

**The shifting role of the spectator in Charlie Chaplin's „Modern Times“  
according to the formalist and the culture industry's film theories**

Should we consider films purely as the works of art, analyze their visual language and the meaning, which is created by montage? Or should we also take into consideration the institutions which created them, their agendas, and the theory of the culture industry? Even though such film theorists as Ejxenbaum and Horkheimer might disagree on a great many details, both the theories of formalism and the culture industry have a lot of valid points. In this essay Charlie Chaplin's (almost) silent comedy „Modern Times“ (1936) will be analyzed with the relation of both these theories – after all, comedies were very important for Ejxenbaum and Horkheimer/Adorno alike, although for quite the different reasons. From the artistic/formalist point of view, “Modern Times” seems to actively engage its spectators; in the first few paragraphs we shall discuss the means of how it does so: the usage of symbols, sounds, montage and the associations. And yet at the same time argument could be made, that from the narrative point of view this film demands a compliant and passive viewer – an idea which is perfectly compatible with the theory of culture industry. Finally we shall discuss how these two different theories can be applied to a singular work of art and what kind of drawbacks each of them have.

For the film formalists, such as Ejxenbaum, who believed that films have an entirely different language from any other form of art – a language, which works through the montage of different shots and the associations created by that – comedy was one of the most important cinematic genres. After all, the main purpose of the comedy film is to

Matriculation number: 110015647

strongly engage the audience emotionally, something that is hard to do in any form of storytelling; especially in the silent films, where the verbal narration is limited to the sparse intertitles. Thus, the unique language of cinema has to be used and the spectators have to become its actively engaged readers. The montage of the two simple shots in the beginning of “Modern Times” already illustrates this quite nicely.

The first shot depicts a flock of sheep, running through the field. The high camera angle used in the shot makes a huge number of sheep and the sense of the homogenous group much more noticeable, yet the shot itself has almost no meaning at all. The meaning is only created when we compare the first shot with the one that follows – a high-angle shot, which depicts a great number of industry workers exiting the subway. The fact, that the one shot follows another already suggests a connection in a same way how we automatically make a mental connection between the two words in one sentence. The connection is further indicated by the various similarities – an unusual high angle is being used in both shots. Furthermore, the numerous, homogeneous groups are being shown – and in both instances they are moving in the same direction. Sound bridge is being used as well. It seems that the spectators are invited to make a comparison between the two groups – after all, the montage of the shots highlights their similarities. But the creation of the meaning does not end with the similarities – if Charlie Chaplin is making a comparison between two groups, what is its purpose? To answer it we should consider the usage of signs.

According to formalists, every object and film technique is a meaningful sign in its own right. Many of these signs have conventions associated to them; some of conventional meanings associated with the image of a flock of sheep are compliance, sameness and dullness. Therefore, while making a comparison between sheep and the industrial workers (who are even dressed similarly to one another, in a sense – another flock), the spectator automatically assumes that the workers must inherit the same traits – they are compliant sheep of the modern day society. The most wonderful aspect of this particular usage of montage is that this quite complicated meaning is created without an utterance of a word or showing a single intertitle; the meaning is created through the cinematic language which only requires an active reader. The active participation of the spectator is also critical while producing a comic effect – nothing kills the joke more than the explanation why it is funny. Hence, the similarity between two very contrasting groups could have been far less hilarious if it would have been spelled out to the audience.

However, montage does not necessarily require pre-existing conventional signs to create a certain meaning or atmosphere. It is possible to do so in a very short duration of time using only the symbols which already exist in the film's diageisis. The rapid short sequence in "Modern Times" set just after the Tramp's (Charlie Chaplin) release from the mental hospital does just that. Just before him leaving, the psychiatrist advises the Tramp to avoid stress and excitement; afterwards Tramp steps out to the city and the sequence of his observations commences. The sequence is composed of five seemingly unrelated shots overlapping with one another: a street worker drilling the concrete with the electric

Matriculation number: 110015647

drill, cars driving through the streets and the massive crowds crossing them. Comparing and contrasting these shots would be quite futile – they are basically depicting the same thing, which is a life of the bustling city. The rapid editing, camera angles and music play the largest roles in creating the cinematic sentence here.

The music used in these shots is loud, heavy and threatening – the feeling especially intensifies thanks to the previous scene in the hospital being quite tranquil. The sudden loud soundtrack comes out of nowhere and the active spectator is asking themselves what could have caused it. The images of the bustling city suggest that cars or crowds might be the elements which intimidate the Tramp. The highly canted camera also implies alienation, intimidation – the everyday objects such as drill or automobiles become something unusual and potentially dangerous. Finally, the rapidity of editing combined with canted camera angles and the threatening music creates an effect of dizziness and disorder – we are basically being told how the Tramp feels in the modern society without any verbal explanations, just through the montage. There are no character reactions or intertitles, the images are very common (cars, city folk) – if the spectator would not actively associate images, sound and editing speed with one another, the meaning would probably be lost and the bleak atmosphere would not be established.

