Chaplin's *Modern Times* and the Great Depression: The Reception of the Film in the US, France and Britain

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Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, released in the U.S. in 1936, was the only film dealing in a direct way with the impact of the 1930s Depression to have emerged from within the Hollywood system and to have been widely viewed by popular audiences during the mid-thirties. It made plain that many people in America were poor, unemployed, and hungry, and that there were major inequalities in society in general. It confronted the effects of the Depression in a way that was unique at the time for its realism. As social critic Kyle Crichton, the pseudonym of left-wing writer Robert Forsythe, commented in the *New Masses* at the time of the film's release:

> I came away stunned at the thought that such a film had been made and was being distributed. It's what we have dreamed about and never really expected to see. ... To anyone who has studied the set-up, financial and ideological of Hollywood, *Modern Times* is not so much a fine motion picture as an historical event.[1]

In the remainder of this chapter I am going to analyse how *Modern Times* was received by critics in the United States, Britain, and France. The political situations of the three countries were very different of course when the film was released in 1936: the United States had a liberal Democratic administration under Franklin D. Roosevelt that was heading into an election year, Britain a Conservative government under Stanley Baldwin, and France was about to head in a leftward direction with the

election of its first 'Popular Front' government. But all of them were experiencing the effects of the Depression of the 1930s and what makes looking at the differences (and sometimes parallels) in the film's reception easier, is that − unusually for a Chaplin film − it came out in all three countries at much the same time. It was first shown in New York on 5 February 1936, in London on 11 February, and in Paris on 13 March.

The U.S. Reception

Among American critics generally, reviewers split into those who were conservatives or left-wingers. Conservatives either denied that the film had political implications, minimized the extent of such implications or simply declined to discuss them. Kate Cameron of the *New York Daily News* typified membership of the first group. 'It had been hinted,' she wrote, 'that Chaplin had gone serious on us and that he had a message of serious social import to deliver to the world in *Modern Times*. No such thing has happened, thank goodness ... There is nothing of real significance in Chaplin's work except his earnest desire, and his great ability, to entertain.'[2]

Among the minimizers was Frank S. Nugent of the *New York Times*. 'Rumor said,' Nugent claimed,

> that *Modern Times* was preoccupied with social themes, that Chaplin − being something of a liberal himself − had decided to dramatize the class struggle, that no less an authority than Shumiatsky, head of the Soviet film industry, had counseled him about the ending and that Chaplin, accepting that advice, had made significant changes. ... We should prefer to describe *Modern Times* as the story of the little clown, temporarily caught up in the cogs of an

> industry geared to mass production, spun through a three-ring circus and out into a world as remote from industrial and class problems as a comedy can make it.[3]

Similarly, Otis Ferguson in the *The New Republic* argued that Chaplin had confused the issue with shots such as the introduction to the film, claiming *Modern Times* as 'a story of industry, of individual enterprise−humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness.' In reality, Ferguson insisted, 'Chaplin is a comedian; he may start off with an idea, but almost directly he is back to type again, the happy hobo and blithe unregenerate, a little sad, a little droll.'[4]

The decliners included *Harrison's Reports* and *Variety*. *Harrison's Reports*, a cinema trade publication, simply observed that the film gave Chaplin's tramp persona a modern background and reported without any comment the fact that 'he suffers a nervous breakdown owing to the mechanical factor work that he does.' 'Abel' [a pseudonym], in *Variety*, noted that 'Whatever sociological meanings some will elect to read into *Modern Times*, there's no denying that as a cinematic entertainment it's wholesomely funny.'[5]

Left-wing reviewers of the film also seemed to divide into three groups: those who defended it as a radical critique of society, but felt the film was not focused enough in its form or content; those who liked Chaplin's attempted social critique, but felt in ideological terms he should have gone further; and those who appreciated that, as a Hollywood filmmaker, Chaplin had already gone about as far as he could. Richard Watts, Jr. was in the first group. In his review of the film in the *Herald Tribune* he wrote:

> The people I disagree with most heartily are those who insist that *Modern Times* is merely rough-and-ready farce and that we who see a certain sociological interest and significance in some of it are bleak fellows who insist on seeking sermons in stones.

