

Title of the Module:

### Charlie Chaplin and Modern Times

There is a linguistic expression known as ‘Chaplinesque’. In the linguistic register, Chaplinesque is a portmanteau word. A portmanteau word is a combination of two lexical items. Chaplinesque is formed by combining the proper noun Chaplin and the suffix, -esque. Esque means resemblance or style. Then, what could be the meaning of the linguistic expression Chaplinesque? The word Chaplinesque refers to any humour, acting style, or film form that bear resemblance to the unique, signature style comedy or performance mode or film idiom of Charlie Chaplin. The word Chaplinesque signifies a whole package of stylistic, narrative, and semantic universe, especially in the context of Film Studies. Primarily, the word evokes a very powerful visual symbolism of the poor universal Tramp, wearing a tight second-hand black jacket, oversized baggy trousers, a derby hat and a pair of ill-fitting black shoes. A characteristic toothbrush moustache and an ever-swinging black walking cane complete the Chaplinesque visual metaphor. The Chaplin Tramp is a representative of the marginalized urban lives in the modernist phase of human civilization. Chaplin modelled the Tramp as a combination of many binary and conflicting human character traits. Tramphood could simultaneously suggest high intellectuality and utmost stupidity, hyperactive everyday life and despicable laziness, pathetic poverty and pinnacle of luxury, political critique of the most sophisticated kind and bawdy jokes of inferior quality, a perpetual flirt and an anti-establishment voice, possessing high moral values but always prone to free alcohol, kind towards the weak and critical of the powerful and so on. Chaplinesque also suggests a powerful, crisp and condensed package of all these things. By now, Chaplinesque has already grown into a universal cultural code.

### Learning Objectives of this Module

To enable the learner to:

- i. understand the significance of Charlie Chaplin in world cinema
- ii. comprehend the career profile and filmography of Chaplin
- iii. understand the major features of Chaplin’s films
- iv. critically respond to Charlie Chaplin’s film Modern Times
- v. follow the major critical responses to Chaplin’s cinema, and
- vi. contextualize Chaplin’s films in the larger political and aesthetic realms

Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp has been with us since the year 1914. Chaplin’s Tramp appeared on the silver screen for the first time in the film Mabel’s Strange Predicament, directed by Mabel Normand, under the banner of Keystone Studios, California. The Tramp was the result of a sudden character improvisation by Charlie Chaplin in response to the Keystone Studios producer, Mack Sennett’s suggestion to Chaplin during the shooting of Mabel’s Strange Predicament. At that time Chaplin was a newcomer at the Keystone Studios. In his autobiography, titled My Autobiography, Chaplin narrates how The Tramp, the ever-green and one of the most readily identifiable silver-screen characters, was born all of a sudden.

“I was in my street clothes [at Keystone Studios] and had nothing to do, so I stood where Sennett could see me. He was standing with Mabel, looking into a hotel lobby set, biting the end of a cigar. ‘We need some gags here,’ he said, then turned to me. ‘Put on a comedy make-up. Anything will do.’”

I had no idea what make-up to put on. I did not like my get-up as the press reporter. However, on the way to the wardrobe I thought I would dress in baggy pants, big shoes, a cane and a derby hat. I wanted everything in a contradiction: the pants baggy, the coat tight, the hat small and the shoes large. I was undecided whether to look old or young. But remembering Sennett had expected me to be a much older man, I added a small moustache, which, I reasoned, would add age without hiding my expression.

I had no idea of the character. But the moment I was dressed, the clothes and the make-up made me feel the person he was. I began to know him, and by the time I walked on to the stage he was fully born. When I confronted Sennett I assumed the character and strutted about, swinging my cane and parading before him. Gags and comedy ideas went racing through my mind” (145-146). This newly invented unpredictable destitute protagonist ruled the Chaplin filmscape till his 1940 film, *The Great Dictator*, where the tramp sarcastically impersonates none other than Adolf Hitler, the Nazi fascist regent of the then Germany.

