



## MODERN TIMES

and the Comedy of Transformation

Charles Chaplin's tramp holds a number of opposing impulses together in an almost easy tension. In tramp films the circumstances of poverty enforce the manners of affluence. Sentiment, especially in his later films, is raised to the status of political theory. The comedy of character and interiority exists almost impossibly close to slapstick (and when the two combine they approach the painfully sublime, as when the flower girl unwittingly throws water on the adoring tramp). In fact, tramp comedy seems to grow out of a melodramatic sensibility (unless it actually works the other way around). In his life, Chaplin must allow radically opposing elements to coexist: the early extreme poverty and equally extreme late wealth: the culture shock, not only of adopting a new country, but of being a neglected, self-sufficient child-adult who has become a beloved adult-child.

The emblem for many of these tensions and transformations is the central joke technique of Chaplin's oeuvre: the transformation of objects to other than their intended purpose—as remarked by many, if not most, Chaplin critics, notably Theodore Huff, Gerald Mast and Wes Gehring.<sup>1</sup> The structure of this joke is simple: the tramp converts an often mundane object into something with a different, either utilitarian or exotic, use.

However, critics do not discuss the fact that the structure of many Chaplin films reveals transformation as a thematic as well as humorous device. Chaplin films tend to be all of a piece in reproducing at several levels the same mechanism for an ultimately similar purpose: the fantasy unity of irreconcilable societal impulses. There exist at least two perspectives to the Chaplin joke: its existence as a joke independent of anything other than its immediate desire to make us laugh, and its relation to an

important theme of the film. The joke is in part defined by the theme it relates back to. But the theme, because it is a part of a successful comic film, is in part defined by the structure of the joke. (Or perhaps it is that only certain themes lend themselves best to comedy.)

The theme of *Modern Times*, which is about oppression of the individual by the political-industrial complex, can be restated more mechanically as the use of the individual for something other than what he was intended. Chaplin is used for various jobs, none of which he is particularly suited to temperamentally, all of which he performs admirably, but for a mistake or accident of some kind.<sup>2</sup> But this dynamic is more than a little like the way in which the tramp uses objects for purposes other than those for which they were intended, but for which they usually are admirably suited. Generally these objects are suited to their jobs only temporarily (the monkey wrenches as Pan Ears), but then so is the tramp always only temporarily employed.

The accusation leveled at by contemporary critics that the film is merely a compendium of situations, techniques, and gags from previous films (especially shorts), works to the obvious advantage of the Chaplin critic who wishes to claim a reading of one film as universally applicable.<sup>3</sup> Given this self-plagiarism, one may see that several films are thematically related in ways that would be more tedious to discover in trying to read a number of films simultaneously. Though we erect a sort of fiction here that *Modern Times* is a thematic summary of Chaplin's previous oeuvre, and though such a fiction is inevitably an overstatement, it is a not implausible overstatement, and can easily be amended by critics with the leisure to re-read the earlier films. I wish to read *Modern Times* because the shorts would be much easier to assimilate into a structural reading, as they tend to be uni-situational, and so can too patly be shown to treat theme and structure homogeneously.

*Modern Times* is about food and shelter. It contains a dozen scenes of people eating, or trying to cadge meals, often unsuccessfully. The tramp spills his co-worker's soup in one of the first scenes of the film. He attempts to eat with the aid of the eating machine; or he tries to serve lunch to the factory's master mechanic through a chicken; or a duck to a diner in a cabaret where a football match is played out with a duck as the football. Each of these attempts at eating ends in failure. The gamin tries to steal a loaf of bread, and the tramp tries to get thrown back in jail, where the meals are at least regular, by eating a meal he cannot afford to buy. Even during the mock-idyll in the shack by the sea, the tramp is not allowed to finish breakfast before he must leave in order to look for work. Other images of food frustration abound: the tramp is forced to become intoxicated by the burglars in the department store liquor department, a scene in which an excess of goods is quite as bad as a deficiency, because this prank ends with his being fired. The gamin has her finger in her mouth in the delinquency photograph, making her appear more childish than her persona otherwise suggests: a bit like a starving child. Near the end of the film, we hear about the frustrated carnal desire of the old roué in the mime the tramp sings.

Just as interesting are the instances of successful acquisitions of food. They begin not with the tramp, but with the gamin, who is first seen stealing bananas from the boat. This is followed by the tramp's acquisition of a piece of bread from his cell mate—though at this he is finally successful only after becoming hopped up on cocaine—the tramp stealing a meal for the girl at the department store, and the acquisition of a meal by the tramp at a restaurant for the express purpose of getting arrested, after his claim that he has stolen bread does not work. He seems reasonably well-fed (after the heroic rescue of the jailers) only in prison.