Although conceding that 'its suggestion of ideas is intermittent and rather vague,' Watt emphasised that 'they are definitely Left Wing in their sympathy and interest.'[6]

Charmion von Wiegand of the magazine *New Theater* belonged in the second group. Wiegand praised Chaplin for dealing 'with the fundamental problems of our times' on screen but argued he could not do so thoroughly enough because his main character was 'still the optimistic, lovable Charlie−the clown.' Weigand was grateful that Chaplin had made his work more socially realistic, but wished he had been more explicit in his radical critique of society.[7]

A few weeks later, in an article in the *Partisan Review*, Edward Newhouse articulated the ideas of the third group by responded specifically to Wiegand's argument. For Chaplin to become a real revolutionary, Newhouse insisted,

> would not only be fine but miraculous, and I don't think he will ever make it ... Chaplin has had his chances to learn about the revolution and there is no evidence he took much advantage of them. For all that, we must look at *Modern Times* as something that came out of Hollywood. That is what makes Chaplin great and his picture a tremendous achievement.'[8]

A major problem with *Modern Times* is that it is not a simple, uncomplicated text in political terms. There are moments when Charlie seems to share bourgeois values. He sits in prison reading a newspaper, with headlines such as 'Strikes and Riots: Breadlines Broken by Unruly Mobs,' and shakes his head in disapproval. The house Charlie and the gamin[e][9] dream about is really very similar to the one Charlie parodies, with the husband and wife kissing outside as the husband goes off to work. The final intertitle of the film, as the two set out on the road together at the end, is pure Horatio Alger: 'Buck up−never say die. We'll get along.' Charlie is not really a revolutionary: he goes to prison because he politely picks up a red flag that has fallen to the ground, with the result that the police think he is the leader of the demonstration. Charlie is also deeply respectful to authority: he foils, however inadvertently, a prison revolt. There is also, as Charles J. Maland remarks, 'subtle criticism of unions throughout the film, particularly when a strike is called immediately after a factory has reopened and Charlie has obtained a job that would enable him and the gamin[e] to have some means of support.'[10]

On the other hand, as Robert Forsythe pointed out:

> For the first time an American film was daring to challenge the superiority of an industrial civilization based on the creed of men who sit at flat-topped desks and press buttons demanding more and more speed from tortured employees. There were cops beating demonstrators and shooting down the unemployed (specifically the father of the waif who is later picked up by Chaplin), there is a belt-line which operates at such a pace that men go insane, there is the heart-breaking scene of the helpless couple trying to squeeze out happiness in a little home of their own (a shack in a Hooverville).[11]

Reception in Britain

When we come to look at the film's reception in Europe, of course, there were no real Hoovervilles although there were the issues created by mass unemployment, a growing trend toward mass production, and a number of industrial strikes. Almost all British critics, unlike their counterparts in the United States, understood that *Modern Times* was both comedy and social satire at the same time. The only reviewer who apparently did not see the film as a satirical critique of society was Seton Margrave of the *Daily Mail*. 'The foreword announcing the theme as "Humanity crusading in search of happiness,"' Margrave insisted, 'need deceive no one. In no time at all the film settles down to its job of being a smashing comedy.'[12]

Critics of other newspapers, while recognising that the film was a satire, assessed it differently. Hannen Swaffer in the left-leaning *Daily Herald* thought the satire indicted the organisation of modern society (though he also rather curiously pointed out that the owner of the factory where Charlie works was as much of a victim as Charlie himself).[13] *The Times*, equally oddly since it was an Establishment newspaper, described the film as 'a satire on modern civilisation' that was 'not determined enough.'[14] Campbell Dixon, in the *Daily Telegraph*, declared that the first third of the picture − 'which ... satirises our mechanisation of thought and industry' was 'simply superb.'[15] Ian Coster in the London *Evening Standard* considered it 'not a vicious biting satire' but nonetheless 'a protest against factories where men are forced to become machines, against an age of plenty in which children starve, against unemployment.'[16] The critic of the *Sunday Express* thought it an 'unforced, never vicious satire which lacerates what it touches all the more because it does so with a

laugh.'[17] A. T. Borthwick in the *News Chronicle*, less convinced, declared the comedy a success, but cautiously observed that 'Whether his satire is as deep as he evidently intended, you will decide for yourselves.'[18]

