



MODERN TIMES is a March, 2015 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that film dvd set.

United States 1936 black-and-white 83 minutes live action feature silent comedy Charles Chaplin Productions Producer: Charles Chaplin

14 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 0 Direction: Charles Chaplin**
- 1 Editing: Charles Chaplin and Willard Nico**
- 2 Cinematography: Roland Totheroh*, Ira Morgan***
- 2 Lighting: Don Donaldson* and Frank Testera***
- 0 Story: Charles Chaplin**
- 2 Music: Charles Chaplin* Orchestrator: Bernhard Kaun***
Arrangements: David Raksin* and Edward Powell*
Music Recording: Frank Maher* and Paul Neal*
- 2 Production Design: Charles Hall* Art Direction: J. Russell Spencer***
Makeup: Elizabeth Arden
- 2 Sound**
- 1 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**

14 total points

Cast: Charlie Chaplin* (A worker), Paulette Goddard (Gamin), Hank Mann (Burglar), Henry Bergman (Cafe owner), Chester Conklin (Mechanic),

Louis Natheaux (Burglar), Richard Alexander* (Prison cellmate), Stanley Blystone (Gamin's father), Allan Garcia* (Company boss), Cecil Reynolds (Minister), Mira McKinney (Minister's wife), Edward LeSaint (Sheriff Couler), Juana Sutton (Woman with buttoned bosom), Walter James (Assembly line foreman), James Morton* (Assembly line relief man), Wilfred Lucas (Juvenile officer), Lloyd Ingraham (Frustrated cafe patron), Gloria De Haven (j) (Sister to gamin), Tiny Sandford (Big Bill), Murdock MacQuarrie (J. Widdecombe Billows, inventor), others

MODERN TIMES is one of Chaplin's transitional films. It ends his string of feature silent comedies and begins a trio of political sound dramedies. Still employing a universal tramp figure popularized in preceding releases THE KID, THE GOLD RUSH, and CITY LIGHTS, Chaplin tosses him into an agitated contemporary world. First seen as a frustrated, obsessive factory worker, the shirker cannot even manage to tighten nuts precisely. He is still operating on a private time line, giving himself a prolonged smoke during bathroom break, extending a relief worker's stint by delaying notification of return, creating a unique syncopated labor rhythm that repeatedly contradicts a conveyor belt's steady progress. From the odd black sheep in initial scene to a misplaced ballet star alternating spurts of oil with choreographic steps, everything privileges individualism and the artist. Anyone can be trained quickly to perform a single mechanical function. To achieve art requires discipline, skill, talent, timing. All these are visible in the lead performance.

In six prior outings with transient protagonist, starting with SUNNYSIDE in 1919, the world's most famous former vaudevillian contented himself with silent pantomime in a largely soundless universe. CITY LIGHTS included a whistle and nonsensical modified speech. MODERN TIMES adds intercom sound and a very brief radio announcement. Technological progress establishes beachheads, even in Chaplin's domain. Though sparsely utilized, sound recording is of superior quality in the second Depression Era release from Charles Chaplin Productions. Unavailability of engineering expertise is not what caused this ideosyncratic filmmaker to once again employ a silent format. No,

the reason for it was that he still believed speech would divide, not unite viewers. Thus achieving quite the opposite of his goal.

Two post-GOLD RUSH releases make abundantly clear story continuity was not a Chaplin strength. Otis Ferguson noted a quadripartite structure undergirding MODERN TIMES, labelling its four parts “The Shop,” “The Jailbird,” “The Watchman,” and “The Singing Waiter.” See Saul Austerlitz’s review posted at www.criterion.com for elaboration of this information. It could just as readily be argued these four sections correspond to “Man Against Technology,” “Crime and Punishment,” “Conspicuous Consumption vs. Subsistence Living,” and “Songs of Freedom.”

Revolt against mechanization lands angst-ridden hero in jail. For assisting authorities in foiling a prison break, Mr. Anonymous is advanced to early pardon and discharge. This leads inevitably to violation of socially approved consumerism and a return to confinement.

Between visits with law enforcement agents, there are housekeeping episodes with an equally amoral female teenager, played in swashbuckler fashion by Paulette Goddard. A kind of wordless Katharine Hepburn substitute, her American gamin serves as love interest for Chaplin’s character. What a thankless assignment. Life beyond travel is never more than a daydream in the Little Tramp’s world.