Almost every example of successful food acquisition is in some way illegal. Hunger becomes associated with the normative means of gaining a livelihood, while satisfaction becomes associated with illegality. Tramp comedy becomes located in the necessarily extra-legal. The tramp lives in a world in which good-heartedness is not itself rewarded (a rather religious world in which virtue is its own reward).



The tramp's world, then, is one in which honesty is punished (remember that the tramp is only trying to return the red flag when he is arrested as an agitator) and dishonesty rewarded at the most basic level of survival. (Even the crooks escape unpunished from the department store.) The ethical world is inverted in *Modern Times*. It is not, however, inverted in a way that is surprising to us: what audience will not have at least a *soupcou* of suspicion that the world really works in precisely this way? The only surprise is perhaps that this ethical dynamic should be so graphically and offhandedly portrayed.

We laugh each time someone's carnal appetite is legally frustrated or illegally satisfied. We do not laugh at all human misery in this film, though. The dissolution of the gamin's family after the father's death is portrayed as pathetic. The frustration of carnal appetite as a theme is developed comically where other equally serious themes—the repression of children's rights in an authoritarian society—are not. In other words, we are made to see misery as comic when it is an *obvious* inversion of the ethical universe. The laughter generated in the development of this theme does not, however, allow us license to believe that it is taken less seriously than others. In fact, revealed is our anxiety that this manichean universe is the more accurate representation of reality. The observation that people laugh at inversion is not novel: what is new is the sense that this inversion is potentially or actually correct rather than a temporary fantasy, as in Shakespearean festive comedy.

Another irony exists in the fact that frustration often occurs in the workplace, or the arena that should be the source of the possibility of satisfaction. The opposition between frustrated and satisfied desires is vaguely echoed in the contrapuntal relationship between institutions of work and those of detention: most frustrated desires are frustrated in institutional settings that are supposed to help create the conditions for their satisfaction. Work is supposed to provide at least a competence for the working person: a home, food, and a sufficiency of goods for a family. But, though the tramp's intentions are of the best, he does not seem to be able to hold a job for more than a day, generally less than that in this film. His job as assistant to the master mechanic lasts precisely half a day when the strike begins. His job at the docks lasts about five minutes. And each job seems to end in jail.

The structure of *Modern Times* is governed by the institutions in which the tramp finds himself, and which he finds himself subverting again and again. The institutions become more humane in appearance as the film goes on: he begins as a worker on an assembly line repeating one motion over and over, and ends as a singing waiter with the sound of applause still ringing in his ears. The degree to which the factory and the restaurant are visual contrasts is startling. The factory workers are lined up in rows; they repeat identical motions over and over. When the tramp tries to take a cigarette break in the gleaming, soulless, repetitive bathroom, the televised image of the president of the company (who has himself spent the morning at his crossword puzzle and comic strip) spies him, and orders him to return to work. The size of the factory devices is immense: the dynamo towers above the workers; the factory is itself palatial. The only small objects in it besides the people are the artifacts (use unknown) which the assembly produces. Irony exists in the fact that the scale of the factory is immense, but the object of individual attention is so small as to seem the object of obsession.

But the tramp's jobs improve. He goes from his soulless factory job to an outdoor job at the docks, to the rather more interesting job as mechanic's helper, to his job as waiter/singer. The tramp even accustoms himself to prison life to the extent that he does not wish to leave. The restaurant in which the tramp finds himself at the end of the film is the visual antithesis of the factory setting in almost every way. In opposition to people standing in line at work, the restaurant crowds eat, dance, and otherwise amuse themselves in haphazard, confused fashion. In opposition to the spaciousness of the factory, the compactness of the restaurant (low ceiling, cramped

kitchen, impossibly crowded dining area), emphasizes the physical closeness of the clientele, who are so packed together while dancing that the tramp cannot make his way across the dance floor to deliver a duck to an irate customer. In opposition to the big-brother quality of the video monitor that observes all traces of disloyalty, dis-obsession, and eccentricity, the relationship between the tramp and the cafe audience is one of desired difference. The audience desires that he will be sufficiently eccentric to be entertaining. He is, and they look on his difference from them with approval, as their applause shows. (That applause, and the tramp's song, mark perhaps the only time that sound is used to display a likeable quality on the part of culture, and stands in strong contrast to all the other uses of sound in this film as insidiously human.)

