

# Modern times film critique

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As Karl Marx suggests that “ material life appears as the end, and labor, the producer of material life...appears as means”, Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*(1936) exhorts, in numerous ways, that the machine age devoured men both physically and emotionally, breeding a new lineage of ‘ human machines’. There is no respect, time or space for individuality or human emotions in this period of modern mechanical industrialization. From the establishing factory shots to the President’s surveillance cameras, the workers are constantly monitored. The workers are merely perfunctory components of the assembly line, and their concern for the effectiveness of the production process is prioritized over any human emotions. This can also be seen in both the two life-threatening scenes where the human is literally consumed by the machine, where both the mechanic and protagonist find no indecorum in going on about their duties and routine with lack of reactions. The flat lighting techniques throughout the film also represent a lack of depth in humanism. The factory workers only chase after the crazy Tramp when he pulls the lever and disrupts the functions of the assembly line, but immediately return to work when it is fixed. It is as if they are systematically programmed in some way, and perhaps the Tramp squirts mechanical oil on their faces to differentiate himself from the other withdrawn ‘ human machines’. Although sound in motion pictures was introduced a decade prior to *Modern Times*, Chaplin’s mainly silent film demonstrates the feeble human voice, if any, against the destructive power of machinery. The ambient sounds of machinery are accentuated throughout the film, especially in the early factory scenes where there are constant droning and clanking noises coming from the smallest of machines. The human voice on the other hand, is only ever audible when delivered through a machine. All

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other human speech is expressed in printed subtitles. The fact that the Feeding Machine had to be introduced by a 'mechanical salesperson' through a LP record, despite the presence of three representatives, are clear indications of the pulverized human expression. Perhaps this was also an effort by Chaplin to resist the constant innovations of the modernizing world for he believed, as the 'mechanical salesperson' states, "actions speak louder than words" in filming. Spontaneous, implausible and organic characteristics were customarily identified with the comedy genre. Yet Modern Times invokes a contradictory comic style, using repetitive and machinelike movements in its performers. At times characters are put in a mechanical trance and sometimes even become a component of the instrument — the humorous way in which these scenes are depicted and the conjecture of audience captivation, on aspects of the modern life they are most likely to fear or dislike, shows us the significant effects that mechanical modernization had on both a new motive for laughter in society, and the arts. This idea runs parallel to the notion of modernism and modernity, where mechanical repetition and continuous innovation run hand in hand. As with the contradictions of modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Chaplin is also faced with the contradiction of attempting to resist and degrade mechanical modernization, while ironically his whole career is thanks to it. But do we live any differently today? With the internet and smart phones being indispensable commodities in the developed world today, as much as we want to revoke the idea, it seems that we are still as much enslaved to technology now as back in the Modern Times.