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Humour Stream

**Comedy, Pain and Nonsense at the Red Moon Café:
the Little Tramp's Death by Service Work in *Modern Times***

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La spinach or la busho
Cigaretto toto bello
Ce rakish spagoletto
Ce le tu la tu la trios!
Senora fila scena
Voulez-vous la taximeter
Le jaunta sur la seata
Je le tu le tu le waah!¹

*(The first verse of Charlie Chaplin's Nonsense Song
from the Red Moon Café scene in 'Modern Times')*

Introduction

You would have to be a real misery-guts not to appreciate *Modern Times*. But the irony of *Modern Times* is that it is all about misery – human physical and psychological misery in the face of the relentless modernizing industrial machine. As an artistic commentary on industrialization and its social effects, the film ranks alongside literary equivalents such as Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The fact that the movie is a comedy featuring the world's most beloved silent icon – the Little Tramp - in his final swan-song, makes the movie even more poignant. The previously silent Little Tramp's explosion into the nonsense song in the Red Moon Café is an illuminating and sublime self-referential moment on film. This moment was eagerly anticipated by Chaplin's public. Was the Little Tramp to speak, ten years into the talkies? Was even Chaplin - whose vociferous opposition to the technological development of talkies was well known - to cave in to the inevitability of progress? Where does Chaplin begin and the Little Tramp end?

The movie *Modern Times* can be read on many different levels. First the movie can, and has many times, been read as a political and social statement on industrialism and its negative effects on the body and mind of organic man. Chaplin's political views were very much a part of his public and film persona – he was despised by J. Edgar Hoover and eventually thrown out of his beloved America – and he was an outspoken humanitarian (Chaplin, 1974; Maland, 1989). But also, and as inferred above, the movie can be read as a personal statement by Chaplin himself on the advent of talkies and his own situation in the cogs of the film industry. For Chaplin pain was the source of his comedy, and comedy was a 'strategy for living'. Comedy was, quite literally, his 'therapy' and the threat of talkies to the silent pantomime figure of the Little

Tramp (whose comedy was innately physical), and thereby to Chaplin himself, was worked out as therapy on screen (Chaplin, 1964).

The following paper draws on both of these traditional interpretations of *Modern Times*, but focuses on a scene and a theme that has rarely been commented upon in the literature on *Modern Times* – service work at the Red Moon Café. Chaplin's comedy was very complex. His art was his ability to make people laugh through his technical expertise with the pantomime sight gag – and thereby communicate his personal symbolic vision. *Modern Times* (which along with *City Lights* has been hailed as his finest achievement) was created at the height of his celluloid-inspired comic powers. Gags were connected across scenes and the institutional settings of each of the four major parts of the movie – the factory, the prison, the department store and the café – provided running references to each-other, and to texts outside of the movie. But the Little Tramp's nonsense articulations to music in the Red Moon Café are more than just a comedic response to the Little Tramp's death by talkie. The Red Café scene, culminating in the perfect fusion of Chaplin and the Little Tramp in the nonsense song, is also a commentary on another type of industrial work - service work. The rest of this paper is devoted to giving a reading of service work at the Red Moon Café, using as its structural discipline Monin's scriptive reading technique (Monin, 2004). We first provide a dominant reading of the Red Moon Café scene, then a critical reading, and then finally a reflexive reading.

The Red Moon Café (Dominant Reading)

The second to last main sequence of 'Modern Times' takes place in the Red Moon Café, which, from a sign outside, we can see is known for its singing waiters. Paulette Goddard, playing the gamin, has been transformed from street urchin to smart café dancer. Upon the Tramp's release from prison he immediately notices her transformed appearance. The gamin has found a job for the Tramp at the café where she is also working and vouches for him. The Red Moon Café has a large dance floor with tables around the edges, and a band playing on the podium. It is a fairly plain room, but on the wall there is a wagon wheel that is strangely reminiscent of the clock which introduces the movie. A large chandelier hangs above the dance floor. The tramp,

working at the restaurant, fills an order for cheese by drilling holes in a large cheese to mimic Swiss cheese, and keeps his tray, loaded with food, horizontal without spilling anything despite being caught up in a dog's leash. What follows is a restaurant sequence in which the Tramp tries to continually serve a difficult customer who complains "I've been waiting an hour for roast duck!" The maitre de reprimands the Tramp and upset, the Tramp enters the 'Out' door from the kitchen to the restaurant, and not the 'In' door as he should. He knocks over a fellow worker carrying a large tray of food and chaos ensues in the kitchen. The Tramp then attempts to deliver the roast duck to the complaining customer. But he is swept away, again and again, by a crowd of dancers who swirl the struggling Tramp, who is desperately trying to serve the customer, around the dance floor. The duck gets caught on the chandelier, impaled, so that when the Tramp eventually makes it to the customer's table, he is sans duck. Eventually the duck is retrieved, but while the tramp is still trying to serve the customer, the duck is again taken by a group of drunk football-playing customers – the duck becomes a football in their antics as the Tramp tries to rescue it, but the Tramp has made a hopeless waiter. The owner tells the Tramp he has failed as a waiter, but he gives him one last chance as a singing waiter. The Tramp is very apprehensive as four singing waiters appear as a prelude to his appearance. The gamin assists him in his preparation by writing on his cuff the words of the song he is to sing, so he can remember them. The Tramp strides out onto the dance floor for his premier as a singing waiter. A dramatic introductory dance, where he flourishes his arms and flings his cuffs away, leaves him with no words, and so he must stall, and then stall, and then improvise. The gamin, from offstage, mouths, "Sing!! Never mind the words." The Tramp does sing, making up a nonsense song full of gibberish and well-placed foreign-sounding phrases in a rendition of the Cuff Song to the tune of Titania. His song and dance is a success and he leaves the floor to tumultuous applause, even coming back for an encore. The owner is very pleased and offers him a job, saying "You're great!! I'll give you a steady job." But the Tramp's triumph is brief as juvenile officials show up at the club and try to take the gamin away as an escaped vagrant. The Tramp and the gamin make an escape from the Café and the authorities (Chaplin, 1936; *Modern Times - Review*).

Service Work at the Red Moon Café (Critical Reading)

Within management teaching the factory sequences of *Modern Times* are often used to graphically illustrate the detrimental effects of assembly-line processes on people. Even today, the images that Chaplin wrought in this movie seem prescient and the film is acknowledged as a complex work, brought to the screen by a Chaplin at the height of his powers. The movie is also famous for its political and social polemic, for Chaplin in middle-age, the time when this movie was made, was a political man with firmly held views, although they were commonly misunderstood². The other subtext of the movie *Modern Times*, which is often relegated to a secondary place to the 'effects of industrialisation' theme, is the issue of Chaplin's own situatedness in the cogs of the wheels of the film-industry itself. In fact, a second look at the famous image of the Little Tramp caught in the wheels of the industrial machine, is to see Chaplin himself being processed through a roll of film winding its way through a movie projector. The movie *Modern Times* was made almost ten years into the advent of the 'talkies', an innovation of which Chaplin is famously claimed to have said "It'll never catch on!" (Attenborough, 1992). Chaplin was against the Little Tramp ever talking. Although he did script words for the Little Tramp (Chaplin, 1936), he felt that the power of this iconic figure would be eroded if he was to talk. *Modern Times* is a semi-talkie. Authority figures in the movie talk, and talk is technologically mediated (through the screen images in the factory, and on the radio). Of course, sound is still a crucial aspect of the movie. Music is crucial to Chaplin's physical comedy, much of which is choreographed and displayed Chaplin's dancing prowess.

The famous opening sequence of the movie, where a flock of white sheep, with one black one, cuts to a stream of men moving towards the factory, belies the film's deep complexity, and the meanings that Chaplin brought to play in it. For example, the screen image of the 'boss' ordering the Little Tramp back to work, even while he sneaks a smoke in the toilet, evokes the electronic panopticon, and the power of the transmitted image to alter the nature of time and space (Kuriyama, 1992). It is seen as the instrument and conduit of authority's intrusion into every aspect of a worker's private space. The enduring image of Chaplin caught in the spokes of the machine, pulled in and spewed back out again, remains popular because it evokes, both literally

and figuratively, the sense of man as cog in machine that epitomises the problem of factory work for the human body and even the psychology of workers.

The prescience of Chaplin's musings on work in the factory scene (and the avenue for moving the goods of the factory to market which is the department store where Chaplin provides an equally interesting commentary on consumption) is carried through into the Red Moon Café sequence. The structure of the Red Moon Café sequence has inter-textual references to other institutions in the interior of the movie (the factory, prison and department store), and to the 'freedoms' of the street which are often juxtaposed to the institutional settings. But also, the Red Moon Café sequence needs to be read acknowledging its references to the outside text of the movie - Charlie Chaplin in real life. The metaphor of Chaplin/Tramp caught in the cogs of the film industry as much as the great machine, has its counterparts in the Red Café sequence in the Nonsense song. This might sound like nonsense at this point in this essay, but hopefully not completely by the end of it. Another point to mention at the outset of a closer look at the Red Moon Café sequence is to acknowledge that the film audience is brought explicitly into the movie as a factor of production in this sequence.

The fact that the sequence is set in an institutional setting involved in the production of food and theatre is also significant. Food, music, dance and theatre are all lynch-pins of Chaplin's comedy. In the sequence of scenes that makes up the Red Moon Café sequence, Chaplin turns his eye inwards towards himself as a physical pantomime comedian and his techniques of disrupting authoritarian narratives with play around food, music, dance, theatre, and props (Olson, 2001).

Having made these introductory general points, let's start again at the beginning of the sequence, but this time with a more critical perspective. At the introduction to the Red Moon Café sequence the camera lingers on a carousel and then switches to a scene of the gamin, dancing in a wild and carefree pirouette dance in the street outside the café. This vision of the carousel underpins the Red Moon Café sequence. When Charlie is accidentally swallowed by the machine in the most-famous factory sequence, basically swallowed by the one that he serves (Stewart, 1976), he goes through the cogwheels to the sound of carousel music. Chaplin uses calliope music on

the soundtrack which bears the same relation to the crank and drone of gears and also evokes the pounding of horses hoofs. The carousel is a merry-go-round, a playful toy and a pleasure of childhood, but a mechanical beast upon which children ride. The carousel is a machine, run by a fan belt, upon which a human being is swung around in circles. The explicit reference to the gamin joyously dancing to the rhythms of the carousel, her body and hands dipping and wheeling in circular motions converts the predominantly negative associations of the machine cogs at this point in the movie to meanings that are somewhat more ambiguous, and seductive. The embodiment of the machine wheel, and its associations with the clocks and time, is juxtaposed with the aesthetic grace and beauty of Paulette Goddard dancing, spinning and whirling in the street. Goddard/woman embodies the machine³. From the very beginning of this sequence the seductiveness of what is about to be unpicked by Chaplin is revealed.

Goddard is dancing in the street: a place of freedom. But, the value of her movement, freedom and playfulness is discovered and marketed by the dance hall entrepreneur, with his eye on the street, but his back to his business. The owner of the café says to his companion as he watches her “She’d be good at the café”. The scene then moves immediately to the gamin, transformed into costume, dancing to rapturous applause, and an encore inside the café itself. This scene of rapturous applause and encore is replicated at the end of the café sequence, and immediately before the pursuing of the gamin again by the authorities as a juvenile offender, by Charlie’s turn as a singing waiter. Charlie’s performance is also rewarded with rapturous applause and an encore. These two visions of the Little Tramp and the gamin, apparently successful and happy in their jobs, and at one with their audience, are like book-ends on this entire sequence. They are both singing and/or dancing, in the final institutional work setting of the movie. But they are both still caught, literally when the authorities show up to arrest the Gamin after Charlie’s last encore, in the cogs of the machine.

Costumed labour, food and the audience

After the scenes depicting the success of the gamin as a dancer at the Café/dance hall, the next scene depicts the gamin picking up the Tramp again as he leaves the authorities after his latest scrape with the law. This is almost an exact replication of an

earlier scene when the gamin meets the Tramp as he leaves a police station. (The relationship between the Tramp and the gamin is symmetrical (Chaplin, 1974) and depicts a love that ends with the Tramp, for the first time, exiting the movie, not alone). In this scene the focus is on the gamin's transformed appearance. She fusses with her new clothes and the Tramp appears. He immediately notices her changed appearance and pays much attention to it. The gamin says that she has found him a job and convinces both an unsure café owner and nervous Tramp to have a trial. This scene is used to build the tension towards the Tramp's first utterances on film. Charlie looks to the camera, and the audience, sharing his concern about his ability to vocalise. He nods towards the audience, literally and figuratively, as the suspense builds towards his first-long awaited vocalizations on film.

The transformation of the gamin into 'costumed labour' is only one of many references to issues of authenticity⁴ in the Red Moon Café sequence. But before highlighting these points, where Chaplin juxtaposes the real and the imagined (or mimicked), we note his sophisticated understanding of the importance of the customer as a figure of authority in service work⁵. And also the real film audience's (rather than the fictive audience/customers at the Red Moon Café) explicit involvement in the production of both food and theatre in the work that the Charlie/Tramp figure undertakes (and his personas become closer and closer as the sequence unfolds).

Once it is agreed that the Tramp will trial as a waiter, he experiences a new kind of work, different and yet the same, from what he experienced in the factory. Authority is now represented by his organisational supervisor, the maitre de, but also by a rich citizen who is the first person he 'tangles' with. This happens quite literally as the Tramp first crosses the dance floor, when he becomes tangled in the lead of an obviously well-to-do customer leading a dog across the dance-floor. The Little Tramp's social positioning is clearly below that of the dog. This graphically illustrates his new dilemma for he is confounded by the authority of the customer. That it was probably Chaplin's deliberate intention to present the service worker as being at the bottom of the social scale is reinforced when we consider the main frustrations of his work. In particular, there is the complaining customer in the main set piece of the sequence, and the drunken customers who thwart Chaplin's forward progress towards the complaining customer with the duck. The emotionally belligerent and the

emotionally inept/inebriated are also of a higher social order than Charlie/Tramp. These meanings are also carried forward in the lyrics to the music of the singing waiters who explicitly refer to service work as never-ending servitude and even slavery⁶.

So, the customer beleaguers the poor Tramp, but of course so does the Maitre de, who is seen vigorously berating him because of a complaint of a customer over a delayed duck. But, as in the factory sequence, the immediate supervisor is also given sympathetic treatment by Chaplin. He is acknowledged as an embodied cog in the wheel of the factory machine: as caught in the machine as the worker himself. In an echo of the factory scene where the Tramp feeds his supervisor, hopelessly compromised in the machine, the maitre de (still berating the Tramp about carving the duck) is called away by another customer – the maitre de is as much at the beck and call of the customer as the Little Tramp is himself.

The ‘back-stage’ scenes depict a filthy and chaotic environment where one man is even sawing wood. The effect of having someone saw wood in the kitchen is so incongruous, when we compare what normally happens in a kitchen, it must be seen as a reference to the back-stage of a theatre where a stage hand would be preparing the stage set for performance. At one point Charlie drills holes in a very large block of cheese, and takes out the cheese, now supposedly Swiss cheese, to a customer. What happens back-stage is used to comic effect to illustrate the creation of an artifice for the customer. Through most of this kitchen scene the customers can be seen dancing to music through a crack in the door, exaggerating the perception of difference between what happens in the back-stage and the front-stage.

The setting of the café scene is always shot from the front of the floor, with the dance floor and tables, and the raised stage with the musicians upon it, thereby always appearing like a stage set within a stage set. There is minimal decoration except for a wagon wheel, whose architecture is mimicked also in the central chandelier which becomes an essential plot device further on in the movie when the duck which Charlie is desperately trying to serve to the customer becomes impaled upon it, in an excruciatingly graphic scene. The duck itself is decorated in such a way as to evoke a queasy sense of humanness (as does the chicken in the factory sequence) by the

placement of its garnish so that it looks like wide/wild staring eyes. The organic (man) is this time shafted (in the replicated visual symbology of the clock, wagon wheel and chandelier) by time itself.

The shooting of the scene to implicate the audience in the action is also carried through into the kitchen scene. At one point Charlie comes to the counter to wait for the aforementioned duck and the audience becomes, by implication, the kitchen staff preparing and handing Charlie the food. Charlie is looking at the audience at this point, innocently (not) pretending it was not his fault the laden tray of another waiter was upset as Charlie came through the 'Out' door when he should have gone through the 'In' door. This involving of the audience in the action, and the conflation of the audience in the role of producing what is being consumed, is quite explicit in this scene and is reminiscent of a Brechtian dialogue with the audience.

The scene gains even more significance when one considers Chaplin's obsession with food in all of his movies, but particularly in *Modern Times*. The interface between the machine and the body – its juxtapositions, hybridities and extensions, its prosthetic qualities (Haraway, 1991; Scarry, 1985; Stone, 1995) – is a meditative point within the whole movie, and food is a transition device between machine and body. This obsession with food has been located back by Chaplin himself, and his commentators, to the deprivations of his childhood (Chaplin, 1964; Kuriyama, 1992). Food - its production, its distribution, its scarcities, its pleasures, its centrality to the job of keeping the body alive - features in many of his comedy's set scenes⁷.

Food is the centrepiece of many of Chaplin's gags. Feeding his supervisor (stuck in the cogs of the great machine in the factory scene), the feeding machine, bread gags, the intriguing askew duck and its counterpart, the chicken, fare all examples of this. Food was central to life and the fundamental connections between people and things. The interplay between things and people in *Modern Times* is constant with the ingestion by organic bodies of things and of things ingesting people. What is most significant in this scene is that the film-audience itself serves Chaplin the food. This is a direct reference to the audience's involvement in production and in the Tramp/Chaplin's central personal dilemma of talking. We (the viewers) give Charlie

the duck. So, we are brought into the joke of the things, food and organic objects ménage a trios. The film audience is implicated in Charlie's central dilemma.

Throughout the movie there is a queasy sense of play around organic and mechanical artefacts, ingested by and entering each other – Chaplin ingesting bolts from the feeding machine, the impaled and fortune-less duck in the Red Moon Café scene, the Little Tramp himself processed through the cogs of the machine in the iconic image from the film. The industrialization process itself is literally embodied in the physical and psychological processes of the individual⁸. Food is a key metaphor for the transpositions between the body and things. Food is essential to life, is organic, and yet must be 'produced' through work and processed by machines, to be eaten. Girgus argues that these intrusions and inter-fusions have sexual connotations, and draws attention to Chaplin's off-screen liberated attitudes towards sexuality (Girgus, 1996). This may be so, but there can be no doubt that the Little Tramp (and Chaplin) had a great capacity for pleasure, and that pleasure (besides sexuality) has many forms – food, abandonment, nonsense, dance, and music. As pleasure is rooted in the physical body – and Chaplin's comedy was innately physical – the organic-machine interface is a central point of tension in the industrialization process for the pleasure-seeking individual.

Charlie has a strong sympathetic connection to the food which we have given him – the duck. The food is as organic and chaotic as Charlie himself, but Charlie desperately tries to deliver it and to rescue it. The duck becomes misused, like Charlie, as a football: the duck is misplaced and assigned a wrong and degrading role. This also occurs in the earlier factory scene where the chicken replaces the oil funnel used to feed the boss. With the chicken's legs astride the boss's face the chicken carcass looks distressingly human when Charlie pulls off a leg and feeds it to the boss. In the institutions of productions, food is askew. Its central meanings around sustenance and sharing have been altered by production. It is only out in the street – in the real world of freedom – that food is pure. For the gamin, the banana, out on the street, is real food⁹.

The body and the machine are in constant interplay in many set comedy routines throughout the movie. As the machine regiments the body and pervades it, the point

of revolutionary change for Chaplin, it appears as pleasure for its own sake. But pleasure is interpreted as ‘madness’ in the factory sequence. Chaplin responds to the pressures of the factory by engaging in an elaborate, graceful and fundamentally anarchic ballet sequence, evoking a Pan-like figure. He is eventually (like his mother in real life) sent to a mental institution. In the Department Store¹⁰ sequence he uses the ballet of an ice-dancer to create a capricious and teasing dance where again and again he almost, but not quite, meets and falls over the precipice of an upper level of the Department store. But, in this final institutional setting of the Red Moon Café – where the work is service, and music and dance are commodified in its use in the service setting - Chaplin is at his most self-reflective and pricks at his own methods and source of comedy again and again. Chaplin as a mature comedian can be seen at work in the Red Moon Café scene, because it is his very methods of disrupting the meta-narrative of the factory – particularly through music and dance – that is turned back in on itself to pick apart the ‘problem’ with service work.

Clocks, waltz-time, and dancing to your own tune

The central feature of the Red Moon Café sequence is the circular dance floor, and the tables that are arranged around it. The motif of the clock is the central set design feature of this set. The wagon wheel evokes the clock at the beginning of the movie, and this is echoed, as already mentioned, in the chandelier. But the dance floor is also a metaphor for the clock, being circular, with the tables interspersed around it as if they were the clock’s numbers. Rather than the great machine, the Little Tramp is set in this scene to tangle with time itself, and its use in the labour process.

In the factory sequence, Chaplin’s penchant for play – his refusal to let his body become an instrument for efficiency in production (an instrument of work) – appears to be fundamentally revolutionary. Playfulness challenges and is fundamentally revolutionary in this context: it is quite literally ‘mad’, and leads the Little Tramp to a nervous breakdown. It is through the Little Tramp’s physical comedy, drawing on dance, play and music, that he is able to disrupt the grand narrative of the factory, even though it sends him ‘mad’. Physical, sensory, non-cooperation (dancing to one’s own tune) is the ultimate act of rebellion in an imposed system of ordered activity.

But, ironically in the café sequence, music, dance, playfulness and pleasure are employed as instruments of control by scriptwriters and café-owners alike. What a dilemma for Chaplin and the Little Tramp. What becomes of his physically disruptive, graceful comedy?

The scene where the Little Tramp attempts to serve the difficult customer is poignant – it echoes the opening scene of the movie where the Tramp attempts again and again to do his job well on the assembly line, only again and again to be defeated by the impossible position of his life rhythms against those of clock production-time. In the Red Café Scene, as he attempts to serve the complaining customer his duck, he is swept away again and again by the dancing customers. At this point the shot moves to be above the dance floor, showing Charlie moving counter-clockwise, his tray positioning him within the swirl of customers, and spinning him like an internal cog in the small parts of the clock. The timing of the labour process is this time represented by the swirl of the other people – the dance of the crowd. Music and dance is used as a cipher against him, this time to hold him back from his task. Instead of the relentless evenly spaced precision-timing of the factory machine, the Waltz and the Foxtrot is the timing of the labour process, sweeping the Little Tramp out of the control of his own actions and desires. The customer, dancing, is the machine providing the rhythmic and dehumanising process that prevents the Little Tramp, again, from carrying out his task, as it does on the assembly line.

This metaphor of the clock is reflected and refracted in many ways in this scene. The dance floor is a reflection of the cogs and wheels of the factory machine that ‘eats’ Charlie. Dancers (filmed from above) are round hats and heads; tables are round; the tray which circles above the round heads of the dancers is round; as is even the wine bottle and water flask; the lights are white globes and the wagon wheel decorates the bandstand. Dancers circle in a mechanised version of the gamin’s spontaneous carousel dance in the street. All of the above ‘cogs and wheels’ revolve within and around each other. Dancers stop, start and speed up to music just as the machine did when controlled by the pulling of switches and levers. Feeders (diners) are fodder for the controlling mechanism of music and dancers; which, like the factory machine, feeds Charlie through its cogs without purpose and prevents him arriving at his

destination. When Charlie does eventually get through the crowd, the diner is then fed by a robotic Charlie who, like the feeding machine earlier in the factory sequence, mis-feeds him, also making a big mess.

Language and authority

The Tramp is so flustered by the telling off he receives from the Maitre de about the late duck, he mistakenly enters the ‘Out’ door from the kitchen instead of the ‘In’ door. His confusion results in chaos backstage as he disrupts the flow of work which very much depends, as does the factory-line, on everyone understanding the signs and reading them the same way. The Tramp, of course, cannot or will not read the signage in the workplace in the way that is intended. He is an anarchic and mischievous figure, standing outside the conventions of normalising discourse. This inability (or refusal?) to read the signs of written language is particularly significant in *Modern Times*.

Chaplin distrusted disembodied language. Disembodied talking is used in the movie only as an instrument of authority. In the earlier parts of the movie, voice is only heard over the radio, through the articulations of the boss to “Speed up!” the rate of production on the factory floor, and on the gramophone as the ‘mechanical salesman’. Writing is also disembodied language and is similarly distrusted. This can be seen in the latter part of the movie when the warrant for the gamin’s arrest is laboriously filled in on screen by the truant officers who are sent to capture the gamin and eventually undermine the Tramp’s and gamin’s victorious reception and happiness at the Red Moon Café. Writing is also featured when the gamin writes out the words to the song the Tramp is to sing in his debut as the singing waiter on his cuff. This writing of words – scripting – of his performance¹¹ is referred to here as another controlling gesture – even though it is by the one he loves. Woman and machine here are again combined and are emasculating. That the words are flung away in his dramatic introductory flourishes to the song he is about to sing and therefore leaving him ‘wordless’, is a crucial moment in both the life of Charlie Chaplin as the Little Tramp. And also in our interpretation of what he has to say about the service worker. This is because at this point he must become totally authentic. What he says must

spring out of himself, and not the institutional environment in which he is set. Not the music hall. Not the requirements of his work, or even for his love. Not even for the requirements of the film industry (because to live at this point the Little Tramp must speak). What he gives us is a pure and authentic moment. What he speaks is sublime nonsense in a “beautifully doomed last move” (Stewart, 1976). This moment is really the point of this paper, and so we move now to discuss this moment, because to appreciate it we need to reflect back on Chaplin’s source of comedy and his art – his pain. His self-immolation in nonsense requires the unpacking of Chaplin’s comedic method.

Comedy: the sense of nonsense

Why focus on the nonsense song? Isn’t there a fundamental paradox in trying to understand the source of pleasure when that pleasure appears to arise from the very disruption of sense? Well, one thing we learn from examining any artistic practice - and comedy is an art - is that our pleasure grows with the refinement of our perceptions. The nonsense song seems spontaneous and playful. Art at its best always seems spontaneous in origin, but it is always deliberate in perpetration. “Play is a socio-psychological state or posture of instinctive life. It is not something that we do, but something that we are while we do it” (Eastman, 1936, p. 16).

The Nonsense song is a moment, as we have said, of pure authenticity. At this particular moment Charlie Chaplin is everything he is, including the Little Tramp. The song is pure vaudeville physical comedy, and although he makes a noise, the noise is not really the point. Vaudeville and bawdy humour – where Chaplin originated and learnt his craft in England – is celebrated in this song, and Chaplin’s point is that he doesn’t need to speak to be funny.

The song is about the relationship between an older, rich and portly gentleman and a young shapely woman – essentially a fortune-seeker. Chaplin is thus gently making fun of his own public persona as a lover of very young women, and also his financial and emotional defeat by many of them¹². Basically then, he is poking fun at his own pleasure urge and his inability to control it, except through his craft, which he does

masterfully in this scene. The Nonsense song is sung with seductive and teasing, yet under-stated, bawdiness. He mimes with his hands, his body and his facial expressions the developing relationship between the gentleman and the young woman. He becomes a woman at one point in the dance simply by altering the movement of his feet as he walks away from the audience, causing his body to suddenly look like a woman's wide-hipped seductive sway which is accentuated by a coy look back over her shoulder at the audience. He then mimes the pulling down of the blind on the couple's nocturnal activities.

As well as pointing out the ways that Chaplin portrays himself in this song, there is also a point that needs to be made about language and his reluctance to let the Little Tramp use it. Purdie has commented that "producing language always involves unwelcome effort ... Language production really is a kind of 'work', an effortful production" (Purdie, 1993, p. 109). Chaplin seems to instinctively realise this, as he so explicitly refers to the scripting of his words (as the gamin writes them on his cuff), and then their deliberate (by accident) discarding on the dance floor, leaving him speechless yet again. And so, Chaplin is able to produce, apparently without any effort, the nonsense song. Nonsense is intrinsically pleasurable because we escape the work of language's production. As Purdie has commented "It is 'fun' for adults as well as children to babble meaningless syllables, and it is of course 'funny', often hysterically so, when we mark the radical transgression involved in this false linguistic production" (ibid).

It seems pertinent at this point in this essay to raise the question, 'What makes something funny?' "Comedy is making terrible faces playfully" according to Eastman (1936). Immanuel Kant defined the cause of laughter as "The sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" – or in other words, *as reaching after something and finding it is not there*" (cited in Eastman, 1936, p. 9). Chaplin himself largely agrees with Eastman on humour¹³ (that its two fundamental requirements are playfulness and difficulty), although he argues more precisely that:

... through humour we see in what seems rational, the irrational; in what seems important, the unimportant. It also heightens our sense of survival and preserves our sanity. Because of humour we are less overwhelmed by the

vicissitudes of life. It activates our sense of proportion and reveals to us that in an over-statement of serious lurks the absurd. (Chaplin, 1964, p. 227)

Humour, like postmodernity, has a function to overturn master narratives. In short, “postmodernity is a matter of avoiding getting narrated” (Olson, 2001). Humour is always an escape of sorts - from the logic which builds expectation of familiar outcomes. Humour sometimes sparks a furious response because it collapses assumed conceptual foundations. Modernity, coherence and the rational world of systems (political, economic and social) are solemn and self-important. Power takes itself very seriously indeed and expects obeisance and even cringe. Postmodernity is called into being when irreverence creates chaos – chaos theory of material world is reflected in the perversity of a constructed world.

Nonsense frees us from the restraint of reason (Monro, 1951). Nonsense is absurd. It is logically incongruous. Nonsense does not merely twist a pattern into a slightly different pattern – and give the shock of surprise that seems to be regarded as essential to all humour – but breaks the pattern all together. It is the appeal of fantasy and of novelty and oddity which raises the feeling tone of the observer to joyous excitement. In such a mood the unthinkable can be said, and the undoable done. For Chaplin humour both “protects and structures the individual psyche in the face of the pain of the human condition” (Girgus, 1996, p. 3). *Modern Times* was an artistically mature film and a ‘double-edged’ comedy that acknowledges “the destructive power of the very forces it promises to contain” (Kuriyama, 1992).

Reflexive Reading

The experience of watching this movie many times has been to feel like reaching out across time and falling in love with your own son. Is Chaplin dead? It hardly feels so when one watches a re-mastered DVD. The picture quality, despite being black and white, is clear and sharp, and looks fresh. The sound is crisp. We are seduced, because we have become fans. But have we retained our critical distance?

Looking at the comedy and the commentary on industrialisation, and writing about it, has really felt like a process of discovery. We are stunned anew at Chaplin’s prescience and his gift. Is there anything more to say about service work than what he

said in 1936? Is not the central problem with service work still the conscription of play and pleasure into the processes of industrialisation? Have we, as ‘fans’ of the movie, had our own critical faculties curtailed? How does one critique one’s own pleasure?

As we watch and listen to the nonsense song, it seems like a pretty good answer to life’s conundrum. We also feel like imploding sometimes at life’s paradoxes. But the Nonsense song will always sing of more than we have managed to say in our critical reading. It asks if authenticity is ever really possible, and perhaps even suggests that it is glib to blame system-imposed roles for squashing us into the uncomfortable mores and manners that this film mocks. Chaplin after-all is truly himself and utterly vulnerable – naked in front of an audience – when dressed up as a clown. If truth-telling is only possible when cloaked in the fantasies of theatre; if nonsensical words are meaningful; and if the masked face of the clown ‘speaks’ to our deepest emotions, then writing about all of this is just one more round of the game that critics play. It is our turn to ride on the carousel that swings critical writing out beyond all that is meaningful. It seems that pricking each-others pomposity about claims to truth might be all there is left for us to do.

Or maybe the answer is really in the last scene to the movie when Chaplin walks off hand in hand with Goddard, both determined to make the most of their lot (as unemployed vagrants). Maybe Chaplin is quite right. As critical individuals we are caught in our pleasure-seeking natures. We work – even slave – caught up in our techno-lusts. Machines do give pleasure. Of course Chaplin knew this – his whole career and success was built on technology. As we walk forward into the future, our love of machines is a true companion. Technology is what makes us human. Technology is a generous gift to others. Chaplin always said that he had nothing against technology – just the purposes that machines can be turned to that dehumanise. Our love of machines and the way we use them is our future as we walk with Goddard and Chaplin - virtually, because they are both now dead - into the sunset and the looming foothills just outside California.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our critical and reflexive reading of *Modern Times* has reinforced for us the importance of understanding comedy and humour as a critical distancing method in studying management and its practices. That which is odd creates a sense of difference and humour challenges solemnity by ‘teaching irreverence’. As long as solemnity and its adjunct, respect, are in charge we cannot question. Critical awareness develops when enabled by distancing techniques but some of these are remote intellectual exercises which are difficult to excite others (and even ourselves) to engage with. An audience is more easily persuaded by emotional (v. rational) capture, and film/comedy can do this. The rhetorical power of *Modern Times* lies in the Little Tramp’s charm – we identify with his vulnerability, childlike spontaneity and seeming (but always failed) attempts to ‘fit in’. Captured, we are then drawn into a nonsensical world (the one the Little Tramp inhabits) which actually makes more sense than the meta-narratives we are used to. The tramp’s personality is the persuader: and in the symbolism of the intentionally chaotic constructed scenes we discover the message. We allow ourselves to be seduced by what is on the screen, but if we study the art – the symbolism and the skill of how that is brought through a narrative to what we see – then we can be both seduced and enlightened.

When we watch *Modern Times* we watch a very serious comedy about the psychic and physical pain wrought by industrialization. To accentuate this most obvious message of the film, Chaplin’s greatest symbol – the innocent, child-like, charming but fundamentally anarchic Little Tramp, beloved by millions – is to be ground through and destroyed by the processes of technological industrialization. His response is to use this source of pain to expel out into the world a profoundly inspired commentary on the human condition through the gibberish of the Nonsense song. At the same time he has given us a commentary on service work which highlights its central dilemmas, which remain as relevant today as when he ‘discussed’ them on screen for the enjoyment of his 1936 audience.

That the Nonsense song occurs at its end, in a service work setting, is pertinent. The Nonsense song occurs in front of an audience, in a restaurant, and illustrates a

transformative and purely authentic moment for the Little Tramp/Charlie Chaplin. The Little Tramp becomes something he has never been before – a sound-making service worker. Transformation of the embodied self is at the heart of service¹⁴ – whether it is through moving from being hungry, to not being hungry, or from being a silent screen star to a talking one. The service worker is a transformative agent for the process of industrialization. The audience of customers (and ourselves as the film’s viewers and producers of meaning) is transformed, from demanding, complaining, and controlling, to entertained, enriched and happy. Charlie has transformed us all into a playful mood and so the unpleasant can be said and made comic – the Little Tramp is to die. The Little Tramp is not a talking icon and he cannot survive in the age of the talkies. Chaplin knew this (Chaplin, 1964). This is the Little Tramp’s swan song, his little death on screen.

The Little Tramp is a man-child. His comic invention sprang from the unusual way his clown invention faced the world. Whether the Little Tramp was battling a bully, or spreading butter sadly on his pancakes, his silent clown, like all clowns, wove a tragic/comic spell. In the nonsense song the Little Tramp, the entertainer, was revealed. But as he finally became who he really was – as he finally found his place in the world and danced and broke into a gay, charming song – he gave us his last real moment as the Little Tramp (McCaffrey, 1971a).

Is it possible to have a gentle and loving suicide? For Charlie’s self-immolation on the public stage is surely this - softly mocking Chaplin himself (his public persona as a lover of very young women) and his audience, showcasing his power as a physical comedian and his ambivalence about the power of disembodied language. This final swan-song is both understated and poignant, and yet the nonsense song is an incandescent and translucent moment. It is the moment just before death, when the soul of the Little Tramp flies out with his words, leaving the world a few grams lighter. The Little Tramp, when shadows of him appear in later movies, is just that - shadows of before-brilliance. As Chaplin did throughout his film career, his pain was worked out for the audience, for our enjoyment, as self-sacrificial comedy, and so was the Little Tramp’s death in the Red Moon Café.

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Notes

¹ “It may interest you to know that in an experimental study made at Vassar College, an appreciation of ‘nonsense jokes’ was found to increase with an increase of mental ability as represented chiefly by academic standing” (Eastman, 1936, p. 284). Max Eastman was a close friend of Chaplin’s (Chaplin, 1964).

² For examples, see some of the essays in McCaffrey (McCaffrey, 1971b).

³ According to Tyler, woman and machine were the same for Chaplin (Tyler, 1985).

⁴ The issue of authenticity continues to be debated in the critical service management literature (Sturdy, 1998; Sturdy, Grugulis, & Willmott, 2001).

⁵ This issue is discussed in detail in Keat et al. (Keat, Whiteley, & Abercrombie, 1994).

⁶ The lyrics of the songs of the Singing Waiters clearly make this connection to slavery. What is more, they explicitly refer to music’s role in the ‘slave’ status of the singing waiters themselves (and Charlie’s upcoming debut as a singing waiter himself). One line in the second song, a mournful cotton-picking dirge mentions “You can hear the darkies singing”.

⁷ Chaplin was quite explicit in his autobiographical writings about his obsession with food, stemming from the deprivations of his childhood. His mother had a mental illness and was institutionalised. He and his brother were removed from her care and put in a workhouse at a very young age as his mother was unable to feed and care for the two boys (Attenborough, 1992).

⁸ Certainly the two main readings of *Modern Times* use Freud and Marx (Tyler, 1985). Girgus argues, in a fairly vitriolic article about Chaplin and *Modern Times*, that these entrances and exits to the machine can be read as having sexual connotations (Girgus, 1996). He argues, drawing largely on Marcuse and Freudian notions of sexuality, that these intrusions represent sexual aggressiveness and also symbolize the collapse of love and tenderness in personal and human relations. “The machinery dramatizes the turning of sex and eros into inner death” (p. 11). Girgus, like Marcuse, equates pleasure with sex here arguing “In a repressive order, which enforces the equation between normal, socially useful, and good, the manifestations of pleasure for its own sake ...” (Marcuse, cited in Girgus, p. 11). But, the central tenderness between the Little Tramp and the gamin provides a counter-point against a simple reading of the advent of this machinery and sexual aggressiveness with the collapse of love and tenderness. Also, the hybridities and prosthetic associations between the human and machine can also be read as extensions of human consciousness, rather than intrusions, infractions and disruptions of them (Scarry, 1985).

⁹ The gamin taunts the authorities by eating a banana early in the movie, and no-one slips on the banana skin, which is an inverse of the usual expected role of the banana in slapstick. The extreme close up of the gamin’s face as she teasingly eats the banana while flaunting authority’s inability to capture her flagrantly illustrates two key themes in Chaplin’s comedy – sexual bawdiness, and anti-authoritarianism.

¹⁰ The Department store as a retail form evolved to sell the mass produced products of the factory. The Little Tramp’s employment opportunity there as a security person is a comment on the location of the service agent as a proprietor and protector of the goods of the carnival of consumption enabled by the factory – and it pleases. Once again, it is the food that is the key issue for Chaplin and the crucial scene where the tension between the Department store and access to the resources it enables. Chaplin’s Little Tramp gate-keeps the Department store, but cannot help but feel sympathy for the starving and unemployed burglars, who he knows, and gets drunk with. From what we know of Chaplin’s thinking in putting this scene together (Brownlow & Gill, 1989), he initially had the burglars robbing the store, but wanting to keep the sympathy of the audience, he deleted this scene. Chaplin’s process of film-making was more alike to the processes of writing and editing than modern film-making where scripts and sets tend to be well constructed and thought-through before filming begins. Chaplin would have a gag concept, usually involving a set, and then would experiment and evolve the concept while filming until he was happy with it. Hundreds of takes would often be required to get the few seconds he wanted. Unfortunately almost all out-takes of his movies were destroyed – this was common practice in the early days of film-making (Brownlow & Gill, 1989).

¹¹ The scripting of language in service work – the requirement to say certain things such as “Have a nice day!”, or “Would you like fries with that?” has been discussed in the critical literature. The requirement to speak only certain words in a certain way is common in service work, and has been compared to having similar effects on workers as has the production-line in factories (Cameron, 2000; Leidner, 1993; Sturdy et al., 2001).

¹² His wives and lovers were almost always under 20, and usually much younger. Paulette Goddard was old by his standards, being over 20 when he met her. His divorces and alimony payments were legendary. Goddard was apparently the only one who did not take him to the cleaners when they broke up (Attenborough, 1992; Chaplin, 1964).

¹³ Eastman argues, based on a study of laughing infants, that humour is “the enlargement of the attitude for punishment when in the mood for play” (p. 29). A sense of humour is not present in an infant – what must be present is that one must feel playful, and the relationship with the provider of the amusement is crucial. Infants laugh eighteen times more when it is their mothers tickling them as when it is a stranger. The other thing that must be present is something unpleasant – such as something snatched away at the last moment. It is the mood for play that turns the unpleasant from a dissatisfaction to a satisfaction.

¹⁴ For example DeMouthoux gives a discussion of the role of the transformation experience in the ‘art firm’ (DeMouthoux, 2004). Management texts also discuss how to create a transformation experience in the customer (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2004).

Comedy, pain and nonsense at the Red Moon Cafe: The Little Tramp's death by service work in Modern Times

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