The understanding that *Modern Times* was a satire went all the way across the political spectrum. Curiously, liking or disliking that satire was not something that seemed to be related to the political stance taken by particular newspapers. As noted already, the *Times* critic believed it should have gone further while the reviewer of the left-wing *Reynolds's News* thought 'the sociological satire ... too extravagant to hit the mark.' (One of the ironies of this was that *Reynolds's News*, earlier in the same edition of the newspaper, had pointed out that British girls in the garment industry were being subjected to even worse production-line conditions than Chaplin's Tramp, and that many were suffering hysterics and nervous breakdowns as a result of the pressure.[19]) Almost immediately, newspapers did begin to give a political resonance to Chaplin's picture − but this was mainly through cartoons rather than film reviews. The *Evening Standard*, for example, pictured 'The Other Fellow with a Funny Moustache,' Hitler, operating machines like those in the *Modern Times* factory − but the ones in the cartoon are mass-producing armaments. The *Daily Mail* used the moment in the second factory sequence of *Modern Times* where the machinery breaks down to emphasise the futility of League of Nations sanctions against Italy over Abyssinia.[20]

Of the British reviews, three stand out because of their analysis of *Modern Times*. These are by Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*,[21] Sydney W. Carroll in the *Sunday Times*[22] − and J. L. S. in the *Daily Worker*.[23] Lejeune hated the film. 'Charlie,' she wrote, 'has made, deliberately, a picture of beliefs. They are, I am afraid, rather

chaotic beliefs, their thesis a bit muddled, but they are, so far as they go, unquestionably honest ... Chaplin, who comes from the people, and has now plenty of time and money to think about the people, has taken the people's cause emphatically and deliberately in hand.' But, to Lejeune, the film

> loses wit by the very zeal with which it strains towards humanity. Charlie, the Clown, was in his way the symbol and consoler of the people; Chaplin, the reformer, has lost touch with the common people, and produced what is little more than a gallant but uncomprehending blunder on the left.

In essence, Lejeune, writing in what was then an independent Tory paper, criticised Chaplin for making his Tramp a polemical figure and dismissed it as a mistake that did the political left itself no good.

Where Lejeune was censorious, actor, drama critic, and theatre manager Sydney W. Carroll, reviewing *Modern Times* for the *Sunday Times*, was enthusiastic, highly subjective, and even emotional in describing his response to the movie. Chaplin's film, Carroll wrote,

> 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 civilisation.

Carroll was clearly uncertain about how to respond to the film in personal terms. He recalled laughing at everything 'and felt ashamed of myself the moment after.' In the end, he came up with the suggestion that 'all the revenue that will accrue from it should be devoted to the relief of the poor.' Of course, while Chaplin may have been moving to the left when he made *Modern Times*, he was still a filmmaker working for profit − and not, as Carroll proposed, for charity.

Perhaps the most interesting review of all was in the communist *Daily Worker*. J. L. S. thought the movie took Chaplin 'to new heights as a clown' but it was also 'a revealing document of Chaplin the man − the millionaire who, alone among the celluloid gods in their Hollywood ivory towers, has kept at least one foot on the ground and retained some contact with the class from which he sprung.' Yet J. L. S. took Chaplin to task for not seeing the logic of his growing critique of capitalism (symbolised by the automatic feeding machine that gets out of hand). Chaplin's inspiration, J. L. S. declared, 'stops short because ... though he is conscious of the sufferings of less fortunate humanity, [he] dares not do more than suggest a militant message. He gives no hint of realising the potential nobility of labor under an intelligently run industrial system.' That 'intelligently run industrial system,' of course, was communism. One of the great ironies of J. L. S.'s review was that, the day before, *The Daily Worker* had hailed 1936 as the beginning of Stakhanov's year in the Soviet Union.[24] With his immense and fabled productivity, of course, Stakhanov the miner was just as oppressed by the industrial system as Chaplin's Tramp, always under pressure to work harder and faster.

