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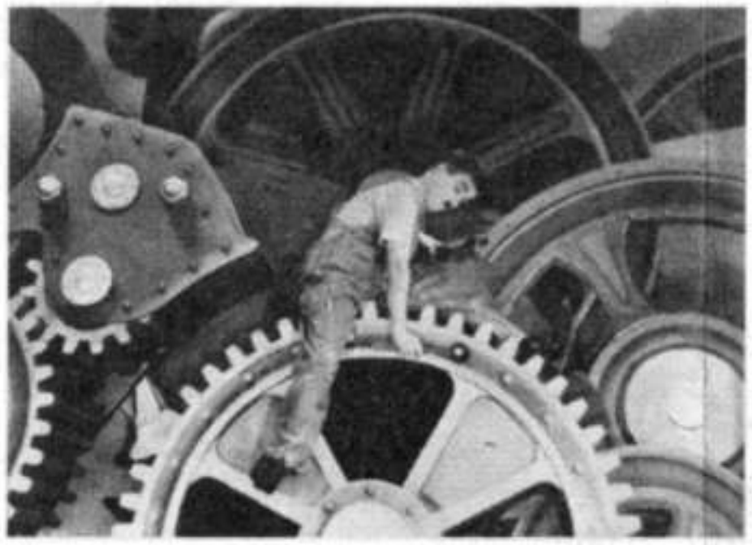
A Chaplin classic sounds off on Hollywood dream factory

MODERN TIMES
Written and directed by Charlie Chaplin
Kino
December 26 through January 1
Film Forum

The title alone would mark Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* as a period piece. In fact, Chaplin's most elaborate feature was anachronistic even in 1936—a proud rejection of talking (but not sound) pictures, released over eight years after *The Jazz Singer*.

Playing for a week in the new digitally scrubbed and remastered version that closed this year's Cannes Film Festival, *Modern Times* was seemingly made under the twin influences of Walt Disney (the cartoon-like use of sound effects) and Fritz Lang (the vast art deco factory that initially employs the Little Tramp). More than any previous Chaplin film, albeit setting the precedent for all subsequent ones, *Modern Times* was a statement—Chaplin's conscious, if sentimental, attempt to locate his alter ego in the context of class struggle. The working title was supposedly *The Masses*.

Chaplin's opening montage joke, comparing the proletariat to sheep, may be ABC Eisenstein, but the comic *Metropolis* of the movie's first half-hour is one of his greatest conceits. The machine rules and



Kino International

Wage against the machine: Chaplin

the factory assembly line appears, as Siegfried Kracauer wrote of the 1920s newfangled, precision-kicking chorus-girl formations in his essay "The Mass Ornament," to be an end in itself. (Kracauer's description of such "ornamental" capitalism is uncannily illustrated by Chaplin's useless factory: "The commodities it spews forth are not actually produced to be possessed . . . Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality.")

Modern Times' music hall celebration of the "little guy" looks forward to Italian neorealism—there are intimations of De Sica and especially Fellini. The movie oscillates between delightful and cloying; Chaplin bludgeons the viewer with frequent passages of his signature tune "Smile (Though Your Heart Is Breaking)" and Paulette Goddard's frenzied performance as the barefoot orphan Gamin is often taxing. Still, *Modern Times* remains Chaplin's most sustained burlesque of authority: It's replete with strikes and police riots, and one of the most celebrated gags has the Tramp inadvertently leading a worker demonstration and being jailed—not for the last time—as an agitator. (For her part, the Gamin is something of an intuitive Communist. Introduced fearlessly "liberating" food for a swarm of hungry children, she appears as she would to the capitalists: a brazen pirate with knife clenched between her teeth.)

There's a dig at the Hollywood system as well. Sync sound is often associated with regimentation and power; the only actual speaking is done by machines. The assembly-line gags elaborate the sort of workplace anarchy that Chaplin was dramatizing as early as the food fights in Sennett's *Dough and Dynamite*. Indeed, *Modern Times*' best jokes almost all involve chow. The movie's supreme gag is the feeding machine. It's not just the exquisite timing that makes this comic mechanism hum, but the demonstration of a situation where one eats in order to work, rather than vice versa. **J. HOBERMAN**

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