



SILENT CINEMA

Modern Times

+ intro

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

This sound/silent hybrid is Chaplin's last non-dialogue film and a farewell to the little tramp character. Its satirical treatment of the tramp as the (literal) spanner in the works of the mechanised world is both funny and profound, and the much-loved character was accorded iconic status by modernist artists and even portrayed as a cartoon – anticipating the themes of man vs system that run like a thread through this month's Anime season.

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Critics are notoriously unwilling to call a masterpiece a masterpiece in case they wake up with red faces a week later to discover that it is nothing of the sort. Even allowing for critical caution, though, contemporary writers were out-of-the-ordinarily churlish about *Modern Times*, complaining in the same breath that Chaplin had dared to change – had been flattered into seeing himself as a mystic rather than a clown and had taken the little man out of his proper element, into the modern world – and that he had *not* changed; that his pictures were still flatly lit and cut in the fashion of 1914; that his evasion of sound by the use of schmaltzy music and archaic sub-titles was an equal blend of cowardice and gall; that in any case the film was at best a retrospective anthology of his favourite old gags.

Today all this seems a far-off whimpering, while the film begins to look, with all its faults, something like a masterpiece. Certainly it has done nothing but improve since the last time it came round. With the years the archaic techniques which seemed so affronting in 1936 have melted into a kind of timelessness. In any case, you feel Chaplin knew very well what he was doing. There is every sign that he consciously recognised this was the last appearance of The Tramp, 22 years after his first appearance at Keystone in January 1914. The optimistic end – for the first time Chaplin trots off towards the sunset and distant horizons not alone but in company with the girl, won at last – taken with the clown's ultimate discovery of a voice, gave the film an air of finality. In his next film Chaplin would be the Great Dictator and in the next, Verdoux. This was The Tramp's last fling and his last look at the world.

It is, as the critics in 1936 pointed out, a different world from the clapboard fences and dirt roads of rural California in the old slapstick shorts; the alleys which in Chaplin's films always took on a look of Victorian London. It is a world whose worries – industrial regimentation, strikes, riots, demonstrations, police brutality, drugs, urban pollution, the inhuman rigidity of bureaucratic social organisations – seem, oddly enough, even more contemporary now than in the Depression years when the film was made. But then, one of the qualities of Chaplin which now becomes clearer with the rediscovery of *Modern Times*, is the way he has of existing outside time. Just as the themes are still relevant to us, so the characters and the sentiments reach back to the nineteenth century. When he speaks of poverty and vagrancy, or shows the orphanage men taking children from a slum home, or shapes his vision of Paulette Goddard's sharp little waif, you sense acute memories of the long

ago reality of Chaplin's hard and formative boyhood. When towards the end he performs his great set-piece, the gibberish version of 'Titine', we see instantly and beautifully resurrected all the vitality and absurdity and incomparable techniques of the English music hall in which Chaplin was bred, and acquired the skills of comedy.

What skills they are, too. There is no sense at all in pursuing the old comparisons with Keaton, because the two comedians were, as we see most clearly here, poles apart. All they had in common was the chosen trade of creating laughter, and the impeccable command of mimetic technique. Keaton's was an art of understatement, of concealment; Chaplin's of virtuosity and display. Keaton in his great set-pieces always gave the impression of a man caught up in irresistible forces of nature (a whirlwind, flood, avalanche, or merely the force of gravity) and simply pitting his wit and physique against them. Chaplin's are brilliant, pyrotechnic exhibitions of theatrical pantomime. Keaton was primarily an actor; so was Chaplin (and on occasions a great one too), but he was first and foremost a *performer* – 'the finest goddam ballet dancer in the business,' as W. C. Fields, intending deadly insult, called him.