With the exception of the *Daily Worker*, the critics in the main British newspapers do not seem to have adopted a straightforward political line in response to Chaplin's film. It may be that critics' reception of *Modern Times* was slightly skewed by the fact that Chaplin, of course, was British, although a long-time resident of the United States. But it is still relatively striking that his satire on industrial life during the Depression won plaudits from both sides of the political spectrum, even if it does not seem to have had any connection with British politics in the broader sense. The French experience was rather different.

Reception in France

From the moment his first films arrived in Paris in the grim initial winter of World War I, the French had taken Chaplin to their hearts. 'Charlot' [Little Charlie] as he was affectionately known in France had become an iconic symbol. Newspapers and the cinema trade press reported endless news items about him, many exaggerated, others entirely fictional. 'There are few men,' wrote Henri Coutant of *Ciné-Journal*, 'about whom has been published so contradictory information as on Charlot.'[25] Those contradictions would continue for many years. In 1921, when Chaplin visited France for the first time as a major international star, they provided the basis for a dispute over his political loyalties. So great was Chaplin's reputation that attempts were made by French newspapers to claim him as a supporter of their own political position. On 19 September 1921, the increasingly conservative newspaper *Le Journal* published what was almost certainly a fake 'interview' with Chaplin in which the latter supposedly criticised the Russian Bolsheviks.[26] Two days later, *L'Humanité*, the official newspaper of the French communist party (PCF), claimed that Chaplin was

actually a supporter of Bolshevism because he was a financial supporter of Max Eastman's 'communist journal' in New York.[27]

In practice, it is far from clear that Chaplin had much interest in politics before the 1930s. During his world tour (January 1931 to June 1932) he showed considerable interest in the pump-priming ideas of Major C. H. Douglas as a means of ending the Depression. After hearing him discuss Douglas in Berlin, Albert Einstein hailed him as an 'economist' rather than a comedian. Chaplin returned to the U.S. with a complex scheme for ending the Depression and soon became a supporter of the 'New Deal' launched by Franklin Delano Roosevelt.[28] But in the same month as Roosevelt's inauguration (March 1933) he began work on what would become *Modern Times,* his own commentary on the world of factory labor, unions, strikes, and the unemployment created by the Depression. As Henri Jeanson commented in *Le Canard Enchaîné* after the première in Paris, 'the war inspired ... [Chaplin] to a sublime film: *Shoulder Arms* ... The crisis, the unemployment, the misery, the injustice and the folly [of recent years] have inspired him to this realistic extravaganza: *Modern Times*.'[29]

The relevance of *Modern Times* to contemporary issues and problems appeared particularly acute in France because the film's arrival there coincided with a major period of political unrest. A month after its Paris première, left-wing parties won a decisive victory in elections to the National Assembly and early June saw the inauguration of Léon Blum as the head of a Popular Front government that included socialists, communists, and radicals. Of more direct relevance to *Modern Times* was the great wave of strikes that began in May and continued throughout the summer. A high proportion of these strikes, as Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly demonstrate, occurred in large mechanised factories involving assembly-line workers − exactly the

kind of factory shown in *Modern Times*, where Charlot is driven insane by the regimentation and endless repetition of the same task.[30] As Goffredo Fofi notes, the film itself was regarded by many workers in France as a 'revolt' and welcomed with 'frenetic applause.'[31]

With its exposure of both methods of American mass production and the consequences of the Depression, many French reviewers regarded *Modern Times* as supportive of the left. For Emile Vuillermoz of the newspaper *Le Temps*, indeed, it was a continuation of the stance adopted in earlier films. Chaplin had 'only ever treated in his life just a single subject ... *Modern Times* follows the logic of *The Kid* or *The Circus* ... like the other films of Charlie Chaplin [it is] a silent indictment of the egotism of humanity and social injustice.'[32] *Le Matin* observed that the film 'shows ... the tumultuous and hard life of the poor.'[33] Jean Marguet of *Le Petit Parisien* hailed it as a satirical film that made people think much 'more because of his jokes than many authors of so-called social dramas with their insipid and fine-sounding windbags.'[34]

