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**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

This lecture tonight is our last chance to pay attention to this process I've been calling the Fred Ott principal. And forgive me for appearing slightly repetitious about this. But to me, it's an essential aspect of our appreciation of these early weeks, to recognize that films like *The General*, or *Modern Times*, or the film we're going to see next week, *The Last Laugh*, Murnau's remarkable silent film from Germany, to recognize that these astonishing, complex narratives grew out of something so primitive and grew out of something so primitive in such a relatively short time, is part of what makes these early films so interesting.

And the viewing you're going to see tonight is your last opportunity to, in a concrete way, experience something of that process, something of that evolution for yourself. Because the two Chaplain shorts that you're going to see, while they are, as I indicated this afternoon, not from the earliest stages of Chaplin's work, they're three or four years advanced beyond that. He's already mastered his medium in certain ways. And these shorts are, in themselves, very coherent and interesting works. And I hope you'll look at them for their own intrinsic value.

But I also want you to recognize, as you think about those short films, remarkable as they are, how much richer, how much more complex, how much more demanding and rewarding in many ways *Modern Times* is. And I think the same thing could be said about all of Chaplin's features.

There's an astonishing distance between even the best shorts or between most of the best shorts and the features. Some of the very best shorts have a kind of elegance and purity, as well as a level of comic inventiveness that makes them in their own way almost the equal of the features. But, of course, even the best of them don't have quite the reach or the resonance of a film like *Modern Times* or *The Gold Rush*.

One way we can perhaps clarify some of what I've been saying, and maybe also do a bit more justice to poor Buster Keaton, who I think in many ways is an equally remarkable artist and in a technical sense an even more interesting director than Chaplain himself, is to begin with a

comparison of the two. Not so much because the comparison will really illuminate weaknesses in one or the other, but the contrast between them I think will help to clarify what are some of the essential qualities in each of these director's work in films. And I hope that you'll sort of think back to the Keaton material you saw last week as I'm making these comparisons.

One way to think about the differences between Chaplin and Keaton, and also to think about what is essential about both of them, is to talk about the way they deal with objects and the role that objects have in their films. In Keaton's case, we might say that the basic objects of interest are usually massive and gigantic things, whole houses, locomotives, as in *The General*, an ocean liner as in *The Navigator*. And Keaton was interested in intricate systems and in the intricacy with which these systems operated. And he liked to pose his Buster character against these massive systems, to see whether Buster could survive them and to show us certain aspects, both of Buster's resourcefulness and power to muddle through, but also his comic inadequacy and comic failings as well.

And a number of the most dramatic and famous bits from *The General* could be said to crystallize this principle. Think of that magnificent joke. It's more than a joke. That cosmic joke, that vision of experience, that existential mockery, but also affectionate mockery of human nature, that's embedded in the cannon sequence at the very beginning of Keaton's most important film. You remember how that works. It's very funny at every level. But as Keaton first fails to fire the cannon, then the second time reloads the cannon with 10 times as much powder, then gets stuck in front of the cannon and it looks as if he's going to be shot.

But every move in that sequence is full of amusing comic business. But think of how as the joke builds, as it keeps topping itself, something else begins to happen. What begins to emerge, as I suggested last time, is almost a kind of vision of life, a vision of life in which human agency matters. You do have to struggle and do what you can to try to save yourself or accomplish your ends.

But then when your ends are accomplished, even when things work out almost exactly as you had planned, remember what happen. The cannon does fire. It doesn't shot at poor Buster, who runs away from it and hides in the cowcatcher of the engine to avoid it. But why doesn't it go? Because at a certain moment, the train just happens to go around the bend and geography and physics collaborate with the Keaton character in order to create a shot that actually does almost hit the engine he's pursuing. And it certainly persuades the people he's pursuing that they are being chased by more than one man.

And, in fact, remember when the cannon fires and we see that the outcome that results is pretty much the outcome that the Buster character intended, there's a double comedy there, isn't there? And it's a metaphysical or an existential comedy. Because what that joke is saying is, of course, what the whole film also says and what many other individual crescendo jokes, we might call them, also say in the film. Which is that we get through in life by muddling through, by working hard, by engaging in all kinds of sometimes almost obsessive labor in order to accomplish our ends.

But in the end, when we do accomplish our ends, it's not entirely because of us. It's because of accident. And when we don't accomplish our ends, it's also because of accident often, as well as because of our human frailty.

So there really is a kind of complex understanding of the world implicit in the kinds of jokes that Keaton manages to tell us, as if there's a sort of understanding or interpretation of life embedded in the best moments of *The General*. And this kind of vision of experience wouldn't really be possible if Keaton was as interested in individual encounters with small objects as Chaplain is. Because the distinction between Keaton and Chaplain in terms of the way they use objects is that Chaplain is in love not with large, gigantic structures, but with tiny ones.

He wants to see how Charlie manipulates his cane. He wants to watch Charlie interact with a hamburger or with a shoe that he is pretending is a turkey dinner, in a fragment from a late film of his that I'm going to show you I hope in a few moments.

So if objects in Keaton are massive and systemic in a certain way, the objects that are most characteristic of Chaplain's world are small and manageable. And the interactions between the Chaplain character and these objects are often an occasion for the exploration of character. When the Tramp character encounters a particular object, one of the things he is characteristically tempted to do is to transform its use, is to make it useful some other purpose.

As if in the contest between Charlie and the world, Charlie has some transcendent power to allow his optimism to transform a recalcitrant reality, to make the reality kind of bend to him. And it becomes especially poignant, as you'll see in the passage from *The Gold Rush* I'm going to show you in a little while. It becomes especially poignant when we understand how minimal are the constellations that Charlie finds. When he transforms this shoe into a turkey dinner, he's actually starving. And although it may psychologically help him out, we can see his

resilience facing hunger and making the shoe do for a meal.

So what is expressed there is something of the character's imaginativeness, but also something of his resilience and optimism. Because when he encounters the world, his relation to it is one of a magician or a transformer. He's always trying to impose his imagination on the world.

And if you watch Chaplin's films-- this is true of his shorts as well as his longer films-- if you watch Chaplin's interactions with objects closely, you will see a continual drama in which the imaginative world of the Tramp is in some sense in a kind of conflict, or a kind of collision, or at least a kind of angry conversation with the world in which the objects of the world are, although they may resist, are constantly under the pressure of the transformative power of Charlie's optimism, resilience, and imagination. So it's small objects in Chaplain that matter. And they declare for character, rather than for some cosmic understanding of the world.

We can get at another fundamental difference and some of the strengths and the alternate kinds of strengths of both Keaton and Chaplin by talking about the different protagonists or heroes that are characteristic of their works. In Chaplin's case, let's start with Chaplain, we often have heroes who have grand visions, or schemes, or hopes. They tend to be chivalric characters. So sometimes the project they take on is rescue the damsel, protect the woman.

In the first feature-length film or nearly feature-length film that Chaplin made-- it was a film called *The Kid*. And it actually involves a child. The kid of the title is a young boy, an urchin, very much like the real Chaplain in his childhood in London. And the Tramp character, who is himself starving, encounters the kid and has to protect him. So it's actually a story of maternal- - there's a maternal quality to Charlie in this. He's much more like a mother than he's like a father.

But anyway, it's in a certain sense a kind of sentimental parenting fable, in which we see starving, miserable, down-at-the-heels Charley defending a person who's even more vulnerable and even weaker, even less able to take care of himself than Charlie is. And although it is a deeply sentimental film in many ways, it also was a film that provides another occasion in which we can see the Tramp character's imaginativeness operating. Because as I suggested this afternoon, one way you can also see it operating in chase sequences because he makes such amazing split second decisions about how to elude his pursuers. And often those decisions reveal his intelligence and his improvisatory quickness.

So almost everything that happens in a Chaplain film returns in some sense to our sense of the Tramp's character. And we feel that especially strongly I think in *The Kid* because one of the things that happen-- I think *The Kid* is 1921. And one of the things that happens in *The Kid* is that we see Charlie exceeding himself in imaginative resourcefulness because he now has to protect a child.

And what you feel is that his compassion and his protective instincts mobilize a resourcefulness and an intelligence that you can't help but recognize and you can't help but see. And so that in a certain sense, there's a grand scheme here, protect a child, save a child's life, or protect an orphan, or protect a young damsel in distress from bandits and outlaws, that sort of thing.

And then Chaplain himself, the character himself, often has grandiose visions of wealth or of success. Some of his films, as in *Modern Times*, include dream sequences or fantasy sequences, very, very clever, intelligent sequences. Because you can tell that they are taking place in a subjective realm, itself a kind of thematic and technical advance in the making of movies. That Chaplin found ways to introduce images that the audience would recognize instantly as taking place, not in the real world, but in the subjective life of the characters as part of his achievement as much as a mature director.

So the Chaplain hero is often an ambitious character, although he often fails. He has large ambitions. He has chivalric tendencies. He's hopeful, resilient, in many ways grandiose and sentimental.

And the Keaton character couldn't be more opposite in some ways. He has sometimes been called wrongly the great stone face. But he's a character who sort of muddles through without any grand schemes. The Keaton character usually isn't trying to do anything more. The largest thing he ever tries to do is impress a woman, as he does in *Cops*. Mostly what he's just trying to do is survive, get through the day, get around the corner, keep this ship from sinking, keep this locomotive on the track.

One might even say that in *The General*, which is his most grandiose plan in all of Keaton's films, what the Buster character does in *The General* is the most ambitious and remarkable. He's going to recapture his train. He's chasing the Union army as if he's fighting the war on his own.

But it's important to realize how we're supposed to understand that in a deeply comic way because the Keaton character is so wedded to his engine that's really not thinking about any more marshal victory or winning the war. What he wants to do is recover his engine. So even there, there's a kind of smallness, a kind of lack of ambition, a lack of grandiosity to what the Keaton character is doing. So he wants to just survive and do a task, again a very sharp contrast.

The treatment of women, a third category, might be a way of seeing them in sharp distinction to each other. Chaplin's treatment of women is deeply sentimental and chivalric. They're almost always, with the partial exception of *Modern Times*-- and I'll talk about that briefly in a moment-- they're almost always treated sentimentally and as characters who need protection, who are weak and vulnerable, as well as beautiful and stand for some kind of purity. They are an inheritance or a vestige of the Victorian ideal of women.

They were put on pedestals because they were too pure for the world. And they were also too weak to open doors for themselves. They had to have men do that for them. So Chaplain's female characters, with the partial exception, dramatically partial exception of the gamin in the film you're going to see tonight, tend to be of this sort, Victorian stereotypes. And his treatment of them is deeply sentimental.