That visual difference points out other, less tangible differences between the two settings. The president of the factory is perfectly dressed, dapper, cold. Henry Bergman, a long-time Chaplin repertory player, is jollily fat, a bit sloppy though well-dressed, not rich, though comfortably bourgeois, and obviously kind. In fact, he gives the gamin her first break as a dancer, thus becoming a sort of fairy god-father. At the factory, the tramp is obviously a loner and at odds with all parties, if not actually engaged in open hostilities. By the time he arrives at the restaurant he has acquired a friend in the gamin, someone with similar sensibilities: another loner, another eccentric, another character whose sense of personal freedom is somehow paramount in a way that it is not for most people. Chaplin is portraying the cafe as the scene in which human sympathy is finally possible for the tramp: food and entertainment provide a climate of gregariousness that fosters a feeling that personal intimacies are possible.

But even the restaurant cannot provide permanence for the tramp, and it does not provide him with a completely comfortable working environment. He is still somewhat at odds with his fellow employees because of an inattention to the rules without which an institution could not run, as for instance when he enters through the exit door, knocking over a waiter and his tray. And the cafe acceptance and support of the tramp's eccentricities reveal with finality the unsupportiveness of society. It shows that even in the best of all possible circumstances, external societal forces (here in the form of the delinquency officers) will invariably circumvent the tramp's comfort and force him back on the road.

Although the jobs seem to get better, each job loss is punctuated by incarceration of some kind:

factory . . . . .	hospital,
unemployment . . . . .	prison,
shipyard . . . . .	arrest.
department store . . . . .	prison,
factory (strike, unemployment) . . . . .	prison,
restaurant . . . . .	arrest of girl

Each job, each sequence, ends in either actual or threatened incarceration. The conditions vary: sometimes the tramp is seeking arrest, sometimes it is thrust upon him. On the first occasion he finds himself, not in jail, but in another equally futile institution: the psychiatric hospital. The repetition of this motif may or may not be intended as comic, as it is in such other films as *Take the Money and Run* and *The Great Escape*. In any case, the futility of the attempt at gaining permanence, security and sanity in the marketplace is evident by the end of each job.

Work becomes, in fact causes, the opposite of itself. It *inverts* itself, causing an instability that it was supposed to forestall and prevent. This futility remains present even though the jobs become better and better.

The factory creates an atmosphere in which all significant action must be movement of one kind or another. In the factory, one cannot choose how to move, and one can barely choose whether to move with the machine or in opposition to it. The greatest



transgression possible is stillness. When Charlie attempts such modes of stillness as sneaking a cigarette in the bathroom, he is immediately caught by the president of the company, whose only official function seems to be to tell the workers to increase their rate of production. Uniform motion becomes inscribed on the body of the worker in a manner that is locally destructive and inefaceable. Charlie, unable to discontinue the motions of bolt-tightening, which look like nervous twitches when he stops, uncontrollably spills a bowl of soup onto a fellow worker.

When the tramp is not performing uniform motion, he is being incarcerated. The tramp goes to jail when he is unemployed. It is as if to say that work and incarceration are associated as necessary alternatives; idleness is the only state not allowed in society. It is illegal, or extra-legal. Or perhaps it would be better to say that even idleness must be physically surrounded by, and lent the legitimacy of, an institutional setting. The further irony is that, though institutions seem created in order to enforce a work ethic, they really encourage idleness, at least in the tramp. The tramp is fired from all of his jobs, generally as a prelude to being arrested, for circumstances that are almost never his fault (though the sinking of the ship is an arguable incident.)

The tramp is never jailed for a significant length of time. In fact, he seems to be incarcerated two or three times in two or three days. During his first sentence he manages to attain to a certain amount of comfort. But the same circumstance that renders his comfort possible—the rescue of the sheriff—is also ultimately responsible for his release from jail. He is forgiven a crime he did not really commit for an act of heroism for which he is not really responsible. In other words, even jail, the lowest possible institution to which one may appeal for safety and security (the minimal conditions for home) is not really accessible to those who desire it. The tramp even has trouble getting himself arrested in order to return to prison when he cannot make a go of civilian life. He has to try twice. And when he is arrested, the gamine and a “lucky” accident are responsible for his ejection from the paddy wagon and for rendering his guard unconscious.

So, ironically, the tramp, eager to comply with societal rules that maintain that one must be engaged in enforced institutionalized work or enforced, institutionalized idleness, is forced into a situation that is extra-legal, some point in transit between work and jail that he is by all societal definitions not allowed to maintain, but a point which becomes a chronic condition in *Modern Times*. He is forced into an extra-institutional idleness by both the marketplace and the legal system that is also movement between both these institutions each of which tells him he cannot remain in this extra-legal setting. The tramp is forced by the institutions that surround him into idleness that is non-legitimate movement (though in a way this moving idleness is also implicitly operative in the workplace.) If we can take the tramp's first job as the model for all, we see that the work is physically defined as the absorption of the self in one limited task that one part of the body repeats over and over, while the rest of the body remains perfectly motionless.)