Considerable emotional mileage derives from the song “Smile,” an evergreen making its premiere appearance here. Composed by Chaplin himself, it evidences wizardry for melodic creation, a major payoff of years devoted to music hall entertainment. Lyrics and its title would be added much later, in 1954, by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons, according to Wikipedia. Apparently the tune was not intended to carry any message other than what could be inferred from accompanying scenes.

What did the director intend audiences to feel after watching his losing struggle against innovation and conformity? Rebellion against modernism? Sympathy for displaced laborers? A supportive bond with strikers and labor unions? Resistance to industrialization?

Hard to tell. As political document, MODERN TIMES lacks gravity and a detailed program for action.

It succeeds chiefly as a thoroughly entertaining work of art. Most visually intricate of all Chaplin's films, MODERN TIMES incorporates a smidgen of Russian montage and homages to Fritz Lang's METROPOLIS and Rene Clair's A NOUS LA LIBERTE. Acute class distinctions of the German silent classic resurface. Clair's concept of liberating workers from tedium is enthusiastically adopted as well.

As exposition of pantomime mastery, this motion picture is second to none. Whenever its principal player is on view, audiences are treated to a master class in narration through gesture.

Not so impressive are veteran silent partners from earlier decades. Their dense makeup, exaggerated grimaces, and broad overplaying must have repelled contemporary observers newly introduced to subtleties of intonation.

However, this 1936 phenomenon did make considerable impression on other directors and actors. Murdock MacQuarrie's J. Widdecombe Billows, hapless automatic feeder mastermind, certainly looks like a prototype for THE WIZARD OF OZ's title character. Goddard's defiant open stance on a waterfront dock, knife gripped crosswise guarding teeth, tonally prefigures Errol Flynn in THE SEA HAWK and dozens of lesser lawless sea dogs. The linked arm departure into unexplored territory which concludes MODERN TIMES is echoed in a similarly united quartet three years later traveling to a rumored Emerald City. Watch loping glides of its improvising cafe singer here and discover a starting point for Jacques Tati's tennis footwork in LES VACANCES DE MONSIEUR HULOT. Another striking resemblance is Allan Garcia's boss with surplus leisure time whose interest in assembling jigsaw puzzles resembles Susan Alexander's pursuit of a like achievement as insulated mistress of CITIZEN KANE's Xanadu. Neither is happy, despite status and wealth.

Editing reveals faster pacing than customary in Chaplin's work. Dissolves, iris-outs, even an occasional wipe serve as transition devices. Within scenes, Old Hat prevails, cutting harnessed tightly to movements of the star. Result: a substantial number of scenes drag in order to accommodate silent film timings more conducive to elaborate mime.

Oversize props frequently recall hoary conventions of Victorian stagecraft. Yet sets intermingle realistic elements with blatantly artificial ones, most notably in external factory scenes and those shot along an urban waterfront. There are several remarkably detailed setups, a ship under construction being perhaps most distinctive.

At no point is underlying music misjudged. When heard, it invariably reinforces emotional impact, making it ideal companion to underdog characters. Since no meaningful lyrics are ever coupled with heard tunes, all interpretation must be supplied by pictures. Exactly what the film's creator wished.

Highlights of MODERN TIMES are conveyor belt sequences, Chaplin's compulsory automated meal, a salacious song-and-dance routine, the whirling waiter buffeted by hotfooting crowd, and one inadvertently sunk ship.

Lowlights abound also. Chief are the gamin's attempts to ape Esmeralda, a less rewarding feeding scene involving the hero's trapped supervisor, Charlie's utopian fantasy about breakfast in an ideal cottage, and a soused night watchman toasting burglars who claim interest only in assuaging of their hunger. Right.

The MK2 Chaplin Collection double-disk dvd release includes a generous array of special features. Most significant are a twenty-six minute documentary featuring insights into the actor's thinking by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, a ten-minute Cuban film showing rural responses in 1967 to Chaplin's antics, a nine-minute Ford Motor Company musical titled SYMPHONY IN F from 1940, and a six-minute introduction to Chaplin's achievements by David Robinson.

Anyone interested in the development of film comedy must watch this motion picture. It's a rare privilege to see a master mime providing such an extended display of formidable skills.

Content of this film is suitable for teens and adults. Parents of preteens should preview it in advance. There is a fairly stark death scene involving the gamin's father, multiple instances of sexual innuendos, and repeated mockings of authority figures, both secular and religious.