

## CHAPLIN'S "MODERN TIMES"

ONE of the greatest difficulties of cinema as an art is that many of its effects can be obtained in two ways—legitimately by the proper use of the medium, and illegitimately by borrowing from the other arts and principally the theatre. The majority of commercial films fall into the second category. From time to time, however, comes a film which stands out from the general run by virtue of its essentially *filmic* qualities. We experience the peculiar pleasure that is derived from seeing the resources of an artistic medium used as they should be—to produce effects that no other art can produce so well. *The Virtuous Isidore* and *Remous* were both films of this kind. And now America has provided an example which is far richer and subtler than either—Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

I wish, in this note, to stress two things that seem to have been neglected by the official critics. The public has been slapped on the back and urged to go up and see Charlie some time. It has heard all about the uproariously funny sequence in the factory and the old gags and the new star. What has not been sufficiently emphasized is first, that *Modern Times* is a perfect instance of cinema being used for serious social criticism of the most drastic kind; and secondly, that the acting in the film is an object lesson of what *film-acting* ought to be, but very seldom is.

It is true that Chaplin is the old Chaplin with all the old gags—the jumping hat, sliding staircases, a dive into one foot of water, incredible juggling with overloaded trays in a restaurant and, of course, a tremendous exhibition of roller-skating. But by dwelling on the obviously comic side of the film one runs the risk of missing its profound seriousness. It opens significantly with a shot of sheep coming through a hedge, followed at once by a shot of a crowd of men jogging, jostling and elbowing one another as they hurry to the factory. This indicates the theme: it also suggests the undercurrent of bitterness which runs all through the film. Men have been divested of their natural human qualities and

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reduced to the state of a herd of animals. The comparison is important and makes the opening of the film more effective than a similar shot in Lang's *Metropolis*, where we see men reduced by the system to mere automata.

The bitterness of Chaplin's criticism of industrialism is evident from the shot of the "boss" in his office. Not the master mind of *Metropolis*, but an empty, vacant person playing with a jig-saw puzzle. As a comment on the big business man it is final. The organizer is seen to be every bit as sub-human—there is a reference back to the opening shot—as the factory-hands. He is engaged in an occupation which is just as mindless and mechanical as theirs.

The sequence in which Chaplin is seen tightening up bolts on parts of machines as they pass on a sliding table recalls Clair's *A nous la liberté*; but the comparison is all in Chaplin's favour. He has transformed his borrowing into something new and more arresting. Even when no longer at work Chaplin is unable to stop going through the automatic motions of tightening up. Delirium follows. He proceeds to fall on any and every object—particularly trouser buttons!—which vaguely resembles a bolt and give it a turn with the spanners. Finally, a splendid target presents itself in the shape of an elderly lady with a large button on each breast. This is magnificent farce, to be sure, but farce with a purpose. The same is true of the automatic feeding machine (to save wasting time over lunch intervals!) which gets out of control, projects the food furiously into Chaplin's eyes and continues equally furiously to wipe his mouth with the automatic mouth-wiper. This sums up what has gone before and rubs in the mindless absurdity of the whole system. Man has made machines, but has ceased to be their master and become their slave.

The first part of the film ends with Chaplin's retirement to a mental home. The second part seems at first to have very little to do with it. It is concerned with the wanderings and adventures of Chaplin and his Vagrant Girl (Paulette Goddard). There is only one more scene in the factory, but this time it is pure farce and has none of the seriousness of the others. The discontinuity between the two parts, how-

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ever, is only apparent. The second part continues the criticism of industrialism, but it does so indirectly. The fact that the scene moves outside the factory is really an extension of the artist's field. The escapades of the pair are charming, but the point is that they are utterly *disinherited* in a world dominated by big business. The search for food, for a home, the clashes with the police, have a fundamental seriousness. Their disappointments are continually heightened by their outbursts of natural spontaneous gaiety, suggesting the way in which people would live if they were given a chance. This simple gaiety bears on what has gone before. In order to be successful as art and as criticism, criticism of things as they are must be accompanied by some vision of things as they ought to be. Criticism of people must be coupled with some realization of the potentialities of human nature. The deepest thing in Chaplin's film is a sense of what is good and natural, of what is really *human* in human nature. This accounts for the immense superiority of his work as *social criticism* over Russian films like *Mother*, *Storm Over Asia* and *The General Line*. In the Russian films there is no vision, no sense of what living humanly means. Their province is destruction. Their aim is limited to pulling down an existing order. One of the most striking things about them is that there is not a single character, not a single human being in any of them. The Mother and the Father and the Son in *Mother* and the peasant woman in *The General Line* are pale figures and really little more than animated theories. For the *proletariat* of the Russian Revolution like the *citoyen* of the French is an abstraction—an abstraction which is infinitely poorer than the reality for which it stands. When we compare *Modern Times* with any of the Russian films we see clearly how inadequate a materialist philosophy is to provide a basis for art. It ends inevitably in a radical impoverishment of the art it pretends to inspire.

I have said that one of the virtues of this film is the exhibition of film-acting. Chaplin's handling of Paulette Goddard is a remarkable piece of work and compares with Pabst's direction of the young Greta Garbo in *Joyless Street* which was seen in a terribly mutilated version in London last year.

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Critics have emphasized the fact that this is a "silent" film—the human voice is heard twice, once on a gramophone record and once in Chaplin's song. It has been somewhat grudgingly admitted that he succeeded in what he set out to do, but we have been told that the captions slowed down the film. As a matter of fact, there are very few captions; and the undeniable proof of Chaplin's triumph is that not a single one of them was necessary. The basis of film-acting is *mime*, and this film is one of the most astonishing exhibitions of miming I have ever seen. Both the principal actors succeed in expressing a wonderful range of emotion by gesture and the play of features; and the pleasure we get from it makes us feel what a poor substitute the spoken word is for the thing it is replacing.

The "high spot" of the second part is of course Chaplin's song. His parody of the music-hall turn is one of the funniest things he has done. The expressiveness of his miming has to be seen to be believed. And it should be noticed that the words of the nonsense song are the perfect accompaniment to the acting. That is the whole point about film-acting. Words must accompany acting, they should never be a substitute for it as they are tending more and more to be.

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