The famous shot of the Tramp trapped inside the factory's machinery is also worth mentioning – it is but a one shot, with no montage involved, and yet that single shot still embodies the formalist view on film as art. The shot is a play on the literal and the abstract meaning of the word “cogwheel” – as the Tramp is sucked into the machine,

Matriculation number: 110015647

he does not get stuck between the giant cogwheels, the machine keeps on working, as if to say, that the Tramp is not a foreign object to it – indeed he is the integral part of the workings of the factory. The conventional meaning of the word “cogwheel” is, of course, a tiny, dependent part of something much larger, without any agency or free will of its own. Thus, the literal representation of this word on screen (the giant wheels all around the Tramp) create an association to the abstract meaning and make the audience consider the idea, that the Tramp might be just that – a tiny cogwheel of the society’s machine. A single shot, even without use of editing, creates a critique of a technological society solely through blocking and signs – a feat that clearly required an artistic input on the film’s creators’ part.

A lot of directors adored by formalists considered actors being a certain signs as well – Eisenstein, for example, used to rely on typage casting in his films. The characters actually do relay as much information throughout their appearances as through their personalities. This can also be traced in Chaplin’s “Modern Times” – especially if we would analyze the appearance and the role of a character called the Gamine Girl (Paulette Goddard). The audiences do not get much of her characterization from the plot itself – only that the girl is spontaneous, and yet a lot of information is conveyed from the appearance. There are numerous close-up shots in the film that emphasize the Gamine’s wide eyes – wide eyes are usually a symbol of innocence and kindness. Her dress and long hair, despite her being called “gamine”, underline the girl’s femininity and attractiveness; at the same time the dress is slightly ripped, which reminds us that she is

Matriculation number: 110015647

poor and on a verge of poverty. The visual language is being used to describe her as much as the verbal one.

Very important aspect of her appearance is the fact, that in general the Gamine Girl is clean and good looking, which undermine the dramatic social conditions of her character. The Tramp himself looks much more innocently than his dirty, sweaty and usually quite threatening looking co-workers. The argument could be made, that this was a decision on Chaplin's part to make the main characters more relatable to spectators. But if the film's main point is the critique of the technological, dehumanizing and socially unequal society, wouldn't it be carried across more successfully if the main characters fully belonged to the group of workers, not be slightly detached from them as they are now? Perhaps even though the film's message of the social inequality is not as simple as it appears and underneath it quite the opposite agenda is hidden?

The theory of the culture industry sheds some light to the dilemma. As Horkheimer and Adorno have written, films are the products of a massive industry, which greatly influences its spectators (not the vice versa). The audiences are not only the active readers/participants of the film language; they are also the passive receivers of the messages conveyed in them. Often seemingly unique films from the narrative point of view are utterly cliché and formulaic; sometimes the message of the film is actually opposite to what it appears to be at the first glance. What are the socio-political implications of Chaplin's "Modern Times"? Is this a film that ridicules the imperfect system and invites us to change it, or the one, which encourages us to maintain the status

quo, give up on any changes and remain the complaint sheep the first few shots suggest we are?

The portrayal of the authority figures in this film is one of the most telling clues regarding this question. Factory owner, the police officers and other wielders of power are portrayed as oppressive and indifferent to the common folk: the Tramp's factory owner treats his employees as useful objects rather than human beings; the police rely on the usage of force while dealing with the worker strike, etc. And yet the main characters choose the side of authority throughout the whole film. During the prison riot the unjustly imprisoned Tramp helps the police, not his fellow convicts; his and Gamine's ideal dream house mirrors the house of the pompous rich couple they have just made fun of; the blame of the unemployment in the city is put not on the unjust factory owner, but on his rebellious workers, who are striking for the better conditions.

As the main characters are the most developed, hence, the most relatable, the audiences inevitably adopt their point of view – and if the oppressive authority figures from the point of view of the Tramp and the Gamine are still seen as positive, something they yearn to become someday, the spectators might start feeling the same. The purpose of this quite confusing double bind is, sadly, obvious – the figures of authority in the real world are actually the people who are funding the large part of the film industry and the Hollywood studios specifically. Thus, it is not in their best interest to portray the system they represent in the solely negative light. At the same time they are probably aware of the troubles of the working class and that the large portion of the film-goer population

Matriculation number: 110015647

would relate to those troubles. What is best way to portray their struggle on screen without showing the disruption of the status quo? Present the spectators with the image of the unjust society which is self-aware of its own injustice; show the oppressed whose only escape from their status is to become the same as the ones who oppress. It might be a strong notion, but other aspects of the “Modern Times” confirm it further.

Figures of authority in “Modern Times” are portrayed in a positive light; at the same time every character who tries to upset the established order is presented from the overtly negative perspective. The negative suggestions are not only explicit (as already mentioned, workers fighting for their rights are being associated with trouble makers and, in some instances, thieves), but implicit as well. When the Tramp is wrongfully arrested, the following intertitle informs the spectators that he was arrested as a “communist leader”. This particular accusation is far more important than it seems at the first glance.

