

# Modern times and issue of advancing technology



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Chaplin's *Modern Times* was a silent film, an unusual sight in the burgeoning era of "talkies," or films with synchronized human voices. Chaplin felt that the art of filmmaking was already at its peak and that adding additional features such as voice into the film would detract from the overall comedic experience. Chaplin's best known character, "the tramp," was an ideal example of how portrayal of emotions and dialogue between characters could occur without voice. It wasn't the lack of available technology that prompted Chaplin to stay with the age-old tactics, but actually a protest against the so-called machinery of "progress" that began to rule over the lives of humans in the film. Chaplin viewed the era of machinery as controlling and dehumanizing. The factory where Charlie works is dark and depressing, with no windows or view of the outside world. The workers are covered in dirty grease, signifying a harsh working environment. The machines in the factory are large, dirty, and crude devices, capable of huge forces and seemingly towering over the humans like obsessive supervisors. The workers toil in mundane jobs all day, such as tightening two bolts on a metal plate, while the manager pulls a lever to control how fast the workers have to labor. The attitude of the company seems to be based only on efficiency, with no concern for the workers' well-being. The boss allows a demonstration of an automated feeding machine that could replace lunchtime, and let the workers continue their jobs while they ate. This proved impractical and humiliating to Charlie when the machine malfunctioned and he was forced to eat metal bolts and be repeatedly slapped in the face with a corn cob. Chaplin's use of dark imagery is a clever way of portraying his dislike of mechanical automation without directly declaring it. He lets the audience see what an automated society might look like in the future, and

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has the viewer's form their own opinion on the advancement of technology. Most viewers would come to the same conclusion that technology should be ruled by humans, not the other way around. Chaplin himself does not seem concerned about technology in its own sense, as he uses it extensively to create his movies. Rather he fears the day when machines come into a position of authority, and begin ruling humans. An example of this reversed role-play comes into effect when the boss, appearing on a TV screen, comes and tells one of the head workers to crank up the speed of the conveyor belts, increasing the speed at which the laborers have to work. The effect of television dehumanizes the boss and feels like a command is arising from inside the machinery itself. It is a metaphor for the day when computers give commands to humans, and provokes a powerful, almost disturbing dystopian reality to the audience, exactly what Chaplin designed in this scene. The bleak imagery and modest living style throughout the movie was a reminder of the Great Depression, the time in which the film was produced. The scene where the gamin finds a run-down shack and says " it isn't Buckingham Palace, but it'll do," shows the standards the two were living in, and how the gamin would accept any place to call home. The tramp shows how equally hard life was for him by purposefully trying to go to jail, as it was better than any home he had had before. In this case, he had a roof over his head and meals to eat every day. But every time he was let out of jail, he begged to go back as the outside world proved to be harsher than the conditions inside the comparably comfortable jail. The purpose of the human workers was questionable. The machines could perform complex tasks such as stamp metal and work hundreds of pistons, when ironically; all the assembly line workers had to do was tighten two bolts. Some viewers might ask, " Why <https://assignbuster.com/modern-times-and-issue-of-advancing-technology/>

couldn't the machines just do that?" Chaplin must have intended for the job to be mundane to further support his belief that man was soon to become obsolete and his job permanently replaced by machines. The tramp, faced with a huge workload that was moving too fast for him, eventually goes mad and tightens everything that looked like a bolt with wild fervor. He runs out of the factory, and sees a woman with two buttons on her shirt and attempts to tighten her breasts. This lands the tramp in a mental hospital and he stays there for several weeks. He emerges from the place in roughly the same way he used to be, but now he is unemployed. He eventually lands a job at a new factory and works with a metal stamping machine which can press metal into thin foils. While helping his boss to set up the machine, he manages to crush his boss's pocket watch, which was a family heirloom. Charlie holds up the now wafer-thin watch, and his expression of surprise prompts the audience to laugh. This is a message of the machine's power and dominance over humans; everything that gets in the mechanical crusher's way will be flattened. The film takes a happier note whenever the tramp is not working on machinery, especially after meeting the gamin. They sit together and flirt in the grass, talking about a better life. A new, dreamlike scene comes into focus, with the tramp and gamin living in a peaceful country house, having plenty of fresh milk and fruit for their meals. A cow comes to the door and stops before a bucket, and milks itself. The scene dissolves and the two set out to make their new life come true. Viewers will notice the lack of machinery in the dream scene, and that the couple was much happier living a simple life, without any computers or mechanical gadgetry. Chaplin uses this contrast to his advantage and leads the audience to despise the dark, dreary machines more than ever. As technology continues to progress, some

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people are able to keep up with the advancing rates of growth, but others are left behind in the confusing blur of events. In the factory scenes, Chaplin seems to be unable to learn how to use the machinery properly, and nobody around him wants to teach him. It seems to be an assumption that everybody of the age knows how to use complex machines, because the workers hired from the factory gates were not given any training prior to their hire. Chaplin gives a message that sometimes the advancement of technology inevitably leaves some people out of society. It is better to slow down the rates of development, as it will allow people time to adapt and integrate into technology. When a person has been outside of the realm of technology too long, he/she will find it difficult to catch up, as the themes of technology are often cumulative. The suppression of advanced technology is seen when Chaplin chooses to use only music in the background sound of the film, and leave the actor's voices out. He did this in order to make sure immigrant viewers not familiar with English could still understand his film without resorting to inaccurate subtitles or translations. The absence of human voice also made the actor's movements more important, and placed emphasis more on what they were doing, rather than what they were saying. This led to many funny scenes where the tramp would unknowingly do dangerous things, such as roller skating around a department store, while almost plunging off an un-railed section of the floor. This spectacular feat of acrobatics and daring was a universal theme that many of the comedic moments shared, leaving the viewers with a sense of awe regardless of their cultural background. The film, *Modern Times*, was a comedic film that implied many more political glances than it was outwardly inferred to have. *Modern Times* imbued many of Chaplin's beliefs about modest lifestyles of

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the 1930s and also the harm of advancing technology. It showed the consequences of humans becoming submissive to machines, and the resulting chaos that might occur. By using the medium of comedy to speak to audiences, Chaplin directs his negative view of mechanical automation in an indirect that stays surprisingly potent throughout the film. Chaplin also preserves some of the living conditions of the Great Depression on film, so that the movie both stays true to its time, and also lets future generations of viewers to experience the bleak times of the 1930s. Modern Times is a silent film by a master director who lets viewers see, through the eye of comedy, the very world we live in today.