Chaplin’s use of sound in *Modern Times*
Charlie Chaplin’s 1936 film *Modern Times* was, after *City Lights* (1931), the second film he made after the advent of sound in the cinema. This discussion of it will look at the various ways in which Chaplin uses sound whilst retaining certain aspects of the silent cinema, which made him so famous. In doing so we may begin to see how his employment of sound could be seen as somewhat pragmatic, turning the new possibilities to his advantage without allowing them to compromise his basic methodology. In particular, attention will be paid to the role of music in the film and to the use of sound effects and the functions that they perform. The absence, in *Modern Times* of conventional dialogue will also be considered, as will the self-reflexive way in which Chaplin obliquely comments upon the *talkies* without actually saying a word in the film himself. Throughout, this discussion will attempt to demonstrate how Chaplin adapted his filmmaking to the requirements of the sound era by examining the problems which sound posed to stars of the silent screen and how he sought to overcome them.

Before focussing upon *Modern Times*, it is, first of all, worth placing it in context, within both Chaplin’s own career and the *modern times* in which it was made. Crucially, it was the work of, as the critic Andrew Sarris notes, “the most famous man in the world,”¹ Chaplin, the great silent star, in the sound era. Furthermore, it features Chaplin’s Tramp character (otherwise known simply as Charlie), who as Sarris puts it was “the most endearing and most enduring myth ever propagated by the motion picture medium,”² and, as Chaplin’s biographer and critic David Robinson asserts “the one universal symbol created by the cinema in its first half-century.”³ As we can easily see therefore, in 1936 a new Chaplin film was, to put it rather colloquially, a big deal, especially as five years had elapsed since the last one. However, by the time of *Modern Times’* release, nearly a full decade had elapsed since the first sound film. Moreover, it had also been eleven years since Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* (1925), the director’s last film of the silent era and, in the opinion of Sarris, “his highest plateau of public acceptance.”⁴ In each of these regards, *Modern Times* represents a crucial and very interesting stage of Chaplin’s career. Furthermore, as it combines elements

² p.204, Sarris
³ p.120, David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art,* Collins, London, 1985
⁴ p.207, Sarris
of the cinema’s silent era with a partial adoption of sound it offers a rather unique filmic experience. Indeed, as a late, but significant juncture in Hollywood’s adoption of sound, it stands as an intriguing stage in the evolution of the cinema.

The sound era, of course, began in 1927 with the release of the *Warner Brothers* picture *The Jazz Singer*. From that moment onwards, sound films came, very quickly, to assert themselves over their silent predecessors. As such, it was a time of tremendous change in Hollywood which, as the critic Doug Tomlinson notes “uncritically turned its mode of production… to the spoken word and the theatrical trappings [of the sound film].” In this regard, Scott Eyman’s *The Speed of Sound* usefully elucidates that “by April 1929… outright silents accounted for a mere 4 percent of pictures in release.” In fact, the same writer does not unreasonably claim that “Sound changed everything.” Perhaps, it should, therefore, not come as much of a surprise to learn that the apparently all-conquering *talkies* attracted both voices of dissent and, as Siegfried Kracauer puts it, in his essay on *Dialogue and Sound*, “Early Misgivings.”

The filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, for example, argued that, after 1927, some of his contemporaries had gone “speech mad,” and that they operated under the “absurd assumption that in order to make a sound film it is only necessary to photograph a play.” Certainly, there was much resistance to the transition to sound, particularly as it had so swiftly altered the landscape of filmmaking. One very notable opponent to the *talkies* was none other than Charles Chaplin himself, the ‘most famous man in the world,’ who had left such an indelible mark on the silent era.

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5 Whilst *The Jazz Singer* was not actually the first sound film, or even the first ‘talkie,’ it was, as the critic Anthony Slide notes, in his account of the film, “important because it was the first film with sound to catch the imagination of an audience.” (p.485, Anthony Slide, “The Jazz Singer” in 'International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers – 1: Films (Third Edition),’ (edited by Nicolet V. Elert and Aruna Vasuderan), St. James Press, Detroit, 1997, pp.484-486)
8 p.20, Eyman
10 p.128, Sergie Eisenstein, cited by Kracauer
According to another of his biographers, Julian Smith, Chaplin, the phenomenally successful silent star, had a “fabled resistance to sound.”\textsuperscript{11} Undoubtedly, he must have wondered whether or not his film craft could survive as fundamental a transition as the one into the sound era. In his own words, prior to the release of \textit{Modern Times}, he “realized [he] could never achieve the excellence of [his] silent pictures [making sound films].”\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, Chaplin, as with the other stars of silent comedy, like Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, was faced with a very particular challenge after 1927 as before then his work, as Eyman relates, “demanded a virtuosic level of physical comedy… its primary tools [being] movement and rhythm.”\textsuperscript{13} With the advent of sound, “The primarily visual was supplanted by the primarily verbal.”\textsuperscript{14} A filmgoer in 1936 therefore, might well have asked ‘can Chaplin’s type of comedy survive, or will it have to seriously change?’ By then, Keaton and Lloyd had already long since started speaking (with diminished returns) and the likes of Groucho Marx in, for example, \textit{Duck Soup} (1933), had very effectively embraced the possibilities of comic dialogue. Elsewhere, “the incredibly expressive pantomime of Chaplin [had] give[n] way to the racy cross-talk of Ben Hecht and his confreres.”\textsuperscript{15} Simply put, sound would have presented Chaplin with a problem.

