

# Modern Times

By Jeffrey Vance

No human being is more responsible for cinema's ascendance as the dominant form of art and entertainment in the twentieth century than Charles Chaplin. Yet, Chaplin's importance as a historic figure is eclipsed only by his creation, the Little Tramp, who became an iconic figure in world cinema and culture. Chaplin translated traditional theatrical forms into an emerging medium and changed both cinema and culture in the process. Modern screen comedy began the moment Chaplin donned his derby hat, affixed his toothbrush moustache, and stepped into his impossibly large shoes for the first time.

"Modern Times" is Chaplin's self-conscious valedictory to the pantomime of silent film he had pioneered and nurtured into one of the great art forms of the twentieth century. Although technically a sound film, very little of the soundtrack to "Modern Times" contains dialogue. The soundtrack is primarily Chaplin's own musical score and sound effects, as well as a performance of a song by the Tramp in gibberish. This remarkable performance marks the only time the Tramp ever spoke. Chaplin resisted talking pictures in part because the Tramp's silence made him understood around the world. However, with the gibberish song, Chaplin ingeniously makes the statement that talking in any one language is meaningless in all others, while at the same time allowing the Tramp to "speak" in a way that is universally understood. It was the Tramp's swan song. Chaplin retired the character with "Modern Times."

The genesis of "Modern Times" is rooted in Chaplin's sixteen-month world tour following the premiere of "City Lights" (1931). As he traveled, he saw firsthand the economic and political consequences of the Great Depression and met some of the most influential thinkers of the era, such as Winston Churchill, Bernard Shaw, Albert Einstein, and Mahatma Gandhi. This journey provided the context for "Modern Times." Upon his return to the United States, Chaplin was struck with the idea for the film after learning about healthy young men who had been lured away from their farms to work in factories



*This ad appeared in the March 7, 1936 edition of Motion Picture Herald. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).*

in Detroit but, after several years on the assembly line, succumbed to nervous breakdowns. "Modern Times" evolved into a comedy that embraces difficult subjects such as strikes, riots, unemployment, poverty, and the tyranny of automation.

The opening title to the film reads, "Modern Times: a story of industry, of individual enterprise, humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness." At the Electro Steel Corporation, the Tramp is a worker on a factory conveyor belt. The little fellow's early misadventures at the factory include being volunteered for a feeding machine, a time-saving device employed so that workers may continue working during their lunch breaks. Ultimately, the Tramp has a nervous breakdown and throws himself down a chute into the belly of the factory. Released from the hospital, he quickly lands in prison as a communist leader when he innocently picks up a red flag that has fallen from a truck and finds himself inadvertently leading a workers' parade. After the Tramp prevents a jail break, life in prison becomes so pleasant (he is better fed, clothed, and sheltered in the safe and secure prison than in the chaos of society during the Depression) that he is saddened to be pardoned.

At first the Tramp is determined to return to jail, yet decides to remain in the world when he meets the Gamine (Paulette Goddard), an adolescent orphaned when her father is killed in a labor dispute, who is being pursued by juvenile-care authorities. Both the Tramp and the Gamine yearn for the American Dream of domestic life, imagining themselves in a simple home in a suburban development. Inspired by

the Gamine to get a job instead of returning to prison, the Tramp is hired as a night watchman in a department store. He lands in jail again when the department store is robbed by some of his former factory-worker compatriots. When released from prison again, the Tramp finds that the Gamine has acquired them a "home," in a dilapidated shanty shack, a comic version of the Hoovervilles of the period. Having found work at the Jetson Mill, the Tramp promptly loses the job in a labor walkout. Meanwhile, the Gamine has found work dancing in a café and persuades the café proprietor to hire the Tramp as a singing waiter. The Tramp's complete lack of skill tending to tables in the café is compensated for by his great success as a singing waiter. However, the juvenile-care authorities pursue the Gamine, forcing them to flee their new jobs and take to the open road. Discouraged, the Gamine asks the Tramp, "What's the use of trying?" Summoning his trademark optimism, the Tramp responds, "Buck up! We'll get along!" Heartened, the Gamine replies, "You betcha! Let's go!" Arm in arm, they walk off toward the horizon, off to pursue a better life. It is the Tramp's very last shuffle down the open road. This time, however, he has a companion by his side.

Paulette Goddard had been Chaplin's real-life companion as well since July 1932, and in September 1934, he put her under contract and cast her as the "Gamin," as he called the character in the film (although he would later correct this to "gamine" in his autobiography). Chaplin began pre-production on "Modern Times" in March 1933 and filming began in October 1934, at his Hollywood studio and nearby locations. Art directors Charles D. Hall and Russell Spencer supervised the construction of the impressive factory interiors at the Chaplin Studios, clearly inspired by Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," (1926) René Clair's "A Nous la Liberté" (1931) was an influence on Chaplin's factory scenes as well.

"Modern Times" boasts Chaplin's finest music score. His most recognizable and commercially viable song, "Smile," emerged from a melody used by him in "Modern Times." "Smile," with a completed structure and lyrics, was created to promote the reissue "Modern Times" in 1954. "Smile" is still considered a popular standard today.

The world première of "Modern Times" took place at the Rivoli Theatre, New York City, on February 5, 1936. The press reaction to "Modern Times" was

decidedly mixed. Some were disappointed that the film begins as a satire of mass production that ultimately is not fulfilled. Further, the film does not have the integrated structure of Chaplin's previous feature films. Otis Ferguson, writing for "The New Republic," noted that the film could be divided into a collection of one-or two-reel shorts, with the proposed titles being "The Shop," "The Jailbird," "The Watchman," and "The Singing Waiter."

Chaplin recognized that "Modern Times" was the valedictory for the Tramp and deliberately included many gags and sequences as a loving farewell to the character and an homage to the visual comedy tradition. However, the spine that holds the story together is the journey of survival taken by the Tramp and the Gamine. The final shot of the film, as the Tramp walks down a road into the unknown, is more than a reprise of Chaplin's signature finale. This time, the Tramp is not alone. And this time, the Tramp carries the legacy of silent film down the road with him. "Modern Times," as Hollywood's last silent film, represents the end of an era.

"Modern Times" is perhaps more meaningful now than at any time since its first release. The twentieth-century theme of the film, farsighted for its time—the struggle to eschew alienation and preserve humanity in a modern, mechanized world—profoundly reflects issues confronting the twenty-first century. The Tramp's travails in "Modern Times" and the comedic mayhem that ensues should provide strength and comfort to all who feel like helpless cogs in a world beyond control. Through its universal themes and comic inventiveness, the film remains one of Chaplin's greatest and most enduring works. Perhaps more important, it is the Tramp's finale, a tribute to Chaplin's immortal character and the silent-film era he commanded for a generation.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Essay by Jeffrey Vance, adapted from his book Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003). Jeffrey Vance is a film historian, archivist, and author of the books Douglas Fairbanks, Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema, Harold Lloyd: Master Comedian, and Buster Keaton Remembered (with Eleanor Keaton). He is widely regarded as one of the world's foremost authorities of Charles Chaplin.*