The conveyor belt sequence which opens the film is a masterpiece of choreography. Chaplin is the man who simultaneously tightens two nuts on each of an endless series of mysterious components as they pass inexorably by him. A moment's inattention to brush away a fly causes chaos throughout the production line; and when finally he runs berserk it is to dance his way into a mad ballet, demonically attacking with spanners anything that looks amenable to tightening, including the bodice buttons of a busty lady passing by. There are similar impeccable compositions of mime and movement in the scene where, having inadvertently swallowed an elephant dose of joy-powder, he pirouettes out of the prison mess in the wake of a line of frog-marching convicts; and in the sequence where he roller-skates, blindfold, on the brink of an abyss – which hasn't much to do with the story, but is divine.

It is no use pretending that Chaplin is not a great clown. *Modern Times* was the film that began his eclipse with the intellectual critics, who complained that he had begun to take himself as seriously as some of them (by right, that is, as intellectuals) had done; that he was forgetting his job as an entertainer and fancying himself as a philosopher. But, looking at it now, nobody could really confuse with philosophy these encounters of his Tramp with circumstances of modern life as self-evident as the huge jealous husbands, angry matrons and other hazards of the world where Keystone comedy lived. He never went beyond the clown's true function of holding up to nature a distorting mirror. Sometimes, of course, the reflections were illuminated with something like genius. It will always remain mysterious whether the famous scene where Charlie helpfully picks up a red warning flag which has fallen off a lorry, and runs after it, unaware that a mass demonstration has formed up behind him, is comedy or tragedy: either way it is an epic of a man as victim of his fate.

David Robinson, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1972

MODERN TIMES

Director: Charlie Chaplin
Production Company: Charles Chaplin Corporation
Producer: Charles Chaplin *
General Production Manager: Alfred Reeves *
Assistant Production Manager: Jack Wilson *
Assistant Director: Carter De Haven
Assistant Director: Henry Bergman *
Script Clerk: Della Steele *
Casting Director: Allan Garcia *
Screenplay: Charlie Chaplin
Directors of Photography: Rollie Totheroh, Ira Morgan
Assistant Camera: Mark Marlatt, Ted Minor, Morgan Hill *
Gaffer: Don Donaldson *
Portrait Photography: Max Munn Autrey *
Process Photography: Bud Thackery *
Film Editor: Charles Chaplin *
Art Director: Daniel Hall *
Sets: Charles D. Hall, Russell Spencer
Props: Hal Atkins, Bob Depps *
Purchasing Agent: Joe Van Meter *
Make-up for Chaplin and Goddard: Elizabeth Arden *
Music Composed by: Charlie Chaplin
Music Conducted by: Alfred Newman
Music Arrangers: Edward B. Powell, David Raksin
Recorded by: Paul Neal, Frank Maher
Projectionist: Garwood Averill *

Cast

Charles Chaplin (a factory worker)
Paulette Goddard (a gamin)
Henry Bergman (a café proprietor)
Stanley Sandford (burglar/Big Bill)
Chester Conklin (a mechanic)
Hank Mann (burglar)
Stanley Blystone (Sheriff Couler)
Allan Garcia (president of the Electro Steel Corp)
Dick Alexander (a convict)
Cecil Reynolds (the chaplain)
Myra McKinney (the chaplain’s wife)
Murdoch McQuarrie, Wilfred Lucas, Ed Le Sainte, Fred Malatesta, Sam Stein, Juana Sutton, Ted Oliver
Louis Natheaux (burglar/addict) *
Joe Van Meter *

USA 1936
89 mins

* Uncredited

With original soundtrack

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Silent Cinema: Modern Times + intro

Sun 15 May 15:30

Seniors’ Free Matinee: Gregory’s Girl + discussion

Mon 16 May 14:00

Experimenta: Lensing the Landscape: River Yar + discussion with artists William Raban and Chris Welsby

Wed 18 May 18:15

Terror Vision: Ms .45 (AKA Angel of Vengeance)

Fri 27 May 18:30

Relaxed Screening: Frequencies (AKA OXV: The Manual) + intro and discussion

Mon 30 May 18:10

Projecting the Archive: Idol of Paris + intro by Josephine Botting, BFI Curator

Tue 31 May 18:15

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