One further problem that would have faced all silent stars was the possibility of their voices not recording well. Indeed, performers with ‘weak’ voices would have been at a great disadvantage. As Michel Chion, the prominent writer on film sound, explains, in his book \textit{Audio-Vision}, “phonogeny” was a prized commodity: “the rather mysterious propensity of certain voices to sound good when recorded and played over loudspeakers.”\textsuperscript{16} Even though Chaplin does not use his voice in \textit{Modern Times} (other than to sing at the end), it is generally agreed that he was ‘phonogenic.’ According to Robinson, for instance, he “had a pleasant voice that recorded well,”\textsuperscript{17} whilst as Smith notes, in concurrence, he was “A clever mimic.”\textsuperscript{18} Why then, we might well ask, did he wait until 1940, in his \textit{The Great Dictator}, before talking aloud in a film for the first time? The answer seems to lie, as Chaplin himself has stated, in his reluctance to

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\item\textsuperscript{11} p.87, Julian Smith, ‘\textit{Chaplin},’ Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1984
\item\textsuperscript{12} p.97, Charles Chaplin, cited by Smith
\item\textsuperscript{13} p.326, Eyman
\item\textsuperscript{14} p.20, Eyman
\item\textsuperscript{15} p.20, Eyman
\item\textsuperscript{16} p.101, Michel Chion, ‘\textit{Audio-Vision},’ Columbia University Press, 1994
\item\textsuperscript{17} p.466, Robinson
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give voice to his famous Tramp character, who makes his final appearance in Modern Times: “To talk he would have to step off his pedestal, the pedestal of the silent film; the first word he ever uttered would transform him into another person.”

So it was, therefore, that the Tramp never uttered a single word of dialogue in the whole of his illustrious career.

In spite of Chaplin’s objection to dialogue in the 1930s, however, Modern Times is, abundantly, not a silent picture. First of all, it has an almost continuous musical score that not only performs a variety of functions, but is also the product of meticulous and careful attention. As David Robinson explains, “Chaplin work[ed] with [David] Raksin [co-arranger] on the transcription of his composition night after night, until long after midnight, and did not even spare him at the weekends.” Indeed by Raksin’s own account, he and Chaplin “spent hours, days, months in [a] projection room running scenes and bits of action over and over…shaping the music.” Already, therefore, we may discern at least one regard in which Chaplin was prepared to utilise the possibilities of sound. However, as silent films were meant to be played in theatres to an orchestral accompaniment, it could certainly be argued that this particular use of sound did not in any way compromise his silent film craft. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that Chaplin took full advantage of the chance to personally oversee the orchestration of Modern Times and that, in doing so, he benefited from having greater control over it. Furthermore, any account of the use of sound in the film would be grossly incomplete were it to overlook the ways in which music is employed within it.

Perhaps the most obvious way music functions in the film is to underpin its pace and rhythm. In this respect, where the visuals lead, the music follows. Frequently, for example, its tempo increases when what we see moves at a faster speed. Similarly, several times in the film, when the action stops, the music does as well, before it resumes again and continues to trace the ebb and flow of the visuals. A good illustration of this relationship between what we see on the screen and the music we hear can be found early on in Modern Times, during a sequence in which Charlie

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18 p.88, Smith
19 p.209, Chaplin, cited by Sarris
20 p.97, Chaplin, cited by Smith
21 p.472, Robinson
22 p.471, Robinson
works as a bolt-tightener in a factory. Standing over a conveyor belt, the Tramp continuously tightens bolts that pass before him, which, in turn, get hammered down by two co-workers further along. As we watch all three men engaged in their work, a reoccurring percussive sound on the musical score is employed to underline the fast pace at which they have to operate, and to emphasise the repetitive nature of their occupation. When, though, a lever is shown being cranked back to stop the machine, the music follows suit and comes to a brief halt before resuming again in a different vein. Much later, towards the end of *Modern Times*, the music works in much the same way during a sequence in which Charlie is shown in a new occupation, as a waiter. In it, Charlie attempts to carry (above his head) a tray of food across a packed dance floor, but the throng of dancers, to the sound of frenetic fast-paced music, get in his way. In this sequence, the music’s rhythm foils the unlucky Tramp: the energetic trumpets, fast strings and dancer-friendly baseline perfectly suit the revellers but are no good for him whilst he’s caught amongst them. Significantly though, we can see here how Chaplin has the music serve the film’s comedic elements, as it does throughout: the music is paced in such a way as to showcase Chaplin’s skills as a pantomimist, capturing what Eyman calls ‘the primary tools of his comedy, movement and rhythm.’