If you think about the treatment of the heroine in *The General*, you'll see how dramatically Keaton diverges from this view. Remember, Keaton is not making fun of women in that. He's making fun of the Victorian stereotype of women that appears in so many movies. So when the Keaton character picks up that woman when she's hiding in the potato sack and throws over his shoulders, and throws her onto the pile as if she's another sack of potatoes, or later in the film when the Keaton heroin begins to do such stupid things that you begin to realize that she is one of the great airheads in the history of movies.

Do you remember some of the tricks she pulls? Like she ties a willow tree across the tracks. She tries a rope across the tracks to stop the next train from catching up with them. Or she sweeps out-- do you remember this business-- where she sweeps out in the cabin of the engine while poor Buster is struggling to keep the engine going? She doesn't like a little bit of soot on the floor.

Keaton makes fun of this figure. But he's not making fun of women. He's not making fun of actual living females. He's making fun of the stereotype of women that appears not only in the

movies, but also appears in sort of the popular conception of what women are. In any case, we can see how deeply mocking and unsentimental Keaton's treatment of women is.

One final contrast that I think is helpful and interesting might be the contrast that we might generate if we tried to describe the visual style of each director. Chaplin favors close shots and emphasizes character. He aims for a totally realistic style in which you're oblivious to the camera's presence. You're not supposed to think about the camera. He wants to create a camera that is as transparent as possible. You're supposed to just focus on the action.

Chaplain's idea is that his camera is a window on reality. And he doesn't want the window or the window pane to be part of your understanding of what you're watching. There's something social and character-oriented in Chaplin's visual style and especially in his preference for closeups which reveal the psychology of character.

The contrast with Keaton is very dramatic. Keaton is a more interesting director in a technical sense. He'll mix his shots much more often. He'll use closeups. But he also loves long shots and middle shots, depending on the effect he's looking for.

If you think about what a master he is of the long shot, think of the moment, for example, in *The General* where the camera backs up far enough so that we can see Buster working furiously on the car that carries the wood, the wood carrier on his train, working furiously with his head down, while we see the train move across the battle line. So that he ends up in enemy territory and he doesn't even know it.

So there's a kind of cosmic joke. And again, it's a joke that's only possible in the movies. I mean it's a joke that partly depends upon the camera's position, its power to photograph motion, and the fact that it can encompass a much larger mise-en-scene that is ever possible in a live theater.

So it's a technically interesting achievement. But it's also a morally interesting achievement because what does it dramatize? The usual trick, the usual thing we know about the Buster character. He's mostly oblivious to the dangers around him. And often the comedy in Keaton comes from the fact that he's oblivious to his narrow escapes, as we've said before.

So Keaton uses mixed shots. He's much more interested in creating an aura of authenticity in his filming. *The General* especially alludes to documentary photography made during the Civil War. And some of the images are actually recreations of Matthew Brady photographs, very

famous Matthew Brady photographs.

It was very important for Keaton to create these realistic effects, this sense of realism, because so many of his most magnificent jokes depend on your recognition that it's actually happening. That he's not using process shots. Think of, for example, of the unbelievable engineering feat that was involved in the final crash of the train, when the bridge burns at the end of *The General*.

Remember, there's no digital animation then. When Keaton did that, if he didn't get on the camera the first time, that was it. And, in fact, it's incredibly beautifully done, It happens perfectly. There's something almost graceful about that catastrophic sequence.

It's so well done, in fact, it even holds up today in an era when we are so used to special effects of a much more dramatic and astonishing kind. There are no special effects in that sequence. It depended on a mastery of knowing where to put the camera; a kind of engineer's mastery of various individuals and machines that were in motion at the same time; perfect timing, so that the bridge had to actually burn down at just the right moment for the train to come over it. There was no margin for error there.

Again and again, Keaton's comedy shows us this level of technical, as well as intellectual or thematic mastery. Because, of course, that moment when the train crashes into the canyon isn't just a magnificent visual moment and a magnificently comic thwarting of the expectations of the generals who are running the thing. But that moment is also completely consistent with the mock heroic interests, the mock heroic themes of the movie as a whole.

And what I'd like to do now is concretize and embody the arguments I've been making very briefly and inadequately by having you look at three scenes, one from Keaton, two from Chaplain, that can help ground what I've been saying in particular images, in particular moments.

The first scene is a scene that I wanted to show you last week and didn't have time. I think of it in a certain sense as a particularly clear embodiment of what we might call the Keaton vision. And it's a sequence that violates one of Keaton's deepest principles at the very end. And I'm a little sorry it does. And the sequence is harmed by that.

There is a special effect in it. And it's too bad that there is. But it's one of the very rare such moments in Keaton. Keaton tried never to do that. And as I mentioned to you, sometimes very



dangerous things happen to Keaton. And they happen in reality.

And he was often begged, when he became a director of features, to not do his own stunts. But he always refused. And he always did his own stunts.

He broke his neck when he was making *The General*. And any continued filming with a broken neck for part of the time. He didn't quite realize how seriously he was injured when that happened. If you think back to *The General*, you might actually be able to figure out-- it happens relatively early in the film when he hurt himself. When he's on the hand car, when he's chasing on the hand car and he falls off the hand car. And he actually did real harm to himself in that sequence.

