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Chaplin

A life in pictures

Commentary by
David Robinson



Sight & Sound



Charles Chaplin's film career lasted over 50 years and includes some of the finest screen comedies ever made. The work of an instinctive entertainer, his movies made audiences laugh the world over. But they were also always intensely personal films, and touched on everything from his often troubled private life to his radical political views. This 16-page photo supplement introduces us to ten key Chaplin movies, and combines some of the most iconic images of the film-maker at work with rarely-seen archive material. With notes by Chaplin's acclaimed biographer David Robinson

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The Kid

'The Kid' remains Chaplin's most personal work, the comic transmutation of nightmare memories of a childhood of abject poverty and the terror of being dumped in public institutions. More personal still, Chaplin's inspiration for imagining the Tramp as surrogate father to an abandoned baby came only days after his own first child was born chronically handicapped, and died at three days old. He found his only true co-star in the four-year-old Jackie Coogan: an inspired instinctive mimic, Jackie was able meticulously to interpret Chaplin's own conception of the child's role. In the quest for perfection Chaplin filmed for a year, with a then-unprecedented shooting ratio of 53:1. The film established Coogan as the world's most beloved child: after a chequered on-screen career he was to reappear, late in life, as its nastiest old man, Uncle Fester in 'The Addams Family'.

1921





1923

A Woman of Paris

After 70 films in which he had himself clowned in every scene, Chaplin embarked on a dramatic comedy in which he merely walked on in an unbilled role as a railway porter. Chaplin's exposition of narrative and psychology through purely visual means was matched by the understated acting of Adolphe Menjou and Edna Purviance (both pictured): "As I have noticed", he explained, "men and women try to hide their emotions rather than to try

and express them. And that is the method I have pursued – to become as realistic as possible." Chaplin never had a better press or a worse box office: the public shunned a film in which he did not star. Nevertheless 'A Woman of Paris' inaugurated a new school of sophisticated comedy, and was acknowledged by Lubitsch as a seminal influence on his own development. Seeing the film convinced the young Michael Powell to go into pictures.



The Gold Rush

Exemplifying his own dictum that only a hair's breadth separates comedy and tragedy, the dual sources for Chaplin's classic comedy were the privations of the Klondike prospectors of the 1890s and the Donner disaster of 1846 when a party of snowbound immigrants were reduced to eating their own moccasins and the corpses of their comrades. From such unlikely material Chaplin crafted one of his most sustained comedies, with classic set-pieces such as the eating of a boot with all the pretensions of a gourmet banquet, Charlie's transformation into an appetising chicken, the dance of the rolls, and the miners' hut that teeters agonisingly on the edge of a precipice. 'The Gold Rush' is one of Chaplin's most visually spectacular films; shooting began on location in the Sierra Nevada snow country, though subsequently the snowscapes were recreated at the studio under the Southern Californian sun.

1925





1928

The Circus

Chaplin built the scenario of 'The Circus' around the nightmarish climactic sequence of thrill-comedy: performing a tightrope act high above the circus ring, he is attacked by a troupe of vicious monkeys, who throw him perilously off balance and rip off his break-away trousers to reveal that he has forgotten to put on his tights. Rejecting doubles even for the most dangerous scenes, Chaplin mastered the techniques of wire-walking and made 200 takes in the lion's cage. Though the result is one of his most sustained and carefree comedies, the production was fraught with hazards, including a gale that ravaged the circus tent, an unseemly and sensational divorce and a fire that destroyed the set (the picture shows Chaplin, a dressing-jacket over his costume, surveying the still-smoking ruins). Chaplin preferred to ignore the film in his autobiography, even though it won him his first Oscar (at the second ceremony) "for versatility and genius in writing, acting, directing and producing".



1931

The coming of sound was a bigger challenge for Chaplin than for his Hollywood contemporaries. The global audience he commanded through pantomime would shrink dramatically if the Little Tramp now began to speak in English. Chaplin's solution was to continue making silent pictures, though with synchronised music and sound effects. In 'City Lights' prolific comedy is structured around the central story of the Little Tramp's love for a blind flower girl. From the start Chaplin knew that the focus of the picture must be the final scene in which the girl, having

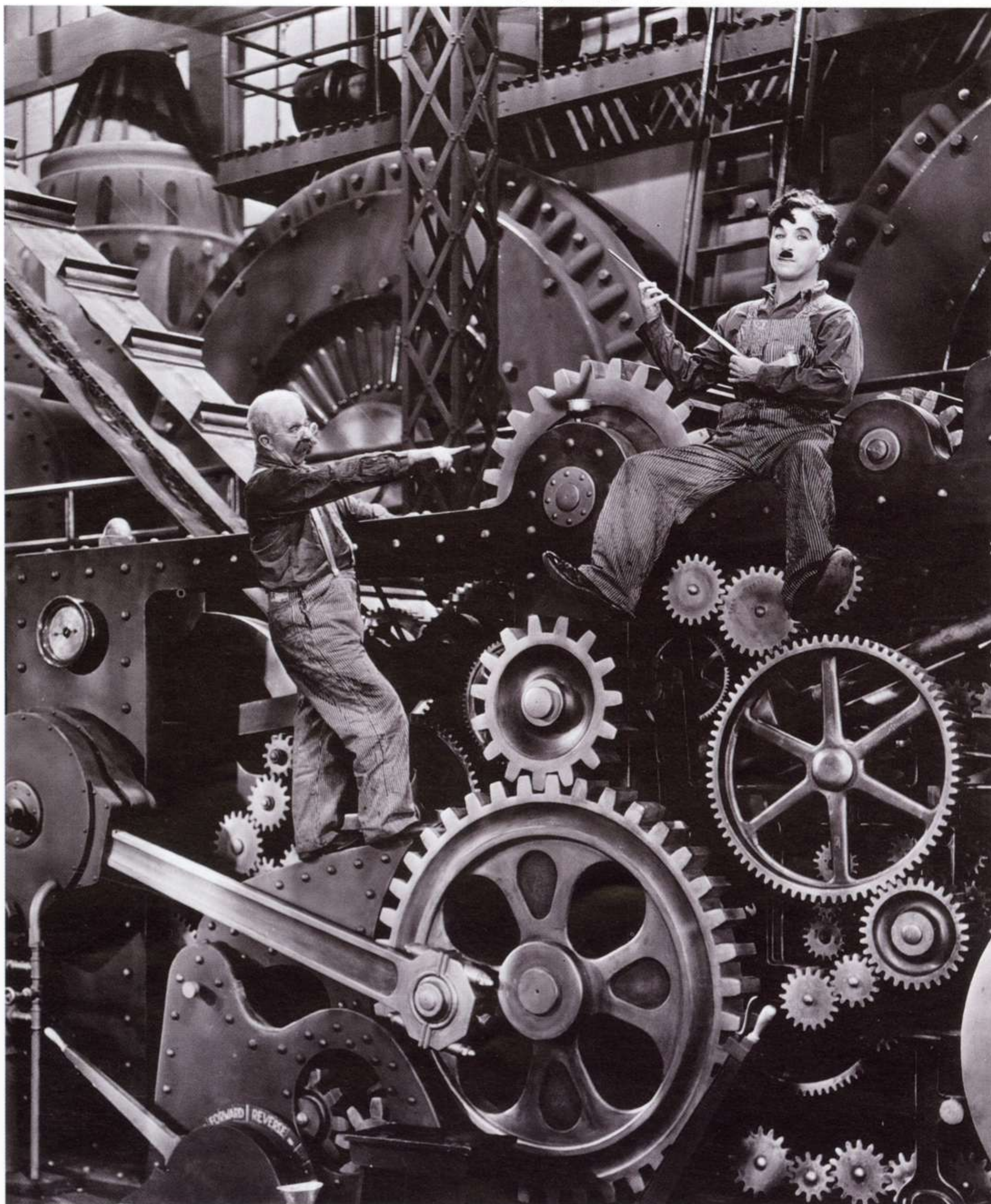
recovered her sight, finally sees the benefactor who has paid for her cure – not the handsome millionaire she had imagined, but this abject piece of humanity. The scene, wrote novelist and screenwriter James Agee, is "the greatest piece of acting and the highest moment in movies". Chaplin had technical and temperamental difficulties with the inexperienced leading lady Virginia Cherrill, and the work dragged on for an agonising two years and eight months. The boxing sequence (pictured) remains one of his most sustained comic tours de force.