In some left-wing circles, however, the film proved something of a disappointment. Charles Jouet, critic of the socialist newspaper *Le Populaire,* cautioned spectators not to anticipate 'a series of profound or straightforwardly sociological inspirations' and emphasised that 'the problem of mechanization' had only been superficially dealt with.[35] Paul Gordeaux pointed out in *L'Echo de Paris* that even though 'the Soviets have been able to welcome this work enthusiastically as a propaganda film, *Modern Times* has nothing subversive about it.'[36] Other commentators pointed to the conservative aspects of the film, as discussed above. The reviewer for the cinema trade journal *La Cinématographie Française*, for example, drew attention to the fact that when a revolt break out in the prison where he is

detained, Charlot is 'instinctively ... on the side of law and order' and, if only by chance, helps in the arrest of the revolt's ringleaders.[37]

There was also one imaginative attempt by right-winger François Vinneuil [the pseudonym of Lucien Rebatet, later a strong supporter of fascism and the Vichy regime] to appropriate *Modern Times* and turn it into a critique of Russian communism. Writing in the nationalistic *L'Action Française*, Vinneuil interpreted the film as 'a satire .... on a society enslaved by materialism, of which Soviet Russia represents the barbarous apogee.' When he picks up the red flag accidentally dropped by one of the demonstrators (the act that will lead to his incarceration) Charlot acted only as an unwilling dupe − like many real dupes, Vinneuil sarcastically commented, who had espoused communism. Most of all, he argued, the film protested against the take-over of human society by what he termed 'social automatisms,' such as the regulated world of factory work. The society represented in *Modern Times*, Vinneuil insisted, was closer to that 'of Stalin, of his five million informers and of comrade Stakhanov [the Soviet miner]' than it was to that produced by western capitalism.[38]

As in the United States and Britain, some critics chose primarily to discuss the film's aesthetics. Raymond Lange of film magazine *Pour Vous* spoke for several when he compared *Modern Times* to a collection of individual hors d'oeuvres, individually delicious but with nothing to tie them together.[39] Chaplin himself, though he saw nothing wrong with this, seems to have agreed. A few days before the release of the film in France, he set sail on a boat for Honolulu, with French polymath Jean Cocteau as a fellow-passenger. The diverse parts of *Modern Times*, he told Cocteau, 'existed in their own right. I could show them separately, one by one, like my early one-reelers.'[40]

There was a strong sense of relief from many French critics that, five years after the release of his last film *City Lights*, Chaplin had returned largely unchanged. 'The Charlot of the little comedies before the war has not grown old,' wrote René Lehman in *L'Intransigeant*, ' ... he is still ... the eternal vagabond, the humble and tormented toy of fate, a poor little man delivered into the human jungle ..., clumsy but inspired, a simpleton but devoid of hate.'[41] Yet other reviewers thought it eccentric that *Modern Times* had not been made as a talking picture. 'There is hardly a case more curious,' wrote Emile Vuillermoz,

> than that of Charlie Chaplin, calmly refusing to take account of the technical revolutions of our studios and following his task as a silent film-maker with heroic indomitability. His latest film proves to us that he has abandoned none of the elements of ... what we call 'cinema before the war.' We feel very clearly his willingness to die at his post defending a formula he has created.[42]

Vuillermoz was wrong, as it happened. *Modern Times* would be Chaplin's final 'silent' picture. Moreover, as several critics pointed out, although Chaplin did not in fact speak in *Modern Times*, his voice was heard for the first time cinematographically, singing gibberish to what *Le Figaro* explained was 'a song that is well known in France and which was all the rage here a few years ago: *Je cherche après Titine* [sung] by Léo Danide[r]ff.'[43] Chaplin's version, observed *La Cinématographie Française*, was composed of 'words without sense, without coherence, idiotic to read, but so madly funny in the mouth.'[44]

French influence on *Modern Times*, as the most knowledgeable critics realised, was not confined to Chaplin's nonsense song. The reviewer for *La*

Cinématographie Française commented that *Modern Times* 'bears, in two or three places, the light and sketchy influence of Réne Clair.'[45] In reality, Chaplin's debt to Clair's 1931 filmic portrait of modern industrial culture *À Nous la Liberté* was, in the words of Pierre Billard, 'more important, more explicit, more spectacular, [and] more varied' than this.[46] Many scenes in *Modern Times* − from the sequence of workers on an assembly line onwards[47] − were clearly derived from Clair's film half a decade earlier. So obvious were the parallels that his production company, the Société Française des Films Sonores Tobis launched a plagiarism suit against Chaplin claiming 1.2 million francs.[48] Clair himself refused to support the suit: many of his own films had scenes that effectively plagiarised the work of Chaplin, whom he regarded as a genius. 'I sold you the rights to *À Nous la Liberté*,' he advised Tobis, 'and you have the right to protect your property. But I do not wish to have any part of it. The whole world of cinema has learned lessons from Chaplin. ... I admire him very much and if he has been inspired by my film, I consider that a great honor for me.'[49]