So this first sequence, it comes from *Cops*. And in many ways, I think it embodies that kind of aversion of the trajectory or crescendo joke I was talking about earlier. It's a small version of the cannon joke that you see in-- or jokes plural, because there's another joke with the cannon in the second half of the film-- that I've talked about earlier.

Let's show it, Greg.

And, of course, this is the moment where Keaton is in flight from the police. The cops are chasing him. He runs up this teeter-totter. He runs up a ladder. It turns out to be like a seesaw.

And there we see the Buster character trying to elude cops who come up on either side of the teeter-totter. You see his acrobatic qualities. But part of what makes it good is that we know he's improvising here. He's in trouble.

People on both ends now are after him. How can you escape this? Teeter-totter up and down, it seems as if there's no escape. It's almost as if every cop in the city is now after poor Buster, massive forces arrayed against the lone hero, a key to his comedy.

And, of course, that's the process shot. But it is a very witty way to end. I mean what does it depend on? Among other things, an engineer's understanding of the laws of motion. Many of Keaton's jokes depend on a kind of collaboration with gravity and call attention to that.

So it seems as if there's no escape. And he does not escape because of anything that he himself has really done. It's contingent. It's accidental. But he does escape, right.

It's as if the universe sometimes, not always, conspires to help us. If we try hard, sometimes

it'll help us. Sometimes it won't. We're mostly foolish characters muddling through. The jokes say that again and again. It's a vision of life.

Now, I want to contrast this kind of joking and this kind of style. Again, for that effect to work, the camera had to be pretty far back. It depended on your seeing the seesaw going up and down. It depended on your seeing the cops on either side of the ladder. So in that sense, it's a characteristic Keaton moment, a characteristic Keaton passage.

I want to show you two passages from feature films of Chaplin's that I think are those characteristic moments of Chaplin. And you'll see how they fit into what I've already said.

First, a scene from *The Gold Rush*. And let me set it up for you. One of the delightful and important things about the Tramp's character, as I mentioned this afternoon, is after a while-- Chaplain made a total of 81 films. The vast majority of them were silent films. After the first couple of films that he made, the Tramp character began to elaborate itself and proceed by a principle of accretion.

That's very important for us to be aware of. Because think of what this means. If the audience for *Modern Times* had seen 50 Chaplin shorts or most of Chaplin's movies-- and this would have been true. In 1936, the vast majority of the movie audience would have lived through the silent era and certainly would have known a great many Chaplin films. So when they came to see *Modern Times*, they had in their memory banks all these other stories about the Tramp.

And, in fact, they didn't have to wait for *Modern Times* for this effect to occur. As the Tramp begin to generate a kind of reputation and more and more people came to watch him, what began to happen was that each subsequent adventure of the Tramp got richer, not because of anything inherent in the new adventure, but because the previous adventures lay behind it and were part of the Tramp's ongoing identity. So as the audience became more familiar with the Tramp and as Chaplin's gifts for dramatizing character and for making movies enlarged, so did the resonance of the Tramp as a figure. And I should have said this afternoon because it's the deepest explanation for why the Tramp became a mythic figure, why the Tramp became such a memorable and powerful icon.

And in this sequence, you're going to see one of the classic instances of the Tramp's resilient imaginativeness in the face of difficulty and danger. In *The Gold Rush*, the identity that Charlie takes on-- by the time he comes to make his feature films, there are dozens and dozens, 30,

40 short films in the past. And all of those identities, all of those adventures, feed into and inform the more recent ones. When the audience then comes to watch *Modern Times* and *The Gold Rush*, it has that history behind it.

In this particular film, Charlie takes on the identity of a '49er, not a football player but a miner, who's gone to Alaska for the Alaska gold rush. We've seen him as a waiter. We've seen him as a ship builder. We've seen him as a pawn broker's assistant.

We've seen him in a whole range of other jobs. And until *Modern Times*, each film, even the feature-length films, only show Charlie in one occupation. It's only in *Modern Times* where we see him in multiple occupations. It's one of the things that marks *Modern Times*'s greater complexity from the earlier film.

So what's happened, he goes to Alaska. He finds himself stuck in a cabin after a terrible avalanche and snowstorm. He's stuck in the cabin without food, with a massive, gigantic fellow, one of his favorite antagonists. Mack Swain, there's a name. And Chaplain certainly chose him because he was so humongously large that when he was juxtaposed against Charlie, he looked even more menacing.

Well, in the sequence you're about to see Charlie is confined in a cabin, in a horrible snowstorm, starving, with this gigantic fellow, who's beginning to look at Charlie as if he might be a tasty morsel. And it's Thanksgiving. It's Thanksgiving. They're about to have Thanksgiving dinner.

What are they going to do? Watch Charlie's imaginative response. OK, Greg.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Even before this, we've seen the Mack Swain character look at Charlie with a kind of hungry eye. And you'll see him do it again here.

Watch how Charlie interacts with particular objects, with small objects. What he's done is he's cooked a boot, one of their shoes. The shoelaces become spaghetti.

Did you see the subtlety of that moment where Charlie look frightened? Watch the range of emotions that he's able to express in his face.

Now, you see how he uses closeups, how it's a drama of character.

You see now, he lacks Charlie's imaginativeness. So he doesn't survive as well. It's almost like mind over matter. It's that quality in the Chaplain character, I think, more than any other, that explains why people loved him.

You see, if you act like you're eating good food, you almost are.

All right. That's enough Greg. You get the idea. It's a remarkable film. And you get an idea.