1936

Modern Times

'Modern Times' marked the last screen appearance of Chaplin's Little Tramp, who takes his farewell from a world very different from that into which he had been born, before World War I. Now, in the aftermath of America's Great Depression, a combination of mass unemployment and industrial automation, he finds himself plagued, to comic effect, with issues not very different from anxieties of our own age – poverty, unemployment, strikes and

strike breakers, political intolerance, economic inequalities, the tyranny of the machine, narcotics. The Tramp is now a factory worker and his battle with the machine – he is driven crazy by production-line monotony and ends up between the cog wheels – has moments of authentic surreality. Chaplin planned to use dialogue but thought better of it: his voice is heard only rendering a ballad in an Italianate gibberish of his own invention.



1940

The Great Dictator



'The Great Dictator' celebrates a bizarre trick of historical destiny: the 20th century's most detested tyrant and its best-loved clown were born in the same week of 1889, had uncanny physical similarities, and even wore the same moustache (though only one was real). Later Chaplin said that if he had known the full truth of the Nazi death camps he could not have treated Hitler as a figure of fun: but the comedy is fairly lethal. Adenoid Hynkel, the tyrant of Ptomania, is crazed with dreams of world domination. The voice of passionate protest, in defence of humanity and idealism, that speaks out through the person of the little Jewish barber, is undoubtedly Chaplin's own. Chaplin painstakingly studied newsreels of Hitler to produce his extraordinary living caricature of the Führer's postures and oratory. To make such a film at a time when much of America was isolationist or pro-German demanded considerable courage – both moral and financial.



'The Great Dictator' – his first film with dialogue – marked a revolution in Chaplin's working methods. Throughout his career up to this time he had worked without scripts, improvising and developing ideas on the set – a costly process he was only able to sustain by financing his own films entirely. By contrast, 'The Great Dictator' had one of the most complex scripts on record, its 300 pages marked with an elaborate system of letters and numbers to identify every shot and take. This was matched by the vast number of drawings by production designer Russell Spencer, often providing detailed storyboarding for difficult scenes. This design is for a spectacular process scene eventually abandoned. Chaplin's idea to fly a sausage-shaped blimp beneath the arch would have no doubt given some anxiety to the Hays Office, Hollywood's de facto censorship board.

The Christmas Card

Chaplin's concern with world affairs was intense and interventionist. In the wake of the Depression he read industriously and propounded his own economic theory. His writings also reveal the passion of his feeling about the Spanish civil war. His fierce hatred of Nazism found an outlet in May 1942 when he was invited to speak at a meeting in aid of Russian war relief. A sense of patriotism (and perhaps a touch of the ham) led him to accept a succession of similar speaking assignments, at one of which he incautiously addressed the audience as 'Comrades'. These incidents were diligently stored by the FBI for future use in the years of Cold War paranoia. The depth and sincerity of Chaplin's belief is attested by this 1942 Christmas card in aid of the Russian American Society for Medical Aid to Russia and calling on the Allies to open a second front in support of the Soviet troops.