The film, *Mabel’s Strange Predicament* is known for its first ever featuring of Charlie Chaplin as The Tramp. The over-drunk, swaying Tramp intrudes into a city hotel lobby occupied by the bourgeois folk of the town. The Tramp’s drunken pranks, flirtatious nature, querulous temperament and disregard for party etiquettes upsets the familial, friendly, public and love relationships of the occupants of the hotel. It’s a critique of all flimsy fragile relationships maintained by the bourgeois. Apart from Chaplin, Mabel Normand also appears in this movie. Ever since this first appearance, The Tramp kept alive the filmic fun factory for many more decades to come.

Now let’s have a short glance at the career profile of Charlie Chaplin. Charlie Chaplin was born on 16 April 1889 at East Lane, London as the eldest child of his father. His father, Charlie Chaplin Senior was a part-time singer by profession in London music halls. His mother Hanna Hill also was a music hall singer. However, father’s alcoholism and mother’s ill-health and insanity pushed the family into poverty and Charlie Chaplin had to attend the school for destitute children in London. At the very young age of five, Charlie Chaplin started to perform on stage as a boy-dancer in the music halls. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, London theatre managers at West End like the Duke York’s Theatre had acknowledged Charlie’s, the teenage boy’s brilliant performance, especially his comic gags and in no time he became one of the most popular comedian on stage. After a couple of rounds of North American theatrical tours by Fred Karno comic-troupe in the first decade of twentieth century Chaplin became a popular comedian on American stage as well.

Charlie Chaplin’s celluloid initiation occurred in 1913 when he was invited to join Keystone Studios run by the New York Motion Picture Company as a contractual comic actor with a weekly salary of 150 dollars. *Making a Living* (1914), a silent one-reel film, directed by Henry Lehrman is considered to be the cinematic acting debut of Charlie Chaplin. The director, Lehrman does the lead role in the film. About this debut film of Chaplin, Simon Louvish makes the following comment:

“A standard Keystone knock-‘em-down one-reeler, *Making a Living* nevertheless featured several different locations and some elaborate street settings on a major thoroughfare buzzing with traffic, marking an effort by Sennett to give Chaplin some space to show his tricks. The Tramp is nowhere in evidence, and though there is some business with familiar knee-slapping and cane, the physical action is more an imitation of the arm-waving antics of Ford Sterling

than anything else. In his legend, Charlie disliked the picture, but in the flush of its novelty for him, he had a few critical tools with which to judge whether it suited him or not—it was his first job in pictures.” (57).

In a review that appeared in the leading film magazine of the day, *The Moving Picture World*, Chaplin’s first movie appearance was assessed in the following words, “The clever player who takes the role of a nervy and very shifty sharper in this picture is a comedian of the first water, who acts like one of Nature’s own naturals” (qtd. in Maland 6-7). Everything which were later on came to be known as Chaplinesque had been there in *Making a Living*, which prophetically suggested that Chaplin would make a beautiful living with the new medium, cinema. From his 1914 debut acting career in *Making a Living* to the next 50 plus years, till his 1967 directorial swansong, *A Countess from Hong Kong*, Charlie Chaplin steadily built and maintained his stardom in world cinema.

Charlie Chaplin had kept The Tramp protagonist in 07 of his total 11 directorial movie ventures. Toward the last phase of his career, from 1947 to 1967, he did not use his signature protagonist, The Tramp, in his films. *Caught in the Rain*, Produced by Keystone Studios was directorial debut of Charlie Chaplin. The lead role was also played by Charlie Chaplin himself. As in many of Chaplin’s films, the Tramp’s flirtation with married women causes all riots, upsetting the sacred wedlock and personal trust. The Tramp’s bohemian behavior disrupts the accepted norms, especially those of the middle-class family establishment.

Chaplin takes up the all-in-all responsibilities in his first feature length film *The Kid*. He was the writer, director, music composer, editor, producer and the lead actor in this family drama of a different kind. Here too, it’s a conflict between the value system of the slums and middle-class or upper-class families. How an innocent infant loses the luxury and protection of his comfortable middle-class family, and later how the boy is ensured of those lost love in a slum, is the main storyline of *The Kid*. Dan Kamin says that, “One of the most brilliant transformations occurs in *The Kid*, and Chaplin sets it up with a grubby a funny bit of business. Charlie, looking his shabbiest and acting his most elegant, strolls down a slum alleyway, only to be deluged by streams of garbage thrown out of the windows. He then discovers a crying baby lying next to some garbage cans, and immediately looks up—perhaps this bit of “human garbage” was also thrown from a window. Suddenly comedy and drama become one, merging to make a terrible point about the value of life in the slums.” (57)

