

Illustration of dehumanization in the society in Charlie Chaplin's silent comedy “Modern Times”

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Though silent films were already old-fashioned by 1936, Charlie Chaplin completed that year his last silent feature film – *Modern Times*. Despite the fact that this film is silent, it is a masterpiece comedy that even today remains a favorite movie by the movie-lovers. This might be attributed to Chaplin's concession to the new era: the film has synchronized soundtracks. This included the limited dialogue that came from the loudspeakers but not from the actors of the film. In most scenes, the film is just full of actions and comedy. The music sung by Chaplin himself became part of the film and all this contributes to the film's preference by movie lovers.

Though the film was shot during the Great Depression of the 1930's and reflects that time, there are several scenes which will always look familiar to a first time viewer. For instance, the fans of Charlie will discover that the memorable comic 'job-switching' episode where Charlie struggles to keep up with the pace of the accelerating conveyor belt of the assembly line was due to the film's opening sequence at an industrial plant.

The relevance of this film can also be portrayed in the contemporary themes. First of all, the opening shot of a large flock of sheep passing through the sheepfold passageway and suddenly bumping into the footage of workers has great relevance in the modern world. This scene is so familiar especially to the America's citizens living in cubicles as if it was a part of their lives.

Furthermore, the modern-day audience while watching this film may see the ruefulness of the electronic surveillance system present in the workplaces. This is more so, in the comic episode of Charlie taking a break during work hours and spend time in the washrooms where a big-screened image of the boss's head appears and the boss orders him to get back to work. Charlie gets seriously scared and terrified when he hears the voice of

the boss. Charlie has no any other alternative but to postpone smoking during that period and embark on the industry's tiring work. Human beings are not accorded the necessary respect and dignity that they deserve and they are there closely monitored, as we have seen.

This act has become a crucial issue in the contemporary world, where the workers in the workplaces complain of not being given time to have a rest, and if given, then the time is too minimal. Furthermore, they lament of strict monitoring by the management. This is exactly the same as we see in the film. For instance, in the Electro Steel industry there is a maniacal type of surveillance system that monitors and controls the workers at the factory. Before seeing Charlie we see the president sitting in his office at technically monitoring the progress of the workers in the factory. The president gives very stern orders when he notices someone taking a break from work. Charlie almost fell over when he heard the president giving stern orders through the surveillance system and he goes back to work. Furthermore, the president gives his foreman instructions to speed up the workers who work slowly.

In addition, most employers in the modern world do not mind about their employees but they focus on making profits. As we can see in the film the Billows Feeding Machine is introduced. This machine is to speed up the eating of lunch by workers so that they resumed duty quicker. This machine is first tested out on Charlie. The testing becomes a nightmare; Charlie is not fed by the machine. To make matters worse, after this scenario, he goes back to work, having not eaten. The president does not mind about this. This underscores the dehumanizing deeds in the society captured in the film.

Furthermore, the country suffers the problem of unemployment. This problem has resulted into vicious cycle of poverty in the film and

perpetuated other bad people's habits. In the film we see Charlie looking for a job on a daily basis. When the news appears in the daily papers that the factories will reopen and there will be employment opportunities, Charlie is so excited and hurries up to the Steel Industry determined to get a job. Lucky enough, he secures his job. However, the workers go on strike and lose their jobs. This just proves the adage that states that "The more things do change, is the more they stay the same". Those who are less fortunate in the society continue to suffer while the rich enjoy.

We also see Paulette's family and Charlie languishing in poverty due to this unemployment woe. In one of the comic episodes we see Paulette stealing bananas together with her young siblings. The stolen bananas are then taken home and used as food. She advances in her theft and one day she steals a loaf of bread from a parked vehicle. This time round luck was not on her side because she got caught by police and was taken away. However, Charlie intercepted and braved the situation so that he could be caught instead of the girl.

The above issues show the relevance of the film to the modern-day society where there is too much injustice and life seems to be very difficult for a common man. The common man has little to eat, languishes in poverty, encounters difficulties to get a job and if he finds the job, then the conditions at the workplace is usually harsh and difficult to persevere.

Perhaps the most fundamental question to ask ourselves would be, "Is Chaplin's film a political or social critique of American life?" From the various scenes and episodes we can discover that this film is a social critique of the American life. The film moves out of science fiction to human drama as it tries to explore the American culture and the society in general during the Great Depression. During this particular section we meet Paulette, a young orphan, who together with Charlie serves to

illustrate the human cost during this Great Depression. We see a country torn apart by paranoia as well as poverty through the actions of Charlie and Paulette. We see that people exist at the height of insecurity and at the mercy of the world around them. The two languish in poverty, as shown by Charlie pledging the police in prison, when he was not released. He says that hunger is the song of the common people.

Witness the subtlety timing in the scene in which Charlie is arrested because of communist agitation. Charlie had just been released from a psychiatric ward, when he saw a flatbed truck with a long load and the truck which had a red flag in the end. This seemed to be a worse point for Charlie, because when the flag fell he picked it and started waving it to give a sign to the truck driver. Unfortunately, a throng of unemployed workers comes up behind him demonstrating in the streets. The scene becomes comic and sorrowful at the same time because the police, who came to the scene, thought that Charlie was the one leading the demonstration and arrested him.