Conclusion

In the early years of the 1930s Depression, argues Terry Christensen, Hollywood produced a series of movies focused on the economic situation that were 'questioning and pessimistic, torn between group solidarity and strong leadership as possible solutions to the crisis of the Depression.'[50] At Warner Bros., in particular, Darryl Zanuck was mainly responsible for producing a series of social exposés: of business ethics (*The Match King*, 1932), the exploitation of Southern sharecroppers (*The Cabin in the Cotton*, 1932), and the penal system in the South (*I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, 1933). By the middle years of the 1930s, however, encouraged

by the introduction of Joseph Breen's Production Code Administration in 1934, the output of the movie industry had become much blander. After 1934, according to Robert Sklar, 'most of the important moneymaking pictures ... had little to do with contemporary life.'[51] Hollywood movies of the mid to late 30s primarily offered 'entertainment' that promised escape from the problems of the Depression years. 'Nothing,' Thomas H. Pauly argues, 'could have been further from the bread lines and the deprivation photographed by Dorothea Lange than the social comedies of Lubitsch, the slapstick of the Marx brothers, and the polished dance routines of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.'[52]

It is against this kind of background that *Modern Times* was released. 'What makes *Modern Times* decidedly different from Chaplin's three previous films [*The Gold Rush*, 1925; *The Circus*, 1928; *City Lights* (1931)],' notes Charles J. Maland, 'are the political references and social realism that keep intruding into Charlie [the Little Tramp]'s world.'[53] It was this confusing juxtaposition of comedy and the realities of the Depression (unemployment, Hoovervilles, social protests, strikes, poverty, and hunger) that appears to have baffled American reviewers and encouraged them to react to the movie along broadly political lines. Conservative critics ignored, minimized, or declined to discuss the social and economic aspects of the film. Writers who were more left-wing insisted that it offered a radical − if not particularly dominant or sustained − critique of American society during the Depression era, that it was constrained by its format as a comedy from going far enough, or that it was a courageous and original film that went as far as possible in challenging Hollywood conventions of the era.

In Chaplin's native Britain, almost all critics accepted that *Modern Times* was both a comedy *and* a social satire. With the exception of the communist *Daily*

Worker, however, they did not adopt a straightforward political or ideological line. Some reviewers, indeed, did the opposite of what might have been expected in political terms: the critic of the left-leaning *Reynolds's News* thought the satire too extreme to be credible while that of the right-wing *Times* argued it had not gone far enough. The reviewers of the two heavyweight right-of-centre Sunday papers offered diametrically opposed views: Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer* dismissed it as a confused and confusing piece of left-wing propaganda, Sydney W. Carroll in *The Sunday Times* hailed it as a powerful indictment of modern society.

In France, *Modern Times* appeared to have more direct relevance than it did in the U. S. and Britain since its release immediately preceded the election of a left-wing 'Popular Front' government and a period of sustained industrial action. French reviewers, themselves writing from different political perspectives, by and large saw the film as supportive of the left. Yet some left-wing writers − like their counterparts in the U. S. and Britain − expressed disappointment, arguing that its critique could have been taken much further. There was also an awareness on the part of some critics that the film appeared in places to endorse conservative values (and one ingenious right-wing reviewer endeavoured to appropriate it as a piece of anti-Stalinist propaganda). French critics generally welcomed the return of the Little Tramp for the first time in half a decade, but at least one (Vuillermoz) criticised Chaplin's decision not to make the film as a talking picture and others found it disjointed and episodic. Yet there was also a certain amount of pride expressed in the French origins of parts of the film: the music for Charlot's nonsense song and the sequences critics recognised as 'borrowed' from *À Nous la Liberté*, René Clair's earlier satire on modernization and mass production.

