

MIT Student

11.139 | Scene Analysis

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### The City as a System of Production

Within the city “our physical contacts are close but our social contacts are distant,” Louis Wirth writes in his 1938 essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life.”<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, as the world was in the throes of the Great Depression and urbanism was still an emerging concept, Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* could not have better captured Wirth’s sentiment of the city as a unique environment that is densely populated yet absent of human intimacy. Arisen out of an eighteen month tour around the world and several years of contemplation, *Modern Times* is a comedic film that tells the story of two misfits that try to navigate urban society only to be rejected.<sup>2</sup> Through the comedy, however, Chaplin criticizes cities for undermining human interactions and relationships in the same ways that Wirth describes. In order to fit into the city, Chaplin insinuates, people must lose their individual complexity to become a mere cog in the urban machinery.

Two scene sequences from *Modern Times* in particular epitomize Chaplin’s underlying commentary on the social relationships within cities. The first is the sequence within the factory in which we first meet the tramp, played by Chaplin himself. Within the first few seconds of this sequence, we begin to understand the idea that “the close living together and working together of individuals who have no sentimental and emotional ties foster a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation.”<sup>3</sup> The tramp and his fellow colleagues are treated more or less like robots. They are asked to perform one “specialized task” over and over, profiting the factory as a whole but gaining no benefits

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1938): 1-24, quotation on 14.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Mellen, *Modern Times*, (London: BFI Publishing, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Wirth, 15.

as individuals.<sup>4</sup> In addition, there is absolutely no time for meaningful interactions; for several minutes, the film audience watches as the tramp works shoulder to shoulder with the other workers without saying a word. When words are exchanged, however, they always relate to the efficiency of the overall assembly line—the president tells the mechanic to speed up the assembly line, the manager barks at the tramp for falling behind on the assembly line, the tramp and the worker next to him row over who stalled the assembly line. By lunchtime all the workers are so exhausted that they do not engage in any enriching dialogue. Again the tramp and the other worker row in an aggressive exchange directly induced by the conditions of the factory, and as the camera quickly pans over the line of seated workers in the background of the feeding machine, it is clear that none of them are really interacting. Both details exhibit the unique urban phenomenon of individuals that retain “great social distance” despite “frequent close physical contact.”<sup>5</sup>

In sharp contrast to this factory scene sequence, the scene that introduces us to the Gamin and her family arguably shows the cost of human intimacy. This is the first scene sequence in the film that shows meaningful relationships between individuals, first between the Gamin and the poor children in the street and then between her and her father and sisters. Unlike the workers on the factory assembly line, the Gamin and her family embrace and engage in emotionally sensitive dialogue within the moments that they are together. Furthermore, the Gamin’s actions are motivated by the personal gain of the people she cares about. These are the key components that establish meaning in her relationships. Chaplin, however, immediately sets up the tension between her acts for personal gain and the rest of society when she is forced to steal bananas, against society’s rules, in order to support herself and loved ones. In addition, her ragged clothes and her father’s unemployment suggest that acting out of personal and individualistic gain is not rewarded and in fact at odds with the city.

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<sup>4</sup> Wirth, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Wirth, 16.

Juxtaposed with each other, both scenes convey the idea that the efficient urban lifestyle undermines meaningful relationships. This sentiment extends through the rest of the movie as well. Nearly every meaningful interaction and relationship occurs between societal misfits, whether it is between the tramp and the Gamin, the robbers at the store, or the impoverished and unemployed; whereas every interaction among assimilated urban dwellers is focused on the efficiency of the overall system, whether the system be a factory, a shipyard, or the city itself, maintained by the ever watchful police. The ultimate epitome of this tension between the individual and the system manifests in the final scene in which the tramp and the Gamin are ejected from society because they are unable to lose their complex individuality. Indeed, Chaplin uses *Modern Times* to criticize the trends of urbanization; in his eyes the city has become a “system of production” that has and will continue to “displace personal relations.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wirth, 17.

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