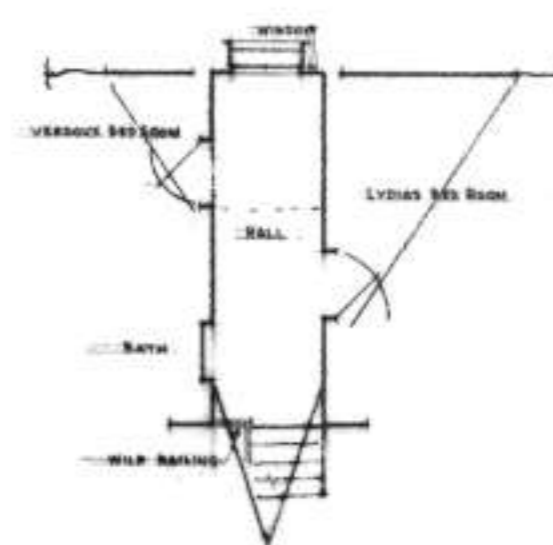
1942



Monsieur Verdoux

The darkest film of Chaplin's career, 'Monsieur Verdoux' – subtitled "a comedy of murders" – was based (at the suggestion of Orson Welles) on the career of the infamous French wife-killer Henri Landru. Chaplin plays Henri Verdoux, an honest bank clerk until the Depression and unemployment drive him into a profitable business of marrying and murdering rich widows. The business of murder is handled with tact and dexterity. Claude Chabrol considers the scene pictured above as worthy of Hitchcock: Chaplin intimates the commission of the dark deed only through a civil conversation, an exit, a change of light and a re-entry. The plan for the scene, pictured right, by art director John Beckman is one of a series that meticulously laid out the shooting of every scene in advance, to avoid waste of raw film-stock, then in short supply.

A COMEDY OF MURDERS
CHARLES CHAPLIN



1947



1951

Limelight

'Limelight', in which Chaplin turned back to the London and music halls of his youth, looks like a nostalgic escape from the brutal realities of McCarthy-era Hollywood, in which he found himself a victim of the prevailing mood of political paranoia. There was certainly more than a touch of bitter autobiography in Chaplin's portrait of an old comedian

who has lost the loyalty of his public. The 20-year-old Claire Bloom played the young dancer whose career he retrieves as his own declines; and in a precious sequence Chaplin is partnered by his greatest peer in silent days, Buster Keaton - seen here with Chaplin in the dressing-room scene that precedes their slapstick stage act.

In 1952 the US attorney-general rescinded Chaplin's re-entry permit to the US as the star was sailing to Europe to promote 'Limelight'. The move - which effectively exiled Chaplin from the country he had made his home since the 1910s - was engineered by the FBI, capitalising on McCarthyite hostility to Chaplin's political views. J. Edgar Hoover was still only assistant chief of the FBI (he became director in 1924) when he first took an interest in Chaplin. This was the period of America's first Red Scare and in Hoover's eyes Chaplin spelt trouble, since his films were about the homeless, the unemployed and the slum-dwellers - that underbelly of society that threatened the stability of capitalism. Moreover he was marked as a foreigner - an Englishman who declined to adopt American nationality. Hoover's FBI was to keep up its surveillance until Chaplin's death. Dating from 1922, this is the earliest extant page in Chaplin's FBI files, and reveals Hoover infiltrating Agent Hopkins into the Chaplin studio to report on Chaplin's "Parlour Pink" friends and his lack of respect for Will Hays, the new Tsar of Hollywood.

Attention Mr. Hoover -2-

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TITLE AND CHARACTER OF CASE: CHARLIE CHAPLIN, et al. Los Angeles, Cal. COMMUNIST ACTIVITIES			
FACTS DEVELOPED: <div style="text-align: right;">INTELLIGENCE AUG 2 1922 DIVISION</div> <p>At Los Angeles, California:- A reliable confidential informant in contact with the moving picture industry and also with the "Parlor Bolsheviki" groups of Los Angeles, Hollywood and Pasadena, reports that during the visit of WILLIAM Z. FOSTER to Los Angeles, a reception was given in his honor by CHARLIE CHAPLIN (the moving picture star) which reception was attended by many of the "Parlor Bolsheviki", and a large number of the radicals connected with the moving picture industry, as, for instance, WILLIAM DE MILLE, and ROB WAGNER.</p> <p>CHAPLIN stated to FOSTER that neither himself nor the stars associated with him have any use for WILL HAYS. "We are against any kind of censorship, and particularly against Presbyterian censorship", he said laughingly, and showed his guests a pennant with the words: "Welcome WILL HAYS", which he had fastened over the door of the men's toilet in his studio.</p> <p>At this reception, the great importance of moving pictures with their educational and propagandist appeal for the cause of the labor movement and the revolution was discussed, and several instances cited where radical ideas have been or are going to be embodied into moving pictures as well as legitimate plays.</p> <p>MRS. KATE CRANE GARTZ, who was present at this recep-</p>			
REFERENCE:	COPIES OF THIS REPORT FURNISHED TO: Wash.-3; S.F.-1; Seattle-1; New York-2; File-1;		

1952

1957

A King in New York

Nearing 70 and in European exile, Chaplin needed courage to embark on a new film without the familiar facilities and colleagues of his own studio. It took even more courage to be the first film-maker anywhere to take on America's anti-Red witch-hunts. Chaplin was not seeking revenge for his own persecution, but was deeply affected by controversial and notorious McCarthyist cases such as the Rosenberg trial. As in 'The Kid', here too the ultimate victim of society's wrongs is a child: Michael Chaplin plays Rupert, the politically sophisticated prodigy whose spirit is broken when the UnAmerican Activities investigators trick him into the humiliation of 'naming names'. In the scene pictured below, Rupert harangues the investigators.