By the time of 1936, the year “Modern Times” was made, the communist coups and revolutions have happened (or almost happened) in the several countries; this ideology, especially the most prominent Russian communism, in the western world was justly regarded as a radical and dangerous movement. For example, Holodomor (Ukrainian genocide masterminded by the communist leader Joseph Stalin) has already been committed during 1932 – 1933 and was widely recorded in the western press. The potential dangers of communism were very well known. Therefore, accusing the (suspected) leader of the workers’ strike of being a “communist” creates an instant negative association between any kind of fight for the workers’ rights and the most



radical form of leftist politics. It does not matter, that the same accusation could have easily been made in real life at the time – what matters is that in “Modern Times” the parallel between the social-active workers and communists furthers the notion of any kind of changes to the status quo being dangerous and unwelcome. Even if the spectators do not make this conclusion consciously, the shadow of disapproval is bound to appear in our minds – the same would happen, if the hypothetical character fighting for their national identity and the rights to individual enterprise would be accused of fascism - the very radical side of rightist politics.

The storyline of the “Modern Times”, despite its interesting comedic form and unusual, bumbling main character, is also incredibly formulaic. The whole film can be divided into these commonly used segments: 1) the hero gets into trouble (the Tramp is fired from the factory); 2) after the series of misfortunes the hero loses his motivation; 3) the hero saves the girl (the Gamine Girl); 4) while helping the girl the hero regains his motivation and faith in himself; 5) the hero gets the girl and the happy end ensues. Of course, the ending of the “Modern Times” is a little bit more ambiguous – we do not know if the Tramp will manage to find a new job – but it is still explicitly stated, that he will not give up until he does so. The Tramp would rather fight tooth-and-nails to integrate himself into the unjust society which keeps rejecting him rather than trying to change it for the better – this kind of ending yet again sends a message to the audience to be passive and compliant. At the same time the formulaic plot structure ensure us that even in imperfect society everyone will get their just rewards – a soothing thought, that opposes any kind of proactive thinking. All the injustices the main characters receive in

Matriculation number: 110015647

the film could lose their meaning if the notion of the just world would be introduced – and indeed they do.

Lastly, the genre of the comedy was very important to such a theorists of the culture industry as Horkheimer and Adorno for a very particular reason – as Horkheimer states in his paper, violent comedies in which the heroes suffer numerous comedic misfortunes and beatings might serve a purpose of accustoming the spectators to the real beatings they receive in their actual lives. “Modern Times” illustrates that perfectly: the violence unleashed unto the Tramp (the both physically cruel and psychologically demeaning demonstration of the feeding machine; various punches he receives throughout the film) is portrayed very comically. The spectators do not take this violence seriously thanks to the Tramp being seemingly unfazed by it – if the character himself does not care why should we? Also, the violence is cartoonish, ridiculous; we are alienated from it and invited to laugh at it. And if we can laugh at the violence and injustice in the context of the film, the real life violence starts looking more tolerable – after all, culture industry is step-by-step accustoming us to it through such films as “Modern Times”. It is not a film which parodies technocratic, highly capitalistic and consumerist society – from the narrative point of view this is a film, which celebrates it and invites us to laugh away our problems rather than deal with them.

If we apply the formalist theory to Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times”, it seems that the active spectator is called for – a spectator, who is capable of reading the complex cinematic language and interpreting it. On the other hand, using the theory of culture

Matriculation number: 110015647

industry we can see the same film from the entirely different perspective – it might be the film, which demands a passive, non-critical viewer, who by the film’s narrative is shaped into even more passive one. Which of the two theories is to be trusted? They both have some valid points, which can be applied to the singular work of art; and they analyze the completely different aspects of it. While the formalism is perfect theory to read and describe the form, the language of the film, it does not take into consideration the deeper political and social motivations that exist behind the diagesis – motivations of those, who finance the culture industry and the effect they might have on the film’s plot. On the other hand, the theory of the culture industry is not the best when dealing to the purely artistic side of the filmmaking – even the most formulaic and cliché motion picture can still excel in its form. After all, the oil paintings of the late middle ages have had mostly religious themes thanks to their making being financed by the Catholic Church; but we can still admire them for their technique and the artistic ingenuity even if we are not Catholic.

### **References:**

*Modern Times*, 1936. Film. Directed by Charlie CHAPLIN. USA: Charles Chaplin

Productions, United Artists/Criterion.

Ejxenbaum, Boris, *Problems of cinema stylistics*, 1927. In *Russian Formalist Film theory*

(Herbert Eagle, 1981).

Horkheimer, Max, *The culture industry: enlightenment as mass deception*. In *Dialectic of*

*enlightenment: philosophical fragments* (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W.

Adorno, 1947).