Now, the next sequence I want to show you is in some sense even more powerful. It's less comic, although there are comic elements in it. It's Chaplain at his most dramatic. And it's the final sequence of the film *City Lights*, the film that precedes *Modern Times*. Five years separate them. But it's the last film he made before *Modern Times*.

And it's essentially an urban drama, in which the Tramp character finds himself protecting a vulnerable woman. And the woman he's protecting is a blind flower girl. She's blind. And so she's even more vulnerable and deserving of protection than a sighted flower girl would be.

So Charlie sort of takes her under his wing. And because she's blind, she doesn't realize-- there's a kind of trick in the beginning, a visual trick, that makes the blind flower girl believe that Charlie is a wealthy man.

And Charlie allows her to believe this. He's the Tramp. But he allows her to believe that he's wealthy. And he visits with her. And she has an aged mother, something like the character you see in *The Immigrant*, who dies in the course of the film.

And the second subplot in the film has Charlie befriending a very wealthy man, who is incredibly nice to him when he's drunk and kicks him out of his life when he's sober. And his irrationality is part of Chaplin's critique of capitalism, I think, because he's a rich man.

But when he's drunk, he loves Charlie. And he gives Charlie money and so forth. But Charley uses this to get a fortune.

And he sees an article in a newspaper about a Swiss doctor who can fix blindness. And he sends the flower girl to Switzerland or someplace. And she has the operation. She has her sight regained.

And the Tramp character has had his usual misadventures. And he's just getting out of prison at the very end of the film. So the encounter he's going to have with the now sighted flower girl, which is the very climax of *City Lights*-- this encounter that he's going to have with her is an encounter in which he and the audience know perfectly well who all the characters are. But she has never set eyes on Charlie before. And she has the idea that her benefactor, the man who sent her for the operation and restored her sight, is a wealthy and handsome fellow.

Here is the ending of *City Lights*.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So for the audience, this moment has tremendous poignance because the audience is aware of things that the female character is not aware of it. That there's her benefactor, this shabby little tramp.

So her condescension to him in this sequence has tremendous poignance for the audience. And look at the closeup on Charley here, Charley sees who it is. Charlie knows who it is.

The only thing that's wrong with this ending is the titles are unnecessary. The faces are so eloquent, they're unnecessary. The words aren't needed. In fact, the words even simplify.

Can you see how Charley's expression involves pride, as well as affection and a kind of love. He's incredibly excited and happy to see her and to see her sighted.

See the power of a closeup. She suddenly realizes who it is from touch.

The least necessary intertitle in the history of movies is about to appear.

But look at the closeups here. Look at the art of these closeups. Another unnecessarily line.

There are people who have said that that last closeup is the most eloquent closeup in the history of movies. It might be true. Because the complexity of emotion that's playing across Charlie's face there-- it's hard for people who haven't seen the whole film to fully grasp it, although I tried to set it up. It's partly that he knows there can never be anything between them. It's partly that he's full of joy over the fact that he's been able to help her.

But there's also a sense of their inevitable separation, of the differences between them. And

that's part of what's reflected in that closeup at the end.

And another thing I would call your attention to, part of Chaplin's subtlety, is look how he doesn't hold it too long. A truly sentimental director would have held his final shot, Charley's face, twice as long, three times as long. But do you notice how wasn't there for very long? His hand was over here and then the screen goes blank. He doesn't milk the moment, even though it's an immensely complicated moment.

But the most important thing to say about this scene is that it's a scene that's played out by the drama of the face. It shows how Chaplin had reached a point by the time he reached his maturity in the 1920s, had reached a point where he could create films in which closeups on expressive actors' faces, and especially closeups on the Tramp's face, could reveal worlds of meaning.

The range of contradictory feelings and meanings that run across the theater of Charley's face in these final sequences of *City Lights* are proof of the eloquence of the silent film and are a particularly distinctive signature instance of Chaplin's art.

Well, in the time I have remaining, what I'd like to do is talk very quickly about *Modern Times* itself, the great masterpiece that you're going to be seeing in a few minutes, as a way of sort of setting up some of the things for you to watch for. But I feel badly that I couldn't do this fully enough with *The General*, which is an equally complex film. And I only have a few minutes here. So I can hardly do full justice to the astonishing richness and complexity of *Modern Times*.

But I want to call your attention to certain features in it and count on your being as attentive and generous in your viewing as you possibly can. I'm sure you'll pick up other things as well.

First, the context of the film. I've already mentioned this. So I don't have to spend a lot of time on it. But it's very interesting and significant that the film was made in 1936, released in 1936, something like seven or eight years into the sound era. There hadn't been any silent films made.

Now, I'm not saying that *Modern Times* is actually a truly silent film. It's not. It has a soundtrack. And the soundtrack is complex and rich. And I'll say at least a word about it before I'm finished here.

But in every fundamental respect, *Modern Times* wants its viewers to think of it as a silent film.

It invokes the tradition of silent film and especially the tradition of Chaplin films, to which it systematically alludes in virtually every frame.

So the context for the film is first is that it is in a certain way a kind of silent film. There is no synchronous dialog in it. There are sound effects-- and, of course, there's music-- a soundtrack the Chaplain arranged very complexly. And it's a very rich soundtrack.

But there's no synchronous dialogue until the very end. At the very end, there is synchronous dialogue. And it's Charley who speaks it. In fact, the film was advertised as follows in many newspapers. It was, "The Tramp speaks."