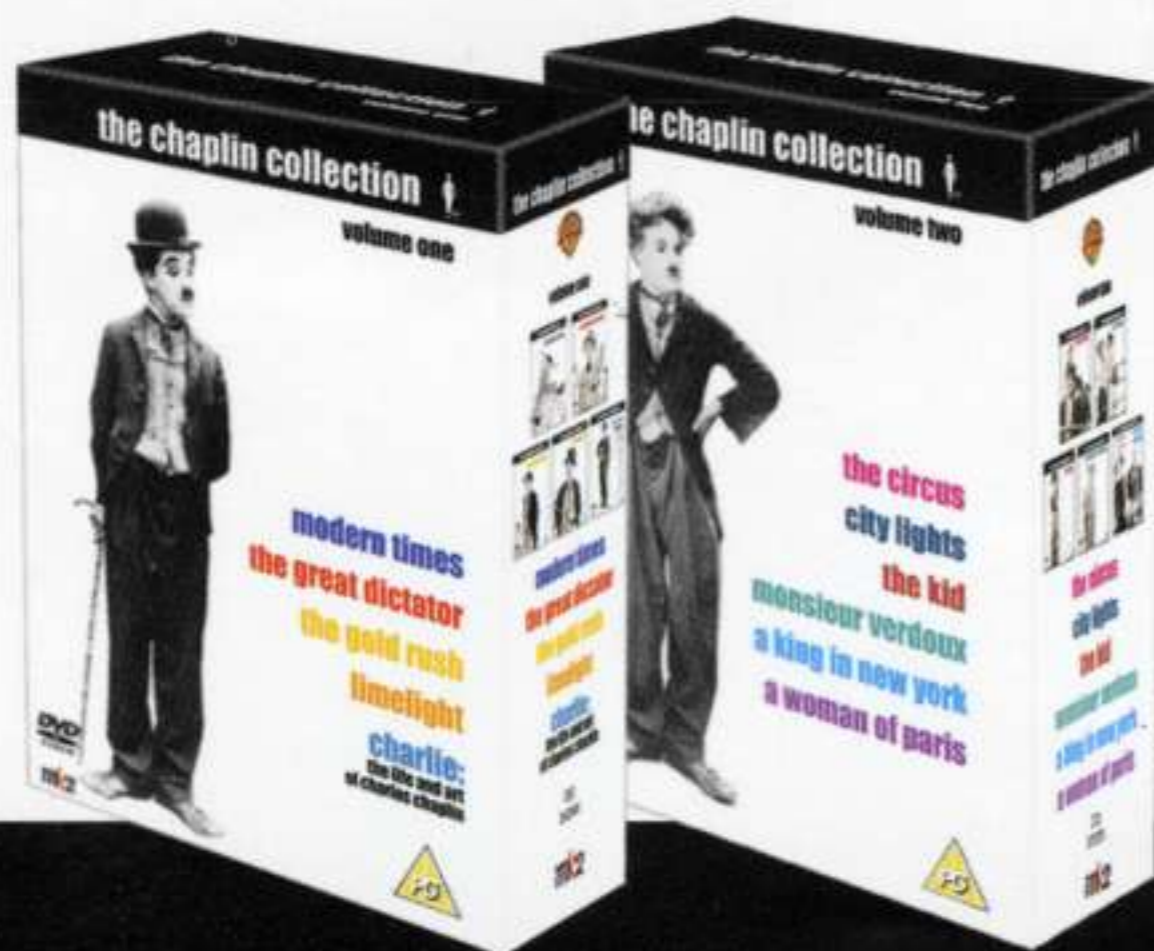
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