

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: Modern Times

USA, 1936. Rated G. 87 min

Cast: Charlie Chaplin, Paulette Goddard, Henry Bergman;
Cinematographers: Ira H. Morgan, Roland Totheroh; **Producer:** Charlie Chaplin; **Director:** Charlie Chaplin

Charles Chaplin may have made *Modern Times* nearly seventy years ago, but its themes are relevant as ever. At the height of the Great Depression, Chaplin both satirized and commented on an increasingly mechanized (and impoverished) society. His beloved character, The Little Tramp (making his last-ever appearance) finds himself continually, and at times hilariously just trying to adjust to this society and survive. He initially appears as assembly line factory worker, and subsequently finds work as a dock laborer, a department store security officer, and even a singing waiter—not to mention numerous stays in jail, whose shelter he begins to prefer to unemployment and starvation.

Throughout, Chaplin never shies away from showing us the human costs of industrialization, though when he does, it's often with his graceful gift for slapstick, which is arguably at its most articulate peak here. Everyone remembers the tour de force sequence where the pressure of an assembly line (and a uproariously malfunctioning feeding machine) causes the Tramp to crack and run rampantly through the factory in a true *ballet mécanique*. The setting is perfect for his repetitive, gag-enhanced humor. The unforgettable sight of him having fallen through a conveyor belt into the innards of a giant, multi-wheeled apparatus remains the film's most iconic image. However, it's only one of many classic scenes. Consider his roller-skating *blindfolded* perilously close to an open ledge, the "nose-powder" assisted

act of bravery he commits during his first stay in jail, or the impromptu game of football he winds up playing with a roast duck while waiting tables.

But though Chaplin's Tramp was the star, his female lead this time out was nearly his equal. Played with poignancy and spunk by his then-paramour and future wife Paulette Goddard, her "Gamin" (street urchin) also struggles to survive after her laborer father is murdered and her younger siblings are sent to an orphanage. Her strength and cunningness are apparent from her first appearance onscreen. When she literally



bumps into the Tramp, it's obvious that they're partners in crime, whether together or apart. Chaplin originally wrote a much more downbeat ending for the film where, after suffering another nervous breakdown, the Tramp receives a visit in the hospital from the Gamin, who has become a nun. Instead, he opted for a more optimistic (if still bittersweet) final scene, with the two characters walking off into the sunset together. They may be poor and downtrodden, but they have hope, and they have each other.

Chaplin's motivation to make *Modern Times* stemmed from when he toured the world to promote his previous feature, the great *City Lights* (1931). He saw once prosperous countries in

financial ruin and sensed from many of the world's citizens the magnitude of finding work, only to see most employment have counter effects. As silent film became more outmoded in contemporary cinema, Chaplin originally wanted this new picture to be his first sound film, and went as far to write a script with dialogue. However, after shooting one scene with traditional sound and dialogue, Chaplin decided to dispense with it and make another mostly silent feature with intertitles and a fantastic, elaborate sound design. Fittingly, the only words come from mechanical devices such as a radio or a phonographic record. The grand exception, of course, appears near the end, when we hear Chaplin's voice for the first time performing as a singing waiter. Naturally, the song's lyrics are complete gibberish, though you can follow along with Chaplin's hand gestures.

Today, the film stands tall along with *City Lights*, *The Gold Rush* and *The Kid* as one of Chaplin's most influential works. It was added to the National Film Registry in 1989, and appeared on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 Greatest Movies in 1998. This high definition digital restoration of the film had its illustrious premiere at the closing night ceremonies of the 2003 Cannes Film Festival. It's been often called the last of the great silent films. In terms of its scope, accomplishment, and emotional impact, it may well be one of the greatest films of all time, silent or otherwise.

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