



*Abstract:* This article considers Charlie Chaplin's 1936 feature *Modern Times* as highly influenced by the sound transition. Even though the film appeared when film sound had undergone narrative integration and synchronized sound had ceased to attract the spectator's attention in its own right, *Modern Times* frames cinematic sound as unnatural. Thereby it employs techniques and experiences from the sound transition and uses them for comic purposes. At the same time, the relations between the film's depiction of machines, its use of sound and music, and the flow of time is constantly under negotiation. What results is a pre-digital hum that is constituted by an impossibility of silence in film after the sound transition, an overall mechanical hiss of the cinematic apparatus that inscribes itself into the film, and the aestheticization of rhythm and noise in the modern era.

## **The Impossibility of Silence in Chaplin's *Modern Times***

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Film criticism has read Chaplin's 1936 comedy *Modern Times* either as an articulation of Chaplin's left-wing idealism in a time of crises, or as his last effort to produce a silent film in which the Tramp as silent film's most prominent character found his last appearance on screen (Maland 127-139; 157n). Chaplin as both actor and filmmaker has been characterized as a stoic whose financial independence enabled him to cling to the bygone relic of the silent feature (Sklar 120). The two features he made in the 1930s, *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936), met with reasonable success despite their status as silent films at a time when sound film already prevailed because of

Chaplin's status as one of America's most highly valued filmmakers. "Chaplin's refusal to make a dialogue film," Charles Maland writes, "nearly a decade after sound films were introduced, made *Modern Times* a stylistic anachronism" (157-58). From this, Maland concludes that "some movie viewers probably passed up *Modern Times* because it was a 'silent' film. By maintaining what seemed to be an old-fashioned style and simultaneously venturing into previously unfamiliar areas of social significance, Chaplin was risking his preeminence as a star in Hollywood and America" (157-58). Similarly, George Potter cites a London review that described the film as "ten years behind the time," and he claimed that the action proceeded slowly due to the use of silent film titles (78).

While I would agree with the possibility that *Modern Times* attracted a smaller audience than Chaplin's films usually did because it lacked a substantial amount of dialogue, I suggest that rather than reading the film as a late occurrence of silent era art, *Modern Times* should be considered as informed by the sound transition. The film critically reflects the technological obstacles of early sound technology and addresses them to both critical and comic ends. After all, *Modern Times* is essentially a sound film: not a film including dialogue, but a film with and about sound. In a recent publication, Lawrence Howe admitted that *Modern Times* "is a silent film only in the strictest sense; Chaplin adopted sound technology in a number of inventive ways" (50). These ways, according to Howe, offset the "capital class that controