplin’s message and it has not lost an ounce of significance.

Modern Times can be viewed here.



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