

Modern Times: Charlie Chaplin in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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Abstract

*This paper looks at Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) through the eyes of Walter Benjamin, reading the film in conjunction with his classic cultural studies essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). It reiterates cinema's complicated relationship with aura as an audiovisual art form. It clarifies that for Charlie Chaplin the auteur, the film is, at its core, a democratic art form, as opposed to Benjamin's hope for it to blossom into a medium for revolutionary agitation and action.*

Keywords:

Charlie Chaplin, Modern Times, Aura, Film as Art Form, Walter Benjamin

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 05.06.2025

Approved: 18.06.2025

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Chaplin in the Age of
Mechanical Reproduction

Notions Jan. - June 2025,
Vol. XVI, No. 1,
pp. 069-073
Article No. 09

Similarity Check: 06%

Online available at :
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volume/notions-vol-xvi-no1-
jan-june-2025](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/notions-vol-xvi-no1-jan-june-2025)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
notions.2025v16i01.09](https://doi.org/10.31995/notions.2025v16i01.09)

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Walter Benjamin exclaims with Marx that the harsh exploitation of the proletariat will lead to the “creat[ion of] conditions which would make it possible [for capitalism] to abolish... itself” (W. Benjamin 217). In Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), the *Little Tramp*, now a factory worker, suffers a nervous breakdown from the stress of keeping pace with the assembly line conveyor belt and exhibits destructive behavior that introduces chaos into the capital’s powerhouse, leading to a temporary halt in the production process. Benjamin would have felt immense pleasure watching this micro-revolution, because it proves his thesis of film having a “revolutionary merit” in “promot[ing] revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art... [and] social conditions” (231). He countered the (rather fascist) theology of *l’art pour l’art* with the theory of a *new* (accessible) art form, focusing greatly on film.

Benjamin begins by outlining his concept of the “aura” of an artwork. The aura is the artwork’s *singularity* within a specific spatiotemporality, i.e., its quality of unique existence in a specific spatiotemporal locus: e.g., the unique existence of the *one* “true”, “authentic” and “original” Mona Lisa at the Louvre in Paris from 1797 onwards (D. Carrier 35). Due to its “ritual function” in religion and *l’art pour l’art*, the artwork acquires a “halo” of *uniqueness* and *authenticity* (Caygill, Coles and Klimowski 193). *This* is the aura, and it confers upon the artwork an unmeasurable and unbridgeable auratic distance, however close to it we may be. It is the unmediated artwork’s metaphysical quality equivalent to the logocentric presence of human speech. For Benjamin, photographic art, and by extension, film, lack aura. This is because of the absence of the presence of the “authentic” “original” in film: not even the film negative can be labeled the “original” because it is the developed (moving) image that constitutes the movie. Even the final cut of a movie is a “sequence of positional views” stitched together by the editor from discrete and disparate shots, i.e., *montage* (228).

Additionally, MK2 digitally restored *Modern Times* from original footage found worldwide in 2003. The French company cut good copies available from footage together and processed all 126,000 frames to remove damages and ensure optimal image stability (A. Doland par. 4). To ask for the “original”, the *ur-cine-text*, is comical, because such a cine-text does not exist. Moreover, the construction of creative geography and visuality in *Modern Times* — its *mise-en-scène* — ensures that it never attains a spatiotemporal singularity. California as depicted in the film is as much a non-entity as the Tramp and Gamine’s fantasy home. It is a world “unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens [the *Kino Eye*], which... chooses its angle at will” (220); it is created with the help of *props* and *special*

effects and shot discontinuously. The Tramp and the Gamine do not exist either, but are characters created with the help of the *mise-en-scène* devices *makeup* and *costume*. *Modern Times* is a classic playing simultaneously in multiple locales throughout the world, destroying any notion of singularity. The film is thus free from subordination to the concepts of “specific spatiotemporality” and the “original”. Its entire techné of production being “founded in... mechanical reproduction”, film drastically diminishes the aura (230).