The musical score is also extensively employed to establish various moods. Consequently, it is fundamental to our appreciation of the narrative, and our emotional engagement with the characters within it. When, for example, the Gamin (the Tramp’s love interest in the film, played by Paulette Goddard) comes across the dead body of her father (after he is shot), the use of mournful strings helps to evoke sympathy for the suddenly orphaned girl, who we do not yet know very much about. Later in the film, once Charlie has befriended the Gamin, the music similarly functions to convey the wistful quality of a fantasy he describes to her (of congenial domesticity), especially through the delicate sound of a harp. Elsewhere, the music is used to give us a fuller impression of the somewhat disorientating milieu in which the Tramp finds himself after he leaves a hospital, having been told to “take it easy and avoid excitement.” We watch Charlie descend the steps out of the hospital before

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23 Here, the music is diegetically sourced as being played by a band that we see at the far end of the dance floor. Nonetheless, this has no bearing upon how the music actually functions in the sequence.

24 P.326, Eyman
Chaplin cuts to a dizzying\textsuperscript{25} montage that depicts the world outside as a rather frightening place: busy, industrialised and fast-paced. Over these images, we hear a frantic burst of trumpets and the loud ringing sound of cymbals being forcibly hit and, as such, we are given a musical as well as visual evocation of the ‘modern times,’ which the Tramp has to inhabit.

At various other times in the film, Chaplin uses music to emphasise certain aspects of the visuals and to signpost changes in the narrative. At several points, for instance, we hear a short, sharp fanfare as the narrative shifts to a new location, or when new characters first enter a scene. This form of musical introduction is used the first time we are shown the factory floor where Charlie works, when salesmen enter the factory president’s office, and when these salesmen and the president themselves stride out on to the factory floor. Elsewhere, music is employed to punctuate moments and actions within the narrative in much the same way that an exclamation mark might follow a written description of them. One such incident occurs when the Tramp falls into a machine, down a chute at the end of a conveyor belt: here, a single crash of a cymbal sounds just as he disappears out of view. Similarly, towards the end of \textit{Modern Times}, Charlie the waiter falls headlong into a table to the accompaniment of a quick drum roll, as he and the table fall to the floor, and a final pronounced drum beat, as they reach it. At other times, the music is carefully synchronised to coincide with, and represent, certain of the character’s movements and expressions. When, for example, a policeman twice pushes the Tramp his movements are musically rendered by two sharp, high-pitched bursts of violins. Much the same effect is achieved when the Gamin first encounters her dead father: as she throws her arms back behind her head, a momentarily suspended assault of trumpets echoes her horrified surprise. Earlier in the film, musical emphasis is also given to Charlie’s delirious behaviour in the factory when he uses his bolt-tightener to ‘tighten’ anything in sight, including his co-workers’ noses and nipples. Each time he twists it around the object of his choice his movements are matched on the soundtrack by single pronounced notes.

\textsuperscript{25}The montage is ‘dizzying’ partly because of the music itself, but also as a result of how the images within it are framed: they run diagonally across the screen at an unusual angle. Furthermore, Chaplin uses dissolves to cut between the different shots that make up the montage, a technique that he does not use at any other point in the film.
Even though the musical score is the most ubiquitous type of sound in *Modern Times*, there are many other distinct, and often inventive, ways in which Chaplin uses sound to the film’s advantage. As well as imbuing the film with carefully constructed orchestration, therefore, the director also makes extensive use of sound effects. In both regards, a rather pragmatic Chaplin comes to light; he embraces the possibilities of sound, but only within his own particular parameters. In fact, as Smith demonstrates, even though Chaplin was an outspoken critic of the talkies, he actually went “about the business of making genuine sound films that tell us far more about the possibilities of film sound than most of the competition.” In examining this conjecture, this discussion must proceed to look beyond the music in *Modern Times* and turn its attention to Chaplin’s use of sound effects.

There are many instances in the film in which sound effects are used to strengthen visual gags. Of course, in this regard, it is certainly worth noting, as Smith indicates, that “most ‘silent’ films were meant to be accompanied by… sound effects” as and when they played in theatres. To a certain degree, therefore, by synchronising them himself in the making of *Modern Times*, Chaplin simply demonstrates how the film would ideally have sounded were it made in the silent era. However, the sound effects in *Modern Times* are surely more elaborate and varied than they could conceivably have been as replicated ‘live.’ Moreover, they are also exactly synchronised. This precise timing is subtly employed in one sequence in which the Tramp is grappled with by the inmate with whom he shares a prison cell. Their fight is interrupted by the sound of an off-screen bell that starts to ring just as the inmate shakes the Tramp’s head, making it seem as though the bell were between his ears. It is hard to imagine this kind of synchronicity being consistently achieved night after night in ‘silent’ theatres.

Elsewhere, there are numerous examples in the film of character’s banging their heads against different objects to the sound of varying percussive noises all of which are used for comic effect. We hear a dull thud, for example, when the Tramp accidentally drops a bunk bed down on to his cellmate’s head. Later, when Charlie foils an attempted jailbreak by smashing a metal door against the escapees’ heads we hear a

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26 p.88, Smith
27 p.87, Smith
more metallic, ringing sound. As neither of these sound effects is entirely realistic we are at liberty to laugh at the pain they herald; even though the door knocks two of the escapees out, it doesn’t sound as though the blows it caused were too painful. Towards the end of the film, more sound effects are used to emphasise the dilapidated state of a shack, which the Gamin welcomes Charlie into, and to lend comic legitimacy to her claim that “it’s no Buckingham Palace.” We hear another (lighter) percussive sound when a beam falls on to the Tramp’s head before he proceeds to nosily collapse a table merely by leaning on it. Moments later, when, after he removes a broom that is propping it up, the roof falls in slightly and we hear the realistic sound of decaying wood creaking. Such sound effects are used sparingly by Chaplin, but effectively serve to draw our attention - and shape our responses - to elements of the visuals.

At various other times in the film, the sound effects are even more integral to the comedy. It is, perhaps, during such moments that we can best appreciate how thoroughly Chaplin exploits the possibilities of sound. In two particular instances, the director plays upon the occasional difficulty we may have of associating sounds with their sources. First of all, in one sequence where Charlie sits with his cellmate in prison, an instrument used on the soundtrack gives the impression of the Tramp’s bones cracking as he shrugs his shoulders. Whilst this constitutes only a fleeting moment in Modern Times, it is a good example of how Chaplin raises a laugh by synchronising the visuals with apparently incongruous sounds. Later on in the film, a rather conspicuous cut similarly challenges how accurately we can attribute a noise to its cause. As Charlie relaxes in the single cell given to him as a reward for foiling the jailbreak, we hear what appears to be the off-screen sound of bird’s chirping. However, when Chaplin abruptly cuts away to a tight close up of a radio we realise that it could have been the sound of it being tuned that we heard.

A sequence that shortly follows, when the Tramp sits next to the minister’s wife, foregrounds the soundtrack to an even greater extent. In a medium shot of the wife, we watch as she takes a sip of coffee that results in an exaggerated ‘gargling’ noise. Next, after Charlie also has some coffee, we again hear the same prolonged noise. Here, instead of using sound to make the visuals more amusing, Chaplin does the opposite. Whilst the rumbling noises are in themselves comic (especially as they
linger), what is really funny is that both characters act as though oblivious to them. We watch as a socially respectable woman, a minister’s wife, tries to remain impassive in the face of the sound’s provocation, but actually shuffles uncomfortably in her seat. Likewise, Charlie continues to face forward, arches his eyebrows slightly and glances furtively from side to side. Chaplin completes the gag with the final unexpected, but this time realistic, sound of the wife spraying some water in a glass. Having kept his composure during the lingering gargles, it is, at last, this innocent sound that makes the Tramp jump.

Other realistic sounds are employed throughout Modern Times to either punctuate or lead the narrative. A number reoccur as auditory motifs: the sound of a police siren, gunshots, bells and hooters. Some of these help us to make sense of what we see, and so function in a straightforward fashion. When, near the end of the film, for example, with one of Charlie’s co-workers in the factory stuck between the giant cogs of a machine, a hooter sounds to signal the start of the lunch break. Hearing it, the Tramp leaves his colleague to get some food. Upon his return, he pulls a lever in an attempt to release the latter from the machine, yet nothing happens, it obviously having been switched off during the break. Moments later, another hooter sounds to bring lunch to a close and, when Charlie again pulls the lever the machine springs back into life. In this instance, the sounds we hear simply serve to clarify the advancing narrative. Similarly, the regimental movements of the Tramp and his fellow inmates in prison, during an earlier scene, only make sense in conjunction with the sounds of a jailer’s whistle. As the scene progresses, Charlie accidentally consumes some “nose powder,” which causes him to respond differently to the commands of the whistle. He comically rotates several times before walking, not into his cell, with the other prisoners, but into the yard, where the sound of a birdcall suddenly alerts him to the fact he’s in the wrong place. Here, we can see how sounds are exploited for their representative values. Just therefore, as the birdcall designates ‘outside,’ so too does the factory hooter represent the oppression of proletariats (en mass, the factory workers follow its commands), gunshots declare ‘danger,’ and the siren heralds the presence of the ‘law,’ or, more generally, the ‘authorities.’ On four separate occasions in Modern Times, for example, the Tramp is arrested and each time the sound of a wailing police, or ambulance, siren emphasises his continual (and unlucky) tendency to find himself on the wrong side of the law. Interestingly, the first time this happens,
the sound of a siren precedes the shot of an ambulance (to which it belongs) arriving, as good an indication as any that Chaplin was prepared to give primacy to the soundtrack.