Well, watch for what happens when the Tramp speaks. It's one of the film's great and serious jokes. He does speak at the end. And it's the only moment.

You do hear dialogue elsewhere in the film. I'm getting ahead of myself. This is what I wanted to say about sound. But you don't see synchronous dialogue. You don't see people moving their lips and words coming out of there.

You see people on a screen talking or you hear people on a radio talking. But you don't see someone on screen actually moving his lips and words, sound coming out, until the very end, when Charlie does his song. He sings a song.

He plays a waiter near the end of the film. And he sings a song. And he tells a story with the song. Watch for what happens. So the Tramp does talk. But it's a wonderful comic joke.

Another aspect of the context of *Modern Times* is it takes place during the Depression. But the subject matter of *Modern Times* was Chaplin's typical subject matter. It was about the Depression. It was about hunger, about misery, about someone who can't find a job, about two homeless people, about the conflict between capital and labor, about the irrationality of both sides. It was literally about the turmoil and trouble that was going on during the Great Depression.

Many people predicted, not only that the film would fail because it was really essentially a silent film in an era when no one was interested in silent film anymore, but also that it would fail because it was rubbing the audience's noses in the very experiences they were trying to escape when they came to the movies, the escapist theory of why people attend films. Of course, both predictions were mistaken.

*Modern Times* was a significant commercial success, partly because Chaplin was very clever in the way he did his exhibition of the film. He released it first, not in mass release, but to elite feeders, which charged quite a great deal of money, and then slowly allowed the film to reach larger and larger theaters. He anticipated certain modern marketing methods with the release of *Modern Times*.

And, of course, by 1936, Charlie Chaplin was an internationally famous figure, of such stature. He was about the only figure, maybe apart from D.W. Griffith, about whom people had begun to write essays calling him an artist. So Chaplain occupied a unique place. And that was also part of why *Modern Times* was waited for so fully.

So the context of *Modern Times* is important. There's something brave and surprising about the fact that it was about the miseries of the Depression during the Depression, that it was essentially a silent film in the middle of the sound era. Both very bold decisions on Chaplin's part, both characteristic of his ambitiousness as an artist.

Like Keaton's *The General*, we could certainly call this film also a culminating text, a summarizing text, in several senses. It's a culminating text in terms of Chaplin's work. And I've already talked about that. Every single person coming to see *Modern Times*, who had any experience with the movies before, would recognize in *Modern Times* situations and even physical spaces that had occurred in earlier Chaplin films.

So there was almost a sense in which *Modern Times* was a reprise of the whole career of the Tramp. And I mentioned that *Modern Times* shows us the Tramp for the first time in multiple jobs Having multiple sources of-- and, in fact, multiple misadventures. He goes to jail more than once in the film. We find him in a factory more than once in the film and so forth.

So there's a sense in which the various separate episodes of *Modern Times*, taken together, dramatize, in small, the whole of the Tramp's career. And there are many specific bits of business and scenes in *Modern Times* that are little repetitions, or echoes, or reprises of earlier Chaplin films, which have caused a shock of recognition in the audience, a happy kind of recognition.

There are many examples of that. There are many earlier films which deal with restaurants. You'll see some of them from the shorts that you've looked at, certain echoes.

I won't talk about any of them beyond mentioning that there's a remarkable sequence in the



film-- if we have time, I'll show it to you. But we probably won't have time-- in which we see Charlie on skates. And that scene alludes to a whole short that Chaplain had made, in which he plays a waiter who has to serve people on skates. And you'll see that he has to do that again at the end of the film. He sort of reprises that role. And then there's an earlier moment in the film where we see Chaplain states as well.

But the main point is that virtually every moment in *Modern Times* has some counterpart in an earlier Chaplain short. So there would have been a sense of the audience coming back to Charlie, returning to the world that Charlie stood for, when they came to watch *Modern Times*.

So it's a culmination of Chaplain's career. But it's also in a deep sense, like *The General*, a culmination of silent film. And it would have had that nostalgic affect. It would have had that nostalgic effect on the original audience. Most of the original audience would have recognized the film as an embodiment of a phase of movie going that had passed. And we should watch it in that way as well.

I want to say a word about the Gamin. That's the character, the female character in the film because she represents an advance over any previous Chaplain movie. As I suggested earlier, in most Chaplain films, women are relatively stereotyped and don't play very active roles. This is the first film in which there's a woman who seems to be in some sense the Tramp's equal, in many ways more than his equal. She has more energy. She's a bit younger.

You might watch for the ambiguity in their relationship. Is it a sexual relationship, a romantic relation? Probably not. Charlie's a lot older than the Gamin. In real life, he was having an affair with her, I might mention to you. In fact, he was famous for having relations with young women, especially his young actresses. And there were scandals connected to Chaplain's name partly because of this.

And Paulette Goddard, the actress who plays the Gamin in this film, entered on a career of great fame in the movies, partly because of this role. And you could see how expressive and remarkable her face is. This is the first female character who has energy, will, who has a kind of aggressive capacity to be resilient and care for herself. And that represents a tremendous advance in Chaplain's work.

She's the first sort of semi-independent female in Chaplain's work. And you can see in a certain way, she's a kind of partner for Chaplain.

