



Modern Times

In this cinema classic, Charlie Chaplin's famous "tramp" character struggles to survive in a modern and changing world set against the backdrop of the American Great Depression.

Recommended for all ages

Themes: family, friendship, inequality, labor, non-conformity, poverty, romance, social class, stereotypes, technology, urban issues, violence



Director(s): Charlie Chaplin | **86 min** | **Film Classic, Live Action** | **1936** | **Country:** United States | **Language:** Silent Film

Official film website: www.charliechaplin.com

SET THE STAGE | THOUGHT-STARTERS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This film was made in 1936 at the height of the Great Depression, during an era of great economic and social unrest. Chaplin, in character as the Tramp, is a stand-in for the ordinary impoverished worker, exploited by the capitalist system itself. Using satire, Charlie Chaplin critiques the dehumanizing characteristics of industrialization—at one point he is literally swallowed up by one of the factory machines. Chaplin is particularly poking fun at the assembly lines made famous by the Ford car company, which views each worker as an interchangeable part and values efficiency over humanity. Throughout the scenes in the factory, we see Chaplin failing to be a successful cog in the industrial machine; instead, he wreaks havoc throughout the finely tuned factory system.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Assembly Line:** An arrangement of machines, tools, and workers in which a product is assembled by having each perform a specific, successive operation on an incomplete unit as it passes by in a series of stages organized in a direct line.
- **Satire:** The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize society.
- **Tramp:** A person who travels from place to place on foot in search of work or as a vagrant or beggar. In this movie Charlie Chaplin's un-named character is called the Tramp because he is supposed to stand in for all of the vagrants who traveled around America during the Great Depression seeking food and shelter.
- **Cross-Fade:** Making a picture appear or a sound be heard gradually as another disappears or becomes silent.
- **Silent Film:** A film with no synchronized recorded sound, especially with no spoken dialogue. In silent films the dialogue is transmitted through muted gestures, mime and title cards. When these films were shown in theaters, live musicians created a soundtrack, which complimented the action on the screen.
- **Synchronized-Sound:** Sound recorded at the same time the action is filmed so the image track and soundtrack fit seamlessly together.

For more film terms, refer to the PCFF Film Glossary (pcfri.org/FilmHub).



Clues and Cues

Pay attention while watching

- Although this is mostly a silent film, there are a few moments when Chaplin does use sound. Pay attention to those moments and think about the way those sounds affect the scene.

TALK ABOUT IT | DISCUSSION

- The first image in the film is of a clock with the second hand moving quickly. Why do you think the filmmaker made this the first image in the film? How is your life regulated by time or according to a clock? Is it hard for you to be on time to class? Why is lateness so frowned upon in school and modern society? Do you sometimes have trouble fitting into a school schedule? Is managing your time important to you?
- Early in the film there is a “cross-fade” between a herd of sheep and people going to work. What statement is the filmmaker making when he juxtaposes these two images?
- Although there is a lack of dialogue in the film, the music is critical. How does the filmmaker use music to set the mood in specific scenes for the audience? In addition to sound, sound effects add a great deal of humor to the film. What sound effects in particular do you think are the most notable in the film and why are they so important in telling the story?
- What is the message in the assembly line scenes? Although it’s funny when Charlie Chaplin loses control of his arms, what is the filmmaker saying about how workers are treated? Does this message still apply today even though there are fewer factory jobs?
- In the early days of filmmaking, “dialogue titles” were used to explain what the actors were saying because of they did not have “sync sound.” However, even after sync sound began to be used, Chaplin still chose not to have his famous “Tramp” character speak. Why do you think he chose to do this? What does his silence symbolize?
- Food is a recurring motif in the film. Do you think the emphasis on food is important? What do you think it says about the time in which this film was produced?
- Through the Tramp’s interactions with the Law, Chaplin is critiquing the police. What is his argument about law enforcement? Does his critique still resonate today?
- The first superimposed text in the film states “Modern Times is a story of industry... humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness.” The phrase “pursuit of happiness” appears most famously in the Declaration of Independence. Why do you think Chaplin used this particular phrase and what is he arguing about America?
- This film is demonstrating the way the “American Dream” or progress, competition, and industrialization can harm the “little guy.” What are some moments in the film where individuals are harmed by industrial progress? Are there ways you relate to the Tramp’s experience? Is your daily life regulated by the goals of efficiency and productivity? Do you ever feel like an anonymous cog in a machine?

GET CREATIVE | EXTENSION ACTIVITIES



For Activity Reel details, downloadable storyboard template and more, visit the the Film Hub website: www.pcffri.org/FilmHub

- **Writing Prompt**
Materials: Paper (or posterboard), Post-it Notes and pencil
Create your American Dream Goal Sheet: The Pursuit of the American Dream is a key theme in the film. Based on the characters’ wants and needs in the film, what is their “American Dream?” Brainstorm: What do you think the American Dream is today? How do you think it has changed and why? What is your American Dream? Write down your long-term goals. What are the things you want out of life when you’re 20, 30, 40, etc.? Which ones are doable? Are there challenges getting in the way of achieving your American Dream? Think about the challenges the Tramp experienced in the film. Use the Post-it Notes to write down your challenges and add them to your American Dream Goal Sheet. Which ones are out of reach? Which ones do you think you will absolutely need to fulfill in order to be happy? Remove the “post-it” challenges once you think about ways to overcome them.
Optional: Laminate or frame your goal sheet and keep it somewhere important. If you make your goals important, they are more than likely to come true!
- **Tell a Story Without Words**
Materials: Camera, photos, paper and pencil
The director and star of this film, Charlie Chaplin, didn’t need words to tell his story, demonstrating that film is a visual medium.
First: Watch a few scenes from one of your favorite films with the sound completely off. Can you still tell what’s going on? Which scenes work better than others?
Second: Using a camera, photos, or drawings you create yourself, tell a short story specifically with images, without text. Make a storyboard (www.pcffri.org/FilmHub/ActivityReel) that tells a short story or conveys an emotion. This is good practice for getting into filmmaking!
- **Making Your Own American Dream Home**
Materials: Paper, pencil and magazines
The Tramp and the Gamin long for a house to call their own, even a broken down home like the one in the film. To many, having a house is an essential part of their American Dream. Try to create a picture of your dream home (or even just one room) to capture those dreams or aspirations—this can be done in drawing or collage. Think big and think specific! Share the images with the group and then consider what you believe you NEED to make you happy. Are there differences between the dreams/wishes and the needs?

GET CREATIVE | EXTENSION ACTIVITIES (continued)

- **Cream Cheese and Jelly Assembly Line (or come up with your own assembly line product!)**

Materials: a loaf of bread, jelly, cream cheese, plastic knives, napkins/wax paper/plastic baggies

Create multiple "assembly lines" depending on the number of students in your class. In each assembly line one student will open the loaf and remove the bread, the next student will put on cream cheese, the third jam, the fourth will place the bread together, the 5th will cut the sandwich, the 6th will wrap the individual pieces, etc. You can create more or fewer jobs depending on the number of students in your class. While assigning jobs, inform the students that they

are competing with the other assembly lines to see who will make the most completed sandwiches in the allotted time. While students are doing their jobs, create "speed-ups." At the end ask them if they feel a sense of pride in the product? Why or why not? Did they find their job interesting? Why or why not? How did it feel when they were asked to speed up? If one student held up the assembly line, ask him/her how it felt to slow down the whole process?

- **Make a Documentary**

Materials: Video camera or smart phone

Using the materials you have in your world, make a short documentary about the American Dream. Interview your classmates, family, neighbors, and teachers about their American Dream and the challenges they face achieving it.

MAKE CONNECTIONS | ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources complement the film and inspire further discussion or programming.

BOOKS

- **Hollywood: The Pioneers**

by Kevin Brownlow and John Kobal

A history of the early days of Hollywood.

- **American Silent Film**

by William K. Everson

"Praised as the 'best modern survey of the silent period' (New Republic), this indispensable history tells you everything you need to know about American silent film, from the nickelodeons in the early 1900s to the birth of the first 'talkies' in the late 1920s." (from amazon.com).

- **Grapes of Wrath**

by John Steinbeck

A classic novel, which follows the Joad family as they leave their Oklahoma farm, destroyed by the Dust Bowl, and head to the fields of California.

FILMS

- **Boy and the World (2015)**

This wordless, evocative, uniquely original animated film follows Cuca, a young Brazilian boy who ventures from his simple countryside home into a neon-infused, carnivalesque metropolis in search of his father.

- **Safety Last (1923)**

A boy moves to New York City to make enough money to support his loving girlfriend, but soon discovers that making it in the big city is harder than it looks.

- **The General (1926)**

This classic film finds hapless Southern railroad engineer Johnny Gray facing off against Union soldiers during the American Civil War.

- **City Lights (1931)**

American silent romantic comedy film written by, directed by, and starring Charlie Chaplin. The story follows the misadventures of Chaplin's Tramp as he falls in love with a blind girl and develops a turbulent friendship with an alcoholic millionaire.

- **Duck Soup (1933)**

A short Marx Brothers satire, which lampoons authoritarian forms of government.

- **Mr. Bean (TV Show) (1990-95)**

A contemporary comedic character who draws from Charlie Chaplin's style.

•  *Indicates PCFF festival selection*

BEYOND THE FILM | RELATED INTERNET LINKS

- **PBS American Masters episode about Charlie Chaplin:**

www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/charlie-chaplin/about-the-actor/77/

- **Article about the changing American dream:**

business.time.com/2011/12/01/american-dream-deferred-we-now-embrace-more-modest-personal-goals/

- **Article about the evolution of police brutality:**

thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/09/11/3477520/whats-changed-and-what-hasnt-in-policing-the-police/

- **Historical Summary of Great Depression:**

topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/g/great_depression_1930s/index.html