Throughout *Modern Times*, Chaplin does not use sound excessively but succinctly. Indeed, the sound construction in the film (with the musical score excepted) essentially consists of one long aural sketch, in which Chaplin gives us the most important sound information without including superfluous detail. Importantly, this is not to suggest that he uses sound simply or unimaginatively; instead, the director does not allow it to intrude upon the simple forward thrust of the story, nor obscure his skills as a silent performer. Again, therefore, we may discern a pragmatic approach to sound in *Modern Times*. Take the sequence in which the police-van carrying Charlie and the Gamin crashes. Here, just before Chaplin cuts to a long shot of the van, he introduces on the soundtrack a quick burst of its siren and the noise of it briefly skidding before it crashes: a concise and unobtrusive aural treatment of the incident. Later in the film, when Charlie ingeniously leans against a door in the shack, the sounds we hear are similarly pertinent. Against the Tramp’s weight, the door collapses and he falls into a river the other side of it. Initially, in emphasis of the gag, we hear the consequent splash of water, yet with the soundtrack having served its purpose, we do not hear any noises caused by the Tramp’s struggle to get ashore. Equally, when he comically dives into a shallow pool moments later, we only hear a slightly feeble splash as he enters the water, but not the noises he makes once within it. Towards the end of *Modern Times*, Chaplin uses sound to convey a general background ambience in the café where the Tramp and the Gamin work. In this last instance, we intermittently hear what Chion calls “passive offscreen sound… sound[s] which create an atmosphere that envelope and stabilize the image, without in any way inspiring us to look elsewhere.”28 These sounds, of the café-goers alternately muttering, laughing, cheering and clapping, give us a more precise sense of the vibrant place in which the scene occurs without unnecessarily drawing our attention away from what we see.

28 p.85, Chion
One final way in which Chaplin uses sound effects in the film is as part of his critique of modern times. Certainly, the film as a whole does not present these times in a favourable light, depicting as it does mass unemployment, strikes, homelessness and poverty. Chaplin, however, reserves most of his scorn, albeit under the banner of comedy, for the factory, and most particularly, the machines that operate within them. It is partly through the use of sound effects that these machines are given life in *Modern Times*, yet instead of making the factory-worker’s jobs easier, they are made to seem antagonistic. Throughout, they produce a succession of strange, inhuman noises, which this discussion can only duplicate via approximate onomatopoeias: they hum and buzz, whirr, hiss and click. Moreover, several times, after a quick crank of a lever, they are made to operate so fast that the workers struggle to keep up, resulting in a still more intense and malevolent whirring sound. Elsewhere, the machines are portrayed as rather dangerous. On two separate occasions, for instance, two factory workers, Charlie first of all, get pulled into the interior mechanisms of these machines, along conveyor belts and between giant turning cogs. Before the second worker himself falls prey to the machine, his toolbox also gets sucked into it. After the worker pulls back a lever, it noisily lurches into action, hissing and grinding. Immediately, the toolbox is pulled into the machine, over a revolving cog, whereupon we hear a prolonged and exaggerated cacophony of its contents being smashed (we do, for example, hear the somewhat incongruous sound of breaking glass). The machine proceeds, quite literally, to attack Charlie and his co-worker, by throwing back out at them the detritus of the toolbox, which in turn loudly crashes against the metal surfaces all around. Again, the sound here is used succinctly, and, as it does not have to compete with too many other sounds, potently.

Perhaps the best sequence in *Modern Times* with which to illustrate Chaplin’s apparent distrust of machinery is the one that has the Tramp subjected to a ‘mechanical eating aid’. This sequence, which Sarris describes with something of a hyperbolic flourish, as “probably the funniest in the history of the cinema,”29 is also pertinent to this discussion for the way it employs sound effects. As such, it is worth examining in more detail here, especially as the machine is the most obviously antagonistic in the entire film. Before we see it being tested on the Tramp, we hear via

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29 p.210, Sarris
a ‘mechanical salesman’ (referred to again later) how it was designed to ‘increase productivity’ by reducing the time needed in a factory for lunch breaks and the amount of energy expended by the workers during them. However, Chaplin underlines the fallacy of such a device by having it seriously – and noisily - malfunction; we do not only see how bad a machine it is, but hear as well. A rather bemused Charlie is positioned in front of it, held into place by straps, and we watch – and listen – along with its inventor and the factory president, as it is tested on him. Initially, it works properly, but soon, however, its mechanisms start to go awry, as the sudden sound of faulty electronics first demonstrates. As the inventor frantically pulls levers in an attempt to correct the problem, the machine begins to threateningly fizz and crackle. A corn on the cob, held up against Charlie’s mouth rotates faster and faster to the sound of an increasingly intense and forceful whirring noise. Subsequently, the machine becomes even more aggressive, first pouring and then propelling soup into the Tramp’s face. Soon, we hear a plate smashed against the floor by it, and, as sparks begin to fly, the machine finally disintegrates in a noisy crescendo, with Charlie as its innocent victim. A mouth-wiper, in particular, makes a great deal of noise as it continually 'ticks' back and across Charlie’s face. Finally, his tormentor releases him and, at last, falls silent.

