Modern Times (1936)

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dir. Charles Chaplin; prod. Charles Chaplin; screenplay Charles Chaplin; photography Ira H. Morgan, Roland Totheroh; music Charles Chaplin. 35mm, black/white, 87 mins. Charles Chaplin Productions, distrib. United Artists.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Modern Times is a 1936 comedy by Charles Chaplin that fuses slapstick and melodrama into one of the best-known satires about industrial capitalism. The last film to feature Chaplin's famous Tramp character, it was the comedian's first feature-length work to deal with a topical subject: the Great Depression, which Chaplin uses as the backdrop for the Tramp and his companion's (the »Gamin,« played by Paulette Goddard) quest for steady jobs, which they believe to be the steppingstone to the desired financially secure middle class existence.

Modern Times depicts the Tramp as »a victim of industrialization and the Great Depression« (Stokes 252). In a personal note, Chaplin describes the film's two main characters as »the only two live spirits in a world of automatons«—a hint at the story's core dichotomy: humanity and machinery. »Both [characters],« he continues, »have an eternal spirit of youth and are absolutely unmoral. [They are a]live because [they] are children with no sense of responsibility« (Chaplin qtd. in Robinson 487). Since Chaplin portrays the world through the Tramp's eyes, the audience shares his ability to see it from a child-like, seemingly naïve, viewpoint without any cynicism. Chaplin's stance evokes that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who postulated that inequality was a product not of nature but of society. »Man, in the state of nature,« Rousseau wrote, »can have no need of remedies« (12). A child untouched by society would have no need, either, but by imagining a man whose innocence remains untainted, Chaplin shows us how a civilization gone wrong could affect such a being. Ultimately, the suffering of the Tramp is an allegory of the suffering of humanity »in the state of nature«: Reduced to its plot, *Modern Times* is a series of setbacks for its two main characters, who are not able to find and keep a place in the overtly industrialized

capitalist society the film portrays, no matter how good their intentions are or how hard they try. The hardships they endure are systemic in nature, but their unyielding optimism, enabled by their somewhat naïve perspective and zest for life, keeps them from despair. Chaplin's depiction of humanity, when faced with the inhumanity of industrial capitalism, evolves into a sentimental humanism: *Modern Times* may be considered an expression of his belief in the good of humanity *vis-à-vis* insuperable obstacles. The human potential untouched by a society reduced to the accumulation of capital is found within the innocence of the weak, who prove their strength even in the face of failure.

François Truffaut divided »Chaplin's body of films […] into a concern with two figures: the vagabond and the most famous man in the world« (qtd. in Insdorf 29). He then connected these two figures with specific questions that their respective images raise. The question raised by the vagabond is »Do I exist?« The most famous man in the world asks, »Who am I?« (29). The subtle difference is the latter's sense of his existence, even though he lacks the ability to pinpoint it. The vagabond, in contrast, feels like a nonentity. Everywhere he goes, he seems out of place. Nowhere is his predicament felt more harshly than in the industrial coldness of the dystopian factory scene that opens *Modern Times*: The Tramp is an assembly line worker overwhelmed with the sheer speed of the machinery that allows him not even time to scratch his nose. Trying to keep up with the work, he jumps on the assembly line and is swallowed by the machine. The film presents machinery both as the material extension of industrial capitalism and as the antithesis to humanity. The Tramp's inability to keep up with it stems from the fact that he is a living being: He falls behind when he sneezes or when bothered by a fly. Life keeps getting in the way of the accumulation of capital. After meeting the Gamin who, like him, lives »no place—anywhere,« the Tramp starts aiming for more than mere survival. After making fun of a middle class couple whom they observe—the happiness on display obviously striking them as absurd—he asks the Gamin: »Can you imagine us in a little home like that?« A dream sequence follows that unrealistically portrays a middle class home as a land of milk and honey, and from here on the rise to the status of the bourgeoisie becomes their new goal. It is telling just how unrealistically the dream sequence is staged. Like children, they play act a fantasy scenario because they do not know what an actual middle class existence looks like. Where satire normally betrays innocence by exaggerating the characteristics of what it aims to criticize, Chaplin rather satirizes the bourgeoisie by leaving his characters' innocence intact, thus revealing how alienating bourgeois illusions of happiness can be for those left out. Later, the film's most memorable slapstick scene is introduced when the Gamin greets the Tramp by exclaiming enthusiastically: »I've got a surprise for you. I've found a home!« She then leads him to an old wooden cottage. »It's paradise,« he says upon entering it. He then closes the door, after which a timber beam loosens and hits him on the head, as if telling him that it surely is not »paradise.« In the next few minutes, acts as harmless as sitting on a chair kick off the demolition of almost the whole cottage, but the couple refuses to acknowledge that their »paradise« is make-believe at best. »Of course it's no Buckingham Palace,« the Gamin says while repairing the collapsed roof with a broom—the disparity between »reality« and the characters' perception of their new home could hardly be greater. It is a sad scene, portraying the delusions of people reaching for a life hopelessly out of reach, and the situation is derived from the bleakness of their shared existence in poverty. And yet it consists exclusively of jokes. The fact that the chosen form of comedy is slapstick, which rests on the guile-

lessness of characters stumbling into a situation of violent mishap, helps turn tragedy and comedy into tragicomedy with a melodramatic streak.

The opposites at work here are included in the common sense understanding of the sentimental provided by the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (*OALD*): »connected with your emotions, rather than reason« (»sentimental«). It is surely not reasonable to behave as optimistically, and as oblivious to outer circumstances, as the Tramp and Gamin do, which exhibits an uncommon dimension of sentimentality within the scene. Both its comedic and tragic elements rest on emotionality. However, the viewer's perception of this emotionality differs greatly from that of the characters. The characters are freed from reason, which enables both their unrealistic attitudes and the comedy that arises from them. For the audience, however, it is much harder to disregard reason in the perception of what is happening on screen. Whereas the classical melodramatic approach favors emotion over reason to enhance its emotional impact, *Modern Times* rather uses the viewer's reason, which enables them to recognize the tragedy beneath the comedy, to enhance its emotional impact. Chaplin subverts sentimentality by making the very ability it lacks an essential part of its equation. The *OALD*'s second definition for »sentimental« further supports Chaplin's »popular« subversion of melodrama: »producing emotions such as pity, romantic love or sadness, which may be too strong or not appropriate; feeling these emotions too much.« It is indeed questionable whether the feelings produced by the cottage scene are appropriate. But rather than an inappropriately intense feeling of »pity, romantic love or sadness,« Chaplin approaches sentimentality in a way that leads to inappropriate laughter. It is worth noting that Chaplin viewed »love, pity and humanity« as »the kindliest light the world has ever known« (22). His subversion of the sentimental is by no means an attempt to deny or sabotage the sentimental dimension of his films. His audiences laughed at the Tramp's misfortunes not out of malice, but because the pity and sadness they feel for him makes them recognize their own humanity in his antics—which then enables them to discover the humor that lies between the emotional poles of life. After all, the possibility of leading a good life is the main motivation for the Tramp: a character so universally loved because he came to represent every human being to ever feel so out of place that they began to ask themselves—*Do I exist?*

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