*The Kid* is one of the earliest films where the bewilderments and erroneous decisions in taking care of an infant baby by a single foster-father occur. Parental care, socialization of the growing child, inhuman institutional systems maintained to look after orphans, social humiliation awaiting an unmarried mother, immorality in middle-class values, poverty, minor domestic quarrels between the father and the boy, petty crimes to make a living, comforts enjoyed by the father of a growing responsible boy, greed for money are the major themes of this hugely successful first feature length film of Charlie Chaplin. The perfect harmony and understanding between the kid and his ‘father’ throws questions on the validity of biological parentage and real parenting.

After the making of *The Kid*, Chaplin had produced a series feature film on socially relevant themes. No doubt, all of them were box office hits of the time. The titles of these films are:

*A Woman of Paris* (1923)

The Gold Rush (1925)

The Circus (1926)

City Lights (1931), and

Modern Times (1936)

Though technology for producing talkies or sound films were available by the end of the 1920s, Charlie Chaplin continued producing largely silent films even in the 1930s. *City Lights* and *Modern Times* are films without dialogue. However, starting with his political cinematic satire, *The Great Dictator* (1940), Charlie Chaplin embraced the talkie mode of cinema.

In the last phase of his film career, starting from *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), Charlie Chaplin, stopped making *The Tramp* as his protagonist. Movies like *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), *Limelight* (1952), *A King in New York* (1957), and *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967) are the non-Tramp films of Charlie Chaplin. *A Countess from Hong Kong* is the only colour film directed and acted by Charlie Chaplin. Somehow, a brilliant all-rounder filmperson like Chaplin, refused to accept the emerging technologies of film-sound and film-colour in the beginning stages of their availability to filmmakers like him. As mentioned earlier, Chaplin was at least a decade late to adopt the sound-film technology in his great films. Similarly, even though colour film technologies like Technicolor was available as early as 1939, Chaplin refused to accept the technology till for about the next 30 years, till he produced his only colour film *A Countess from Hong Kong* in 1967.

The history of colour movies starts as early as Edison Manufacturing Company's hand tinted colour film *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* which was produced in 1894. William Dickson and William Heise were the directors of this silent film, the duration of which is about 45 seconds. Each and every frame of this film was coloured or painted with hand. At that point in time, colouring of films was a part of the editorial decision making. Many prints of *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* were distributed in black-and-white versions also. So, here we have a strange situation of the existence of both the colour and black-and-white versions of the same film. The raw film-stock was non-colour, but the released movie was a colour movie, but it was not a colourful movie because only four to five colours were used to tint the original flowing white dress of the young dancer Annabelle Moore. Its definitely an interesting phase in the history of films. So, can we call William Dickson and William Heise as the inventors of colour motion picture?

According to a report by Amita Singh, published in the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, in September 2012, the worlds earliest ideal colour film was shot by Edward Raymond Turner, a London photographer in 1902. According to Paul Goodman of the National Media Museum, Bradford, England, "Edward Turner is the father of moving colour images" (Singh). Technologies like Kinemacolor invented by George Albert Smith of Britain in 1906, Technicolor (1916) and Eastmancolor (1950) were available to Charlie Chaplin. However, he hugged the colour celluloid only in 1967.

*The Gold Rush* is a cinematic adaptation of the historic treasure hunt known as *The Klondike Gold Rush* to the North-West of Canada by prospectors in 1880s. The event was also known as the *Alaska Gold Rush*. It was one of the greatest migrations in the history by prospectors

numbering more than a 10 million. However, only one third of them could reach the destination. Even after reaching the destination, only a few could find the treasure. The animality of human hunger for wealth, human being's cannibalistic urge to save life during starvation, collapse of comradeship at the threat of death, human betrayal etc. are the thematic concerns of this movie. This is a cinematic text book on human greed for wealth and their ultimate perish in search of the remote treasure. Conflict between nature and human beings, human beings and wild animals and conflicts among the human beings themselves are depicted in this film. "In January 1935 [almost ten years after the release of the movie], Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Germany's Minister of Propaganda, issued an order banning *The Gold Rush*. The film, according to an official statement, "does not coincide with [the] world philosophy of the present day in Germany" (Louvish 266).