When this film ends with Charlie and the Gamin walking down the road toward an unknown future, the only difference between that ending and the ending we normally see in a Chaplain short is that Chaplain is usually alone when he walks down the road toward the mountains in the distance. And in this film, he has a partner. So there's a slight suggestion of, if not exactly hopefulness, at least the resilience, of the capacity to survive. You have someone to help you.

And you might watch the way the Paulette Goddard character is treated in the film. Because she actually represents something new in Chaplain's work, a real advance in his understanding of how to deal with female characters. A new kind of respect for women shows up in this film.

I've mentioned the soundtrack before. But I want to quickly call your attention to two features of it. One is that Chaplain arranged the sound track very carefully. And what you'll notice if you pay attention is that the soundtrack has what we might call a quality in which particular themes recur when certain characters appear on screen. And you begin to associate certain melodies with certain characters. And you should watch the way this unfolds.

I mean the melody that's played behind the Chaplain character was actually a popular song of the day, entitled, although the words are never sung in the film, "Hallelujah, I'm a Tramp." And it was a song about being free, and not having to worry about working, and riding the rails, and so forth. Hurray, I don't have a job. Hurray I'm a free, in those ways.

But each of the characters, each of the major characters in the film, has a musical theme associated with him or her. And you should watch the way they sort of meld in and blend together. Chaplain took the sound in the film very seriously.

I've mentioned the talking theme. Watch the mocking way in which talk itself, speech, is dealt with in the soundtrack. You might want to talk about this in your recitations. But ask yourself what's going on there? Why would Chaplain, in the end, denigrate talk?

I think the answer is obvious. The Tramp is a silent character. It's as if this is the revenge of silent film on talkies. It's as if the film is saying talk is crap, talk is silly, talk is ridiculous. Who needs talk?

Watch how the film repeatedly makes fun of talking or shows talking as inadequate or unnecessary. And also the way the film associates talkies with something else that the film is very hostile to, which is mechanized industrialization. The film is a critique of the excesses of capitalism and the excesses especially, the tedium of factory work. And talk and talking films

are associated with what the film identifies as evil or dangerous, as you'll see.

But there's also a moment in the film that-- I won't show it to you. But I'll mention it and ask you to watch for it-- where we can see another way. It's only one of the ways in which Chaplin manipulates sound. And it's an interesting moment because it's easy to miss, easy not to register what's happening there.

There's a moment in the center of the film where Charlie and the Gamin escape their difficulties briefly. Charlie gets a job as a night watchman in a department store. And the department store is like capitalist heaven. They've been living hand to mouth, nearly starving.

And they find themselves in the department store. There's food. There are beds. There are beautiful warm clothes. There are toys. There are even roller skates.

And there's a moment when Charlie and the Gamin exploring the store, having this exciting experience with all these goods, which they are deprived of. It's not an accident that that scene is at the very center of the film. Almost all the scenes on either side of the department store scene rhyme with each in certain ways, as an aspect of the structure of the film. And I'll come to that in second. I'll conclude with that point.

But the department store scene is the only one that doesn't have any counterpart. It's right at the very center of the film. And what one can feel is the way in which that dramatizes the injustice, the sense of haves and have nots that is at the center of the film's meaning. The film is always in some sense interested in that topic.

So there's a moment when the Gamin and Charlie find themselves in this store. Charlie, in his exuberance and high spirits, straps on roller skates and begins skating around. And if you listen to the soundtrack, you'll see the soundtrack is very beautiful and gentle. And you know, dah. It's very calming and exciting.

And as Charlie is skating, the camera shows that, in fact, he's skating in a very dangerous area. The store is partly under construction. And on one point, while he's skating, he puts a blindfold on. And he's still skating very calmly, and beautifully, and gracefully. And the soundtrack under it is very graceful and appropriate to his feelings.

But what the camera shows, what you see, is him coming near the edge of an abyss. Actually, it's a platform. He might fall three stories down into the lower story. And he's not aware of it because he's blindfolded. And the sound-- and then, of course, there's a certain moment

where he takes the blindfold off and he sees that he's about to fall.

And he gets nervous. And he suddenly is no longer so graceful. It's kind of a minor joke.

But what's really interesting about the moment is to think about what Chaplain is doing with the soundtrack. Because when you reflect on it, what you realize is that what Chaplain has done with that soundtrack is have it reflect not the external reality that we're all watching, but the inner feelings that Charlie is feeling. What he's done is he's discovered a way-- it's a simple point, but it's a brilliant discovery. He's discovered a way to use the soundtrack to express a subjective state.

And what he's also discovered, of course, is that-- although other people had discovered this principle too. But Chaplain's using it with great intelligence. He's discovered that the soundtrack and the visual track don't have to absolutely coincide. That they can report different emotions or cause different kinds of reaction. And that what you get when you have this disjunction is something much more complex.

We see Charlie is skating in danger. But his obliviousness to the danger is partly registered by the music, which tells us not about what's happening outwardly, but what's happening inside Charlie. And there are other moments like this in the film, not necessarily with the soundtrack, but in other ways, in which the subjective states of the characters are explored. Pay attention to those because they're very remarkable and interesting moments, in which Chaplain is expanding the repertoire of film.

The structure of the film is especially interesting. And I won't say more about it, than to say if you watch closely what you will see is the structure is a profound structure of repetition. As in *The General*, the film's first half is revisited in the film's second half. It's as if the film is based on a series of rhyming scenes.