In spite of the myriad noises in Modern Times and its near continuous musical score, the film is, of course, conspicuous for its complete absence of conventional spoken dialogue. Indeed, as Tomlinson notes, in his account of Modern Times, it “extensively and specifically employ[s] silent film strategies.”30 In this regard, a comment Chaplin made in 1931, which accounts for his reluctance to entirely abandon his silent film craft, is particularly revealing:

For years I had specialized in one type of comedy – strictly pantomime. I have measured it, gauged it, studied. I have been able to establish exact principals to govern its reaction on audiences. It has a certain pace and tempo. Dialogue, to my way of thinking always slows action, because action must wait upon words.31

30 p.661, Tomlinson
31 p.465, Chaplin, cited by Robinson
There is much evidence in *Modern Times* to suggest that he still felt the same five years hence during its composition. First of all, Chaplin uses title-cards to advance the narrative. One, for instance, accounts for the Tramp’s accidental intake of cocaine (“nose-powder”), whilst another informs us that he had a “nervous breakdown” before leaving “hospital to start life anew.” At many other times in the film, Chaplin simply utilises gestures and expressions without there being any need for dialogue. Furthermore, a great many of the gags in *Modern Times* could easily have belonged to one of his earlier silent comedies. Indeed, Chaplin’s partial adoption of sound certainly enabled him to again showcase ‘his type of comedy: pantomime.’ His exaggerated and amusing movements after consuming the cocaine are a good case in point. Similarly, a delightful roller-skating sequence in an empty department store relies upon carefully choreographed movements. Blindfolded, Charlie continually skates right up to the edge of a big drop, but miraculously manages to stay just the right side of it. Here, as elsewhere in the film, Chaplin even turns an incomplete use of sound to his advantage. The absence of dialogue throughout the film renders the Gamin’s failure to shout and warn the Tramp of the danger easier to accept and less jarring. Equally, earlier in the film, Charlie being mistaken for (as Smith puts it) “a Communist agitator” is made more plausible by the absence of background noise in the sequence. We do not hear the “mob of demonstrators” that gather behind him and, as a consequence, Charlie’s obliviousness to their presence is made to seem less problematic.

Whilst Chaplin himself does not speak in *Modern Times*, the film does make fairly frequent use of human voices. Throughout it, however, (with the singing at the end excepted) we only hear them as what Chion refers to as “on-the-air” sound, “supposedly transmitted electronically.” As such, Chaplin employs the human voice as a satirical tool against the ‘modern times’ that he depicts; in the words of Tomlinson, “machines, not people are allowed voice.” In the opening scenes of the film, the first such voice we hear, as transmitted over unseen loudspeakers, belongs to the president of the factory where Charlie works. Seemingly omnipresent, this oppressive voice controls the productivity of the workers, giving them instructions

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32 p.101, Smith  
33 p.101, Smith  
34 p.76, Chion
and demanding “more speed.” It is both impersonal and demanding, as when, for instance, it says “Section 5: Speed her up, 4, 1” and later, “Section 5: give it the limit.” Even when the Tramp tries to have a cigarette break in a restroom, the president appears on a giant screen behind him, via some kind of audio-visual link up, and snaps, “hey quit stalling, get back to work!” In each regard, the voice is somewhat abstracted, electronically transferred from one place to another. Moreover, it does not constitute part of a conversation and nor could it: the president appears to be in sole command of the technology that allows him to communicate with the workers and it only works in one direction, as, indeed, oppression does.

Elsewhere in *Modern Times* there are further instances of the human voice being used in an abstract fashion. In fact, it is employed sparingly, but inventively and in such a way that recalls the section in Chion’s *Audio-Vision* entitled “Techniques of Relativizing Speech in the Sound Film.” Most obviously, *Modern Times* does “rar[ify] the presence of speech,” which in turn allows Chaplin to “conserve many visual values of the silent cinema.” There are, however, other ways in which Chaplin ‘relativises’ speech, other ways in which he explores the role of dialogue in film. Certainly, he does not employ speech unimaginatively or uncritically. The way a radio is used, for example, during one particular sequence, is reminiscent of the technique Chion refers to as “submerged speech,” and, at other times, a psuedo-“Multilingualism” is in evidence as well. In the case of the former, the radio we hear is ‘submerged’ in the sound mix, though not among other sounds (as in Chion’s account of the ‘technique’) but because it is first cut to and then switched on and off. The cut to the radio (referred to earlier) has Chaplin rather opportunistically advancing the narrative. An announcer immediately declares: “Broken news: A pardon was granted to the prisoner [Charlie] who so recently thwarted the attempted city jail break.” Moments later, after the Tramp and the minister’s wife exchange gargling noises, another snatch of speech on the radio is included for comic effect. Seeking a distraction from the embarrassing gargling sounds, the Tramp turns around to switch on the radio, which instead serves to emphasise them. “If you are suffering from gastritis…” a voice says before Charlie abruptly turns the radio off, now even