*The Great Dictator* (1940) is another major cinematic political critique by Charlie Chaplin. This talkie film remains to be one of the most enduring cinematic comic sarcastic digs on Adolf Hitler, the then racist tyrant of Nazi Germany and Benito Mussolini who was the fascist regent of Italy then. Notably, Chaplin himself plays both the roles of the victim and the victimizer, the Jewish barber and Adolf Hitler respectively. Most of the action takes place in the fictional country Tomainia, a parodic representation of the factual country Germany, under the dictatorship of Adenoid Hynkel, a parodic representation of Hitler. The pathetic living conditions in Jewish ghettos in Tomainia are often juxtaposed with the luxurious lives of the people in the palace. The military and racist comradeship existing between the dictators of Tomainia and Bacteria, a parody on Italy under Benito Mussolini are depicted with a politically biting combination of sarcasm and humour in the film. The arms race between the heads of two fictional nations, their idiotic eccentricities, their deceitful public utterances, their rumour mongering, power hunger, pseudo patriotism, and their ultimate defeat are depicted in the film. One of the memorable sequences in the film is Hynkel's tossing of the balloon globe which indicates his ambition to conquer the whole globe by using military power. To Simon Louvish, Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* was "an unintended battle cry, as Hollywood pussyfooted around the subject of anti-fascist commitment. ... The strange case of *The Great Dictator*, however, is that it resonates, not so much with an affective call to arms against tyranny, but with an unequivocal cry for justice and peace" (278-279). The pressbook for the exhibitors, prepared by Chaplin's United Artists production company, announced that, "*The Great Dictator* is a history-making comedy based on the most vital topic in the history of the world" (qtd. in Louvish, 168). In *My Autobiography*, Chaplin reveals more on the political importance as well on the institutional hindrances he faced during the making of the film. He says, "Half-way through making *The Great Dictator* I began receiving alarming messages from United Artists. They had been advised by Hays Office that I would run into censorship trouble. Also, the English office was very concerned about an anti-Hitler picture and doubted whether it could be shown in Britain. But I was determined to go ahead, for Hitler must be laughed at. Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made *The Great Dictator*; I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis. However, I was determined to ridicule their mystic bilge about a pure-blooded race: As though such a thing never existed outside of the Australian Aborigines!" (00—00) These bold statements by Chaplin make explicit the political and historical relevance of the film.

Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times* is a sharp critique of the capitalist industrial apparatus of assembly line production method that reduces an organic agricultural labourer into

an industrial mechanical hand destined to do only a single repetitive function in the larger chain of jobs required for the manufacturing of an industrial product. Such mechanization or materialization of man renders him finally into a psychotic situation making him an alienated subjectivity. Modern industrial institutions, both capitalist and socialist, turns the factory labourers into dehumanized objects, reducing each one of them into bio-machines destined to do a single piece of never-ending repetitive task. During this process, the creative and multi-tasking capability of human beings are denied to perform. In such an industrial institutional ambiance, finally labourers are alienated from their own labour, institutions, and finally from the society too. In the Marxist critical terminology, the conversion of a multi-dimensional human being into a thing-like being by the modern capitalist system is called reification. It was Georg Lukacs, one of the key ideologues of Western Marxist Thought, who theorized the idea of reification. In *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin is attempting to create a cinematic discourse on the alienated or estranged subjectivities of the modern industrial civilization.

*Modern Times* can be described as a futuristic movie, because Chaplin here anticipates the system of digital surveillance of the mass through the connected networks of CCTVs which is very common in the context of contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century cyber and digital civilization. This 90-minute black-and-white movie features Chaplin's iconic Tramp in the lead role of a factory worker, Paulette Goddard as Ellen Peterson who is now reduced to a young street urchin after the death of her father, and Ernest Garcia in the role of the President of the steel company where the Tramp is employed. The interiors of a steel factory, somewhere in Detroit which was known as the 'Motor City' in the USA, a mental asylum, city streets filled with agitating and unemployed people, jail premises, a cafeteria, a departmental store, a wooden hut, a pub etc. are the major sites where the plot of the film unfolds.