In the first half of the film, there's a fantasy sequence in which we see Charlie and the Gamin inside a kind of cabined environment, inside a kind of domestic scene. It's actually a fantasy scene, in which Charlie imagines a suburban heaven for him and the Gamin.

In the second half of the film, there's an actual cabin in the mud flats that they live in. And those two scenes are sort of in conversation with each other. There are two extended sequences in factories and involving the malfunctioning of machinery. And what you'll notice, if you pay close attention to the film, is that this principle of rhyming scenes creates a situation in

which in the second half of the film you partly feel that you're revisiting scenes and experiences that you've had before.

And one of the reasons that this is a useful and an important idea is that if you think about Charlie's life and you think about the previous history of Chaplin's career as a director and as an actor, what you realize is that in a deep sense what *Modern Times* is doing is replicating the history of Charlie's career. Because Charlie has held a series of jobs. Charlie has been in 15, or 20, or 40, or a hundred different environments. And in virtually every case or in every case, the ending has been the same. He has been released into an ambiguous kind of homelessness and freedom at the end of the film.

There's something footloose, homeless, and unfinished about Charlie's life. And after a while, you come to realize you this would have been true by 1920, if you had paid attention to the 30 or so other Chaplin shorts that already existed. The fact is that it's an endless process.

So another thing that the structure of *Modern Times* manages to dramatize, maybe more deeply and powerfully than any prior Chaplin film has been able to do exactly because of this mirror structure, is that this principle of repetition never ends, that Charlie is on a kind of treadmill. And, of course, Charlie revisits scenes and repeats actions that we'd seen earlier in the film because his life is a series of repetitions. Because the film's vision of social life for a character like Charlie is one that's so mordant.

What he's suggesting is things are hard, things are tough. This man's homelessness, this man's hunger, will never abate. He's going to have a struggle for his whole life. But we don't despair because the Chaplain character himself doesn't despair. So pay attention to the way the structure embodies the meaning.

The point I'm making now, and I'll come back to this later in the course, the point I'm making now is a way of talking about what could be called the film's commitment to the principle of organic form. When the structure of a text is organic, what is meant by that is that the structure itself embodies meaning. That the way the text is organized carries the themes of the text.

And if you think about the structure of *Modern Times*, you'll see that it's a marvelously distilled instance, a marvelously clear instance, of the principle of organic form. What happens to Charlie serially is more meaningful in a way than what happens to him in a single episode. And the fact that we have this sense that things are repeating, that Charlie is on a treadmill, that he lives a cyclical life, that he'll always have moments of hope and hopelessness, that he'll have

momentary times when he finds a place to live or find sufficient food. But that it will always be temporary. That his life is always on the road. That his life is always in process.

And that, at the same time, he never lets himself completely despair. There's always a moment where his resilience reasserts itself. Where those elements are embedded in some sense in the very structure, the very organization of the film. And I urge you to watch it.

What's been embedded or implied in a good deal of what I've been saying tonight also has to do broadly with what might be called as the director Chaplin's complexity. Almost every moment in Chaplin, and certainly almost every moment in *Modern Times*, has the kind of multiplicity, or density, or texture that I've been describing to you as the mark of a serious film. The mark of what I want to call a work of art.

And if you pay attention, one of the things you'll find is that even the moments that seem on the surface to be the simplest ones, are not. Or even the implications in the film that seem the simplest are not. Just one example, the film's critique of capitalism, of a certain kind of excessive form of industrial capitalism, is obvious and very deep. I mean the film is deeply hostile to the dehumanization that work on the assembly line generates for people. And Chaplain works wonderfully comic variations on this idea.

And yet if you think of the film in a simple way, if you think in the film in a simple way as a kind of Marxist or left-wing screed, you're really mistaken. And some people did, in fact. And Chaplain was hounded out of the United States later in his career, in part because he was associated with what we thought to be left-wing causes. But Chaplin's socialism was of a particularly sentimental variety. And he was certainly no systematic communist.

But the most important thing about Chaplain is his complexity. Because if you look closely at the film, one of things you'll find that it isn't just capital that's criticized. It's also labor. There's a wonderful moment in the film when Charlie finally, after times of difficulty, reads in the newspaper that the factory is hiring again. And he's very excited.

And he leaves the Gamin. They'd been living in their little sort of idyllic cabin in the mud flats in the second half of the film. And he runs out to the factory. And he gets hired.

And just as he's about to start his work, the workers go on strike and his life is destroyed again. And, in fact, the truth of the matter is that Chaplain is an equal opportunity insulter. He thinks that labor is just as stupid. Organized labor is just as foolish, just as misguided as

capital.

Something of the complexity of his social vision is reflected there. And something of the complexity of his moral and psychological vision is reflected in the way the Tramp interacts with the Gamin. And in the way in which both the Tramp and the Gamin together, at different moments in the film, try to buck each other up. So we see that there are moments in which each character falls into a kind of despair in the face of the difficulties that they encounter and in which they are helped by their partner. So there's a kind of complexity or maturity in Chaplin's way of understanding even the social difficulty, the social evils, the social problems that he recurrently dramatizes in his film.

For those of you who have never seen a Chaplin film before, and especially those of you who have never see *Modern Times*, let me conclude by saying I'm a little bit jealous of the opportunity you have to see this film for the first time. It's one of the very few silent films I think-- I think *The General* is also one-- that actually stands on its own. That's worth watching, even without any arguments about its artifactual value. I wish you the joy of this remarkable film.