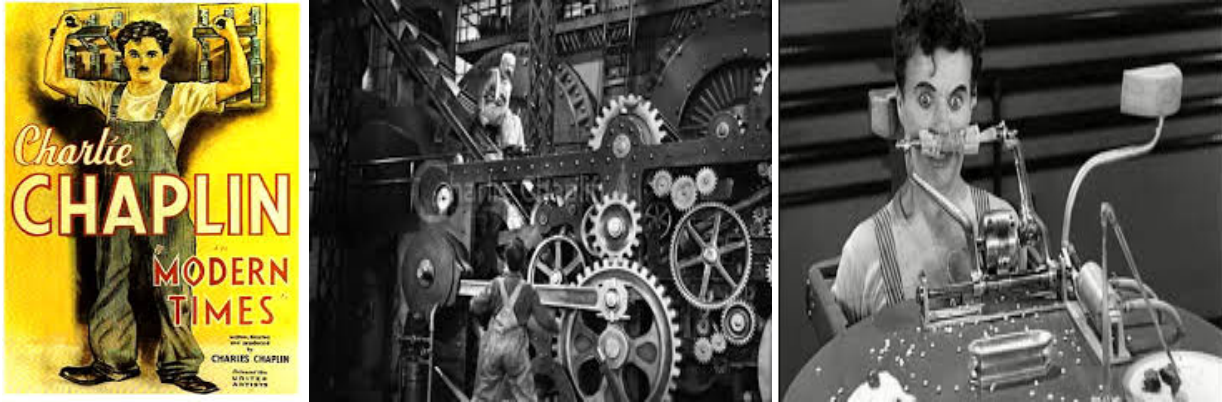


Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936)
Analysis of "Modern Times" through Conflict Theory
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Modern Times Movie Description

Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936) is a humorous satire of urban industrial life in the first half of the 20th century. While working on an assembly line, the “Little Tramp” gets a tick that makes him move like a machine. He then becomes stuck on a conveyor belt and run through another machine. He is used as a test dummy for a feeding machine. The boss spies on him in the men’s room through hidden cameras. He meets a waif and falls in love. He is mistakenly labeled a Communist and arrested. He encounters cocaine while in jail. He gets a job in a department store but loses it. He works as a waiter, only to lose that job. None of these setbacks crush his spirit.

Theoretical Perspectives

Sociologists develop theories to explain social events, interactions, and patterns. A theory is a proposed explanation of those social interactions. Theories have different scales. Macro-level theories, such as structural functionalism and conflict theory, attempt to explain how societies operate as a whole. Micro-level theories, such as symbolic interactionism, focus on interactions between individuals.

Analysis of "Modern Times" through Conflict Theory

Modern Times movie can be analyzed through the lens of conflict theory, a sociological perspective that focuses on the inherent conflicts between different social groups, particularly between those with power and those without. Conflict theory emphasizes the struggles between the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (working class).

Here are some points of how *Modern Times* illustrates conflict theory:

Exploitation of Workers: The film depicts the dehumanizing conditions of factory work. Workers are treated as cogs in a machine, symbolized by Chaplin's character getting caught in the gears. This highlights the exploitation inherent in the capitalist system, where workers are subjected to monotonous, repetitive tasks that reduce their humanity and well-being.

Alienation: The character, the Little Tramp, experiences alienation, a concept Marx described as the alienation of workers from the products of their labor, from the production process, and from their fellow workers. Chaplin's character struggles to find meaningful work and is constantly at odds with the industrial environment that seems to dominate and oppress him.

Class Struggle: The film portrays differences between the working class and the capitalists. The factory owners are depicted as detached and indifferent with the workers' welfare, focused on productivity and profit. This reflects the class struggle central to conflict theory, where the interests of the workers are in direct opposition to those of the capitalists.

Resistance and Revolt: Throughout the film, there are moments of resistance and revolt. The workers go on strike, and Chaplin's character frequently rebels against the oppressive conditions, whether through his actions in the factory or his attempts to find a better life outside of it. This resistance is a key aspect of conflict theory, which sees social change as the result of the ongoing struggle between competing groups.

Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* serves as a critique of industrial capitalism and its impact on workers, resonating with the themes of exploitation, alienation, class struggle, resistance, and economic inequality central to conflict theory.

Step I. Pre-Viewing:

- What do you think you will see in this motion picture?
- List Three concepts or ideas that you might expect to see based on the title of the film.
List some people you might expect to see based on the title of the film.

Step II. Viewing:

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Step III. Post-Viewing Questions:

1. How does "Modern Times" depict the class struggle between the working class and the capitalist class?
2. What was Charlie Chaplin's message in modern times?
3. What symbols in the film represent the control of the capitalist class over the working class?
4. How does Chaplin's character, the Tramp, embody the plight of the working class in a capitalist society?
5. In what ways does the film critique the idea of progress and industrialization?
6. What is the significance of the factory scenes?
7. Write a question to the filmmaker that is left unanswered by the motion picture.