In his autobiography, Charlie Chaplin talks about the germination of the idea for the film *Modern Times*. He explains:

"[...] I remembered an interview I had with a bright young reporter in the *New York World*. Hearing that I was visiting Detroit, he had told me of the factory-belt system there – a harrowing story of big industry luring healthy young men off the farms who, after four or five years at the belt system, became nervous wrecks. It was that conversation that gave me that idea of *Modern Times*. I used feeding machine as a time-saving device, so that the workers could continue working during lunch time. The factory sequence resolved itself in the tramp having a nervous breakdown. The plot developed out of the natural sequence of events. After his cure, he gets arrested and meets a gamine who has also been arrested for stealing bread. They meet in a police car packed with offenders. From then on, the theme is about two nondescripts trying to get along in modern times. They are involved in the Depression, strikes, riots and unemployment" (377-78).

Because of its description of the failure of the capitalistic system in protecting human rights and for its support for a humane political culture, *Modern Times* was often accused of being communistic. Urban poverty, anti-communist political status quo, police brutality, unprofessional jail system that further fosters criminality, maddening industrial culture are some of the main themes of *Modern times*. With *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin has become an artist-activist who aestheticized a progressive politics.

In Charles J. Maland's opinion, "*Modern Times*, in many ways one of Chaplin's most interesting and fascinating films, can be most profitably examined here as a case study of

ambivalence about the relationship between aesthetics and ideology... As he contemplated *Modern Times*, we have seen that there was some pressure on (and compulsion in) Chaplin the artist, like many other artists in the depression, to make a political commitment and to express that commitment through his art. However, this conflicted with Chaplin's earlier, avowed belief that art and propaganda did not mix" (143).

*Modern Times* is a cinematic critique of the Great Economic Depression of 1930s which ruined many developed capitalistic economies worldwide. Urban and rural unemployment increased exponentially during this period. The immediate victims of the Depression, primarily caused by the crash of gambling stock markets that played with investors' money, were the urban industrial labourers and rural agricultural folk. Charlie Chaplin was looking at the Depression from the perspective of the lowest strata of the society, i.e., from the perspective of industrial labourers and unemployed people. This cinematic discourse from a lower class perspective is politically charged. And this could be the reason for many to label this film as a 'Red Film'.

Sydney Carroll responded that *Modern Times* "had stirred me to hysterical, irresistible ridiculous laughter. It had also made my blood boil with indignation. It had choked me to sobs. Here is a film that makes entertainment out of the under-dog. It forces hilarity from the suffering and endurance of the masses. It extracts laughter from poverty, from starvation, from children driven by want to theft. It mixes buffoonery with mind-stifling mechanical routine, and marries insanity to clowning. In making *Modern Times*, Chaplin has achieved something much more than a comic film; he has made a stern arraignment of our so-called civilization" (qtd. in Morgan, n.p). The gigantic machine at the Electro Steel Corporation is the microcosm of the larger dehumanizing, engulfing, lunacy-producing and alienating capitalist social system.

To sum up, these are the salient features of Charlie Chaplin's films: They are cinematic critique of the society of their times; the bourgeois life in the peak of industrial modernism is often the object of satire in Chaplin's films; through his films, Chaplin proved that without sound and colour, it was possible to make engaging films; topical events are taken as the subject of most of Chaplin's films; perspective from the lower-class often gets priority in his films; the Tramp is a universal icon of impoverishment, life-force and resistance; the class-question had always been a major theme in Charlie Chaplin's films; in his first Tramp-phase filmography, his protagonist's drunkenness is often used as pretext to upset fragile pseudo norms of middle-class society; his early films also satirize the stupidity and jealousy of middle-class life; the Tramp's flirtatious advances often foregrounds the misogynist idea of the frailty of women in relationships; in his second Non-Tramp-phase he looks into the pitfalls of high life; and physical agility and physical feebleness are often juxtaposed in his films, where the latter succeeds finally.

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#### Web Links:

<<https://www.charliechaplin.com/en/articles/6-Filming-Modern-Times>>

<<https://www.charliechaplin.com/>>

<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charlie-Chaplin>>

<<https://www.charliechaplin.com/en/films/9-Limelight/articles/3-Filming-The-Kid>>

<<https://www.charliechaplin.com/en/articles/29-the-final-speech-from-the-great-dictator->>