A few years ago, in collaboration with Richard Maltby, I edited a book on the reception of American films across the world. We and our authors queried the idea that Hollywood films were part of some uni-directional current of 'Americanisation.' We concluded that audiences and critics outside the U.S. reacted to such films very much in the light of local circumstance and as a reflection of their own social, cultural and political identities and preoccupations.[54] The same was true of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The film was itself a complex transnational text: made by an Englishman who had resided for more than two decades in Hollywood, it reflected ideas he had worked out during his world tour of 1931-32. Yet, filmed after the creation of the Production Code Administration in 1934, it satisfied Hollywood's own self-regulatory system by including a number of contradictions and obfuscations. Chaplin's 'Little Tramp,' in what no-one at the time realised would be his last film appearance, could be interpreted as a victim of industrialisation and the depression, as an (inadvertent) radical, as a defender of order and as the ultimate survivor. American critics interpreted the film much in accordance with their positions on the political spectrum. This was far from being the case in Britain, where few reviewers seem to have adopted an obvious political line. Things were very different in France, where the movie arrived near the beginning of the great political upheaval known as the 'Popular Front.' Although a few French reviewers opted to focus on the aesthetics of *Modern Times*, many chose to interpret the film as a critique of industrial society in the depths of the Depression. Some, indeed, with little understanding of the compromises and ambiguities needed to make such a film in Hays Code Hollywood of the mid-30s, expressed disappointment that it was not more overtly radical and left-wing.

[1] Robert Forsythe, '*Modern Times*,' *The New Masses*, 18 February 1936, reprinted in Stanley Kauffmann with Bruce Henstell, *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane* (New York: Liveright, 1972), 330-31.

[2] Quoted in Charles J. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 155.

[3] Walter S. Nugent, 'Heralding the Return, After An Undue Absence, of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*,' *New York Times*, 6 February 1936, in *The New York Times Film Reviews 1913-1968, Vol. 2, 1932-1938* (New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1970), n. p.

[4] Otis Ferguson, '*Modern Times*,' *The New Republic*, 19 February 1936, reprinted in Kauffmann with Henstell, *American Film Criticism*, 333.

[5] '*Modern Times* with Charlie Chaplin,' 15 February 1936, in *Harrison's Reports and Film Reviews, 1935-1937, Vol. 6: A Movie World Reference Book* (Hollywood, Ca.: Hollywood Film Archive, 1994), n. p.; Abel, '*Modern Times*,' 12 February 1936, in *Variety Film Reviews, Vol, 5, 1934-1937* (New York and London: Garland, 1983), n. p.

[6] *Herald Tribune*, 16 February 1936, quoted in Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 155-56.

[7] Charmion von Wiegand, 'Little Man, What Now?', *New Theater*, 3 (March 1936), 36, cited in Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 156.

[8] Edward Newhouse, '*Charlie's Critics,' Partisan Review*, 3 (March 1936), 26, cited in Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 156. Forsythe had elements of groups one and three. He argued that 'Chaplin's methods are too kindly for great satire' while making critical social commentary through a film comedy was itself difficult since 'You can't be jocular about such things as starvation and unemployment.' Yet he also

pointed out that 'with the [Hollywood] distributive machinery in the hands of the most reactionary forces in the country there is no possibility of honesty dealing with current ideas.' Forsythe in Kauffmann with Henstell, *American Film Criticism*, 329, 331.

[9] In the film, Chaplin constantly referred to the role played by Paulette Goddard as 'the gamin.' Gamin is the male form of the French term meaning a kid in the sense of child; the female form is gamine.

[10] Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 154.

[11] Forsythe, '*Modern Times*,' in Kauffmann with Henstell, *American Film Criticism*, 329.

[12] Seton Margrave, 'Fast and Furious Fun in *Modern Times* − Chaplin More Brilliant than Ever,' *Daily Mail*, 12 February 1936, 6.

[13] Hannen Swaffer, 'Chaplin's New Film Makes You Laugh Till You Think,' *Daily Herald*, 12 February 1936, 4.

[14] 'Mr. Chaplin's New Film,' *The Times*, 12 February 1936, 12.

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[47] See Marguet, , 'La Critique−*Les Temps Modernes*.'

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