In spite of this, this movie helps us to see the tremendous progress made in the modern society towards reduction in the levels of unemployment. Few Americans today may have to steal in order to get food to fill their hungry stomach. This is unlike the ancient times when an average adult strived to survive rather than to get job. The modern progress is contrary to Charlie's time, where Paulette had to steal a loaf of bread in order to feed her family.

The various scenes in the film help us to uncover the theme of this film, "dehumanized humanity". This topic further enhances the thesis of this movie. The theme is appropriate for this film and there are several scenes in support of this. For example, we notice Charlie trying his best in the various jobs he had: a worker at the assembly line at the factory, a ship

yard worker, a watchman on perilous roller skates or a singing waiter, but still he could not get good payment to even buy food, or a house, as he dreamt. Charlie tells Paulette that he has nowhere to live. The working conditions at the jobs he had were harsh and Charlie is almost driven insane; he starts to 'tighten peoples' noses' thinking that they were nuts in the conveyor belt.

The comedy aimed to show that human beings ought not be mistreated or overworked as this reduces their moral for work and may even cause madness. The monotony of Charlie's job was enough to make him go berserk.

On the other hand, we see that poverty has taken toll in the film. Perhaps this is due to the skyrocketing issue of unemployment. Charlie is too poor to buy a house. He therefore, launches nowhere in specific. Charlie is asked by Paulette where he lives. The answer Charlie gives is "Nowhere", -meaning he has nowhere to reside. Furthermore, the burglars who confront Charlie when he worked as a security officer say that they were not burglars but they were just hungry. This show how poverty had infiltrated the society to tremendous extends.

It is important to note that this film has a number of lessons that we can learn. Despite the fact that it is heavily tied on the social upheavals of the society, we can learn that there is always a reward for acting responsibly. Charlie in half-sanity action comes across a group of prisoners who had taken control of the police. He acts comically and in a way he outdoes the group of prisoners. He gives the pistol back to the police and opens the door to the cell in which the police had been locked up. Charlie was then released from prison because of this good act.

In addition, Charlie was asked to sing, so after he could get employment

in the hotel as a singer and waiter. In spite the fact that he doesn't know the words of the song, he sings some incoherent words incorporated with funny moves and tonal variation. The audience cheers him and he gets the job. This is a moral lesson to us not to despair even if situations seem tough. We should also be tactical.

"I have something to say!" This movie, though shot in the 1930s, was very well directed. The scenes though comic and characterized by actions mainly, are well organized and coordinated in such a way that the episodes follow each other in a systematic order. Charlie's comedy-of-errors genre, involving his innocent attempt to help, is mistaken for political agitation; it is just the thing that would happen to him.

Furthermore, the continuity of his story whereby the demonstration does not just appear from nowhere in order to bring the comedy aspect of the film but flows naturally and also logically from the past events. As if this is not all, we also see the social concerns that underlie the film. We realize that the problems of the workers reflect their real problems. The problem of the workers was unemployment. They wanted to get jobs. They had initially suffered and wanted a stop for this kind of suffering.

Furthermore, the capture and persecution of Charlie by a mistake was almost anticipated. This is because the acts happened not for the first time and would not be the last ones. The police believed that he is a communist and was strongly against the capitalism way of life. That was a big irony because Charlie was the greatest capitalist, though the police charged him for being a communist.

This shows the serious differences of class in the film with the American people. The poor become poorer and continue to be unfortunate. Those with power, on the other hand, continue to dehumanize the innocent and

the feeble in the society. The weak members of the society, such as Charlie and Paulette, remain hopeless still neither knowing where to lay their heads, nor what to eat.

Considering acting in the film, the movie is full of action and is largely dominated by silence of actors. Charlie is one of those silent characters. Like a mime, Charlie interacts with his world, but does not get into it. Instead he remains hopeful looking for his place in the world, and, unfortunately, in vain. We also notice that Charlie is always in motion with his back to the camera and the face up. This further enhances the comic aspect of the film and makes it more interesting as it is action-packed. These actions are synchronized to evoke gags and enjoyable moods to the viewer since they are full of fun.

This film is shot in the black and white monochrome colors. This type of cinematography gives this film its authenticity. Despite of the movie being in black and white, Charlie establishes the red flag by the functions it had – a warning signal that signalized the overhanging of the rear end of the truck. Charlie picks up the flag and waves as a good deed to alert the driver of the fallen flag. However, the police gets the perception that he is leading the throng of demonstrating workers. They arrest him.

We see scenes flowing from one to another. Other scenes of this kind include the feeding-machine demonstration, Charlie's short-lived job at the shipyard industry, lunchtime at the factory with his boss getting caught in the giant machines and the ultimate singing and dancing at the hotel in which Paulette worked. This was an audition for Charlie to get a job as a waiter in the hotel.

“Modern Times” ends up in a note that is both true to this heritage and also a note that softens it. Credit goes to Charlie, for a great body of work that

will remain outstanding and cherished by everyone in this era of movies and cinema.

In conclusion, we can say that this film is only meant to help us strive to act in a way that ensures equality, harmony, and brotherhood. Social injustices and problems should be our priority in ensuring a good environment to live in.