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35 p.661, Tomlinson
36 p.179, Chion
37 p.181, Chion
more embarrassed. Chaplin exploits ‘pseudo-multilingualism’ to relativise speech (in his case, singing) towards the end of *Modern Times* in the nonsensical lyrics to the song that he sings. These, however, will be discussed in more detail later on. Here though, it is finally worth turning our attention back to the beginning of the film and the sale’s pitch we hear spoken by a ‘mechanical salesman.’ As we are shown the various mechanisms of the feeding machine being advertised, this discourse is made to seem ridiculous. Indeed, many of the words used may as well be foreign as “aerodynamic streamlined body… electro-porous metal… automaton soup plate… [and] hydro-compressed sterilised mouth-wiper” all attest. Whilst *Modern Times* does use speech, therefore, we can see how Chaplin invites us to regard it suspiciously.

In a sense, Chaplin’s use of speech in *Modern Times* is symptomatic of his approach to sound as a whole. He explores its potential strengths whilst acknowledging its limitations, just as, overall, he partially adopts sound without completely abandoning silence. Once again, we can see how Chaplin is nothing if not pragmatic; as Smith demonstrates he “had it both ways, making a brilliant conversion to sound while claiming he intended to go on making silent pictures.” Indeed, at one point in *Modern Times*, the mechanical salesman asserts, very conspicuously, that “actions speak louder than words,” yet, overall the film itself only partially supports the claim. Of course, for Chaplin to employ words to undermine the potency of words is, in itself, problematic. More importantly though, *Modern Times* is a film that does use words effectively, albeit seemingly in emphasis of the maxim that ‘a little can go a long way.’ As has already been illustrated, the few words we do hear in the film successfully serve particular functions: they variously advance the narrative (the news bulletin on the radio), sharpen the critique of modern times (the factory president’s demands, the mechanical salesman’s hyperbolic nonsense), and raise a laugh (“If you are suffering from gastritis…”). As a consequence, *Modern Times* emerges as a distinctly self-reflective product, a film that plays sound against silence, challenging us to regard them both differently. Nowhere is this more evident than during the final sequence, set in a café, in which the Tramp is, at last, given voice, and sings.

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38 p.89, Smith
During this sequence, Chaplin’s use of sound is at its most playful. In particular, he exploits the Tramp’s international renown as a silent star and offers us the enticing possibility of hearing him for the first time. Aiming to join the Gamin as an employee in the café, Charlie is asked by the head-waiter, “Can you sing?” and it is with this question that Chaplin first arouses our expectations: are we about to hear the Tramp? However, Chaplin proceeds to employ a variety of delaying tactics so as to make the set-up more potent. Quite simply, but very effectively, he suspends our expectations before he finally resolves them. In doing so, Chaplin foregrounds the role of sound in the cinema to such an extent that we might, albeit tentatively, regard the sequence as post-modern, even though it greatly predates the popular usage of the term. Certainly, much of its strength depends upon our understanding of the Tramp as a silent character: surely we are not about to hear the Tramp? In response to the headwaiter’s question, the Tramp opens his mouth in wide-eyed disbelief, as though the prospect of singing fills him with dread. Nonetheless, he follows the Gamin’s lead and nods his head reluctantly but affirmatively. Moments later, when his new boss departs, Charlie demonstrates to the Gamin his trepidation. Now, he shakes his head, whilst holding his fingers against his larynx, seemingly unsure of its capabilities. As the sequence progresses, Charlie goes about the business of waiting upon tables and Chaplin allows us the time to abandon any hope of hearing him. However, after proving to be an especially poor waiter, the Tramp is called into a staff room by his boss who effectively rekindles our expectations by declaring, ‘I hope you can sing.’ Next, and just for a very fleeting moment, Charlie/Chaplin mischievously looks straight into the camera as if to say, ‘wouldn’t you like to know?’ He proceeds to rehearse a song, but, crucially, we still do not hear him; instead, Chaplin allows us to hear what the café-goers do outside (a musical act performed by ‘singing waiters’). Suddenly, after having the Gamin write down lyrics on his cuff, as an aid to memory, Charlie is called out to perform, and at last it seems as though the Tramp will break his long-standing silence.