We are accustomed to the image of the tramp as a lonely figure moving down the dusky California rural roads of his own volition (as at the end of *The Tramp*). But at least in *Modern Times* (and I would argue in most others in which this end is operative) he is forced down that road by a society that will not allow him to maintain the “freedom” of this non-affiliation with anything except the road. And forced freedom is extremely ambiguous at best.

As slapstick tends to be about physical movement, and Chaplinesque physical comedy tends to be about the transformation of the self, artifacts, or others into something else, so the story comedy is about movement in space between various institutions. This movement is raised to the status of theme, which then gets worked out by the plot in such a way that the valuelessness that was placed on a mode of being—shiftlessness—is transformed by the tramp into an ultimately valuable mode. The tramp makes shiftlessness home-like. The road is at least the place to which the



tramp always returns. Home, which does not really exist in the film except as a burlesque (but which work in the factory or imaginative work in the prison, was supposed to buy), is replaced by movement. Home necessitates a kind of moral and intellectual, as well as physical stasis. But part of the comedy of the tramp is that he recreates movement as home-like, as both a reassertion of humanity and a reconnoting of the kind of motion forced on him by the machine. For Chaplin, comedy is an analysis of the largest influences of mundane and unexamined life in such a way that their life-denying qualities are metamorphosed into life-affirming qualities.

In other words, the largest metamorphosis that takes place in *Modern Times* that reproduces the structure of the basic tramp joke is the transformation of societal values by the tramp. Comedy for Chaplin originates in the remaking of an accidentally malevolent world into an intentionally benevolent world, benevolently intended by the self. The act of perception by which this happens is fantastic, even though the actual act in which this perception results is not. The world, beginning as an objective phenomenon that oppresses the individual, ends as the subjective construct that protects him. Such perception is a taking of the material of cosmic destruction and creating a local preservation. It is a taking of the environment and turning it into the subject of comedy by protecting the self with it. It is a turning of negative definition of the self into a positive definition, of making difference attractive.

Of course, the tramp is turning a negative injunction into a positive action. This is how the end of the film, and the end of so many of the films (like *The Tramp*) are so upbeat in feeling when they are rather sad in fact. The tramp has been forced to the road again, but it is a forcing to which he consents, which he makes his own, which he himself has necessitated. This is not subversive in a local way; the tramp is following orders dictated by the prevailing social codes. But in the sense that he refuses to understand by those codes that he is being punished, he is approaching the subversive, not because he is advocating the overthrow of those codes, but because he reinterprets them according to a radically individual light.

The easiest illustration of this transformation of values is seen in the tramp's stylized treatment of institutions. Up to now we have spoken only of the ways in which these institutions treat the tramp. But the tramp's attentions to and dependence on these institutions make them subject to the same transformative faculty that works on bodies and inanimate objects. Just as a lampshade becomes a disguise, or a boot becomes food for the tramp in other films, so the institution is fantastically made over in *Modern Times*, but by the filmmaker Charles Chaplin, rather than the tramp. The factory becomes a nursery for a man with a nervous breakdown. Jail becomes a home for the tramp, as does the department store. The institution's transformation in each case is toward the fantastically nurturing; it becomes more like a home than an impersonal, dehumanizing place. This is comic: the fantasy of the humanity of the institution, the recognition that humanity is absent in seeing that it is only attained in fantasy. The factory becomes a fantasy of a nursery for an infant, with toys on which to fixate, and women who are nurturing (and who are equipped with breasts on which to fixate). The background music emphasizes the childlike sense of the tramp: it is the saccharine music signaling the presence of the nursery or the asylum). Jail becomes a place that feeds one, and shelters one with a certain amount of comfort, and the department store does the same in a bourgeois dream of absolute luxury.

Elsewhere in the film, when Chaplin satirizes the happy bourgeois couple, the husband on his way to work, the wife skipping back into the house—he is indicating that his own inclinations in that direction (his subsequent fantasy of a home notwithstanding), are mixed in desire and motive. The satirized component in the happy couple's menage is not really the happiness, but what it ignores: two hungry victims of the depression on the front steps. Yes, he certainly desires a stable home, but no, he is not willing to accommodate the kind of blind ignorance of the pain in the rest of the world in order to obtain this domestic bliss. The tramp's dumbshow tells us



that he in fact desires what he knows is not ethically possible. The same ethical sensibility that urges the tramp to want a home and a place to care for the gamin is the same sense that makes the achievement of this goal impossible. This ethical paradox in which such attainment is inherently unfair—is like the economic and social institutions the workplace and the legal system—that should ensure its existence. The thrust of the film is to display not only the fact that home is not possible to the tramp, except in an ironic way, but to explain that that denial is fundamentally paradoxical.

The comedy in this transformation of the workplace, the cause for laughter, is in the tension between the implied fantasy of the home and the graphically portrayed reality of the dehumanizing factory. Chaplin has been criticized for making the sets too large and too streamlined for the character of the tramp to fit comfortably: the tramp seems too anachronistic in the immensity and modernity of the settings.<sup>4</sup> But the settings are absolutely appropriate in the sense that any quality of the human that is brought to these settings is brought by the tramp, and denied by the settings themselves. A tension exists between the size and movement of the tramp and the size and movements of the institutions. In all cases the institutions demand a rigorously uniform motion on the part of the inmates, as well as on the nonhuman working parts. This uniformity is somewhat present even in the restaurant, in the persons of the singing waiters, who march in unison, sing in unison, and are dressed alike. The members of the cafe audience, too, though not reduced to uniform motion, are nevertheless indistinguishable one from another.

Much of the laughter in *Modern Times* originates in the recognition of two opposing fantasies at work at the same time: the fantasy of home and the fantasy of scientific progress. Chaplin was criticized for the anachronistic quality of the factory, the fact that it was improbably old-fashioned. As far as I can tell, though, the factory, though improbable, is not so much old-fashioned as fantastic. It more or less resembles in architecture the imaginative renderings of the future that one sees on the covers of *Popular Mechanics* or *Mechanical Digest*, those pulp magazines that played on adolescent power fantasies in the 1930s through the 1950s, and perhaps later. I think the critics' discomfort with the sets is probably based on a recognition that those sets are realistic renderings of a fantasy of industrial prosperity that seemed grotesque against the backdrop of the seemingly perpetual international depression.

There is an irony of identification at work here between the character of the tramp and the factory settings. Our sympathies and sense of the reality of human feeling go out to the tramp figure—he captures our sense of emotional reality. The factory, on the other hand, is more aligned with some version of industrial, objective, photographic truth than the fantastic figure of the tramp, who, even if his clothes were not anachronistic by 1936, would by this point in his career certainly be fantastic in his presence as a social icon transcending all settings. We do not know, then, which to take as real: the personal truth of the tramp, or the photographic, objective truth of the factories. They each lend an air of credibility and incredibility to the other.

The theme of ethical and economic transformation extends in this film into commentary about the medium itself, as well as about industry, in the use of sound. It is obvious that sound in *Modern Times* constitutes a satire on industry and society: only negative messages are used that relate either to social or industrial oppression: the phonograph that advertises the disastrous eating machine into which the tramp is forced, the television over which comes only orders to speed up the machine, the radio that advertises gas pills at the inappropriate social moment. All these moments of coherence are about the oppression of the individual. (The tramp's comic song is not like these moments, obviously. But it is only necessary here to point out that it too ridicules socially oppressive codes in its nonsensical language that yet manages to relate a smutty story. But they are also about the inappropriate use of the medium of film for some other use, or medium. All the examples of sound in this film are rationalized as being part of another medium: radio, television, phonograph. Used in

a medium that depends for its aesthetic effects on silence, Chaplin seems to say, sound can only successfully or reasonably convey information about tyranny or oppression. One notes with interest that of the four talkies which starred Chaplin, one was overtly about fascism, and another was again about the tyranny of the individual by society.

As the film is about the oppression of the individual by industry and society, and the strategies of re-perception the individual counters that oppression with, so the jokes are not only the central devices of that strategy, but they are also about the arbitrary oppression of one thing by another, and the re-perception of that thing by a creative sensibility that redefines that thing and so, momentarily, liberates it. The lampshade becomes a headdress, the clock becomes a patient's heart, insofar as these things require liberation from the things they are into something else.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Huff, *Charlie Chaplin* (London: Cassell and Co., 1952), p. 138; Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 69; Wes Gehring, *Charlie Chaplin: A Bio-Bibliography* (London: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> In *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 110, Robert Sklar states that "No comedian before or after him has spent more energy depicting people in their working lives. . . ."

<sup>3</sup> Huff, p. 232.

<sup>4</sup> David Robinson, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984), p. 106.