Furthermore, Benjamin compares the anti-auratic art form of film to theater, its greatest auratic adversary. Quoting art and film theorist *Rudolf Arnheim*, he elucidates how the film attempts to further decay aura by reducing the actor into “a stage prop chosen for its characteristics and... inserted at the proper place” (230). In contrast, the fundamental force upon which a stage play operates is the logocentric presence — the aura — of the stage actor. Even in the case of Brechtian theater, it requires *Gestus*, reinvoking the stage actor’s singular presence upon the specific spatiotemporality of the stage. *Modern Times*, on the other hand, lacks the logocentric aura of Charles Chaplin, the actor, but basks in the “spell of the personality” of *Charlie Chaplin*’s Tramp, who entices us distracted spectator-critics with performances of innocence, slapstick and pantomime (231). We do not see his spontaneous performance, but discrete and discontinuous performances pre-digested and woven together into a clean narrative for us by the Kino-Eye and the editor. With its largely silent nature, intertitles and pantomime, it disavows a mediator between the artwork and the spectator-critic, rejecting all ritual function and cult value in its decryal of exclusivity in favor of inclusivity. For Benjamin, it is at this stage of rejection of traditional concepts of art that film declares its newfound allegiance and subservience to the praxis of politics, and it is at this point that the essay no longer speaks for *Modern Times*. This is because *Modern Times* is apolitical: it is neither fascist, nor communist, but *democratic*.

It repudiates capitalism for putting men in the service of machinery, as opposed to vice versa (D. Robinson par. 4), as clearly evinced by the “factory scene”, where the machine depicted in the *mise-en-scène* is a giant monster towering over and swallowing men, reminiscent of the harsh architecture of the underworld factory in Fritz Lang’s Weimar Expressionist masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927) where the workers toil (*Modern Times* 00:15:13) under the panoptic scrutiny of a proto-CCTV, far below the bourgeois tower of Babel. It also questions communism for instilling an ideological herd mentality among the workers such that even an “innocent victim” like the Tramp gets arrested for accidentally picking up its agenda (00:21:07). Just as Benjamin states, the movie attempts not to simply bring forth a “beautiful

semblance”, but to *reproduce* reality and comment upon the deplorable state of the same (230). Ironically, a naturalistic representation of reality requires extensive and expert use of technology: the film is thus the “height of artifice” (233).

Modern Times joins Benjamin in disproving Georges Duhamel’s allegations that film “requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence... awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a ‘star’ in Los Angeles” (239). *Modern Times* appeals to a mass audience, without discriminating between young and old or rich and poor. Its only interest is in claiming an exhibition value. Charlie Chaplin refused dialogue in the movie and used only music and sound effects because he wanted to pristinely preserve the universality of his humor, a major bulk of which was handled through his physical comedy (D. Robinson par. 8). In the opening sequence of the movie, Chaplin contrasts shots of a shepherded flock of sheep with workers heading towards the factory (00:01:49). The syntagmatic connotation is that innocent workers are being treacherously led to be sacrificed and slaughtered at the altars of Capital. The caustic sarcasm of the auto-feeding machine advertisement screaming “Don’t stop for lunch; be ahead of your competitors!” and “Eliminate the lunch hour; increase your production!” is not lost on Benjamin’s spectator critics. Most importantly, the only time we hear the Tramp’s voice is when he embraces his true talent of comedy by performing his great “Italian Gibberish” song, aided by pantomime. All other voices in the movie arise from machines. The meaning is naked. Sound, for Charlie Chaplin, the master of silent comedy, represents the reification and dehumanization brought about by mass production and the Industrial Revolution. T.W. Adorno would disagree thus: “Movies... pretend to be art. [They are just business[es]... made into an ideology... to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce” (94).

But Benjamin probably would not think so. He would be piqued by *Modern Times*’s interest in revelation. It would disappoint him, however, in not being Marxist. No matter how close the Tramp is to death by starvation, he will not gain insight into his political position. This is because *Modern Times* is not interested in the revelation of class consciousness but in postmodern knowledge. It attempts to alleviate the fear of the unknown, thereby reinstating hope in the age of the Postmodern: “Buck up — Never say die. We’ll get along!”. Then the Tramp-Gamine duo sets off down the country lane toward the horizon of hyperreal emptiness and joins Didi and Gogo “behind the mountains” of an unthinkable imagination (Bamps and Heyndels 119). Chaplin’s art is not “the art of a classless society” but “the art of the proletariat after its assumption of power”. In its postmodern skepticism the movie rejects the fascist precursors of “creativity”, “genius”, and “mystery” (218). For the

time being it still holds “eternal value”. This “eternal value” is not its intrinsic, theological characteristic, but is externally imbued. This is because neither the Postmodern age nor the Industrial Revolution has truly ended; they now thrive in a Futuristic glory worthy of being sung by F.T. Marinetti. If, and when this epoch of hypercapitalist horror ends, then, in accordance with Benjamin’s theory of art, and like other great films, *Modern Times* too will lose its “eternal value”.

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