39 If it seems somewhat fanciful to regard Modern Times as post-modern, even if only for one particular sequence, a comparison to the distinctly post-modern Pulp Fiction (1994) may lend some credence to the claim. In the later film, Tarantino (its director) exploits film history, just as Chaplin does in Modern Times, by having John Travolta, of Grease fame, dance, many years after the cinema at large dispensed with his skills as a dancer. In much the same way, Chaplin draws upon his Tramp’s long history of silence to render the prospect of hearing him so enticing. Before he finally does allow us to hear the
As the band begins to play, Charlie strides confidently out into the empty dance floor. For all intents and purposes, the stage is set for him to sing. Indeed, the lyrics on his cuff take the place of a dialogue script, and, with the camera positioned directly in front of him it seems inevitable that the Tramp will sing, but at the same time, *surely not!* He continues to dance confidently and expressively, keeping time with the music. However, events take an unexpected turn when, as a consequence of his exuberant arm movements, his all-important cuff flies off into the audience - *will the Tramp avoid singing after all?* Finally, he readies himself to sing and looks down at his sleeve. Realising that the cuff is not where he intended it to be, Charlie appears for the first time to be ill at ease. In an attempt to regain his composure, and hoping to find the missing lyrics, he plays for time, percussively brushing his shoes against the dance floor whilst looking all around him. Without locating the cuff, he looks anxiously over at the Gamin who emphatically advises him to “Sing!! Never mind the words.” The audience in the café starts to get restless and they assume far more prominence on the film’s soundtrack, talking rather loudly. By now, with Chaplin having used so many delaying tactics, we may be inclined to share their reaction. However, Charlie checks himself and hushes the audience with his hands before, at last, we really do hear the Tramp sing.

The song that Charlie sings, however, does not include any real words, and instead, as Robinson notes, is “in a language of his own invention.”\(^\text{40}\) Nonetheless, these nonsensical lyrics, and the performance in itself, speak volumes about Chaplin’s use of sound in *Modern Times* as a whole. To begin with, the sequence perfectly showcases Chaplin’s skills a silent performer, and what Tomlinson calls “the brilliance of his pantomime.”\(^\text{41}\) Equally though, it turns sound to its advantage. The lyrics, which Smith usefully describes as constituting “a lush blend of fake romantic language,”\(^\text{42}\) work in harmony with the visuals. Freed from questions of meaning, these lyrics are utilised instead for their expressive qualities. In fact, the ‘pseudo-multilingual’ words Charlie sings, and the way he sings them, are actually just as expressive as his rhythmical movements, gestures and facial mannerisms. When, for

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40 p.468, Robinson
41 p.661, Tomlinson
42 p.104, Smith
example, he sings “bushel” he pulls his hand down his chin as though stroking a beard. Similarly, the word “bello” has him trace the outline of a rotund imaginary belly in front of his own, and, as he mimes driving a car, the lyric “taxi-metre” again sounds uncannily appropriate. Throughout Charlie’s virtuoso performance he suggestively articulates certain syllables and, as such, utilises the sonic possibilities of different sounds. He also makes other sounds to further decorate his mime; he blows a kiss and, in a gesture of admonishment, slaps his wrist. These sounds do not distract attention away from the visuals but work in harmony with them, adding an extra dimension to his performance without obscuring it.

This last point seems a good place at which to draw this discussion to a close. Before doing so, however, some reiteration might be useful. First of all, Modern Times is, unequivocally, not a silent film. Nonetheless, its extensive use of sound does not detract from its many silent characteristics. Instead, we can see how Chaplin used sound pragmatically and inventively to bring a further dimension to his skills as a silent filmmaker, to strengthen his comedy and to sharpen his satire. At the same time, one of the ways Chaplin overcame the problems sound posed to silent film comics was to adopt it only partially; he did not simply furnish a silent film with dialogue, nor though, of course, did he just make another silent film. In fact, Modern Times plays with the possibilities of sound, exploring both its advantages and its limitations. Its soundtrack works both unobtrusively in harmony with Chaplin’s silent mimetics, and it is fore grounded in such a way that demands our attention. Equally, whilst speech does form a part of the film’s sound design, it is not, as with so many films, given dominion over it. In each instance, Modern Times can be regarded as a film that, albeit rather obliquely at times, comments upon its own use of sound. Certainly, Chaplin does not obscure his silent past, nor does he allow us to forget that we are watching a sound film. Instead, there is a tension between sound and silence that runs throughout the film, with both extremes battling for supremacy over the other. In the end, Modern Times effectively hybridises the two extremes, revealing, in the process a great deal about the directions in which sound might be pushed, and the extent to which it need not bring about the death of silence. As such, Modern Times deserves to be regarded not only as an interesting stage in Hollywood’s adoption of sound, but as a highly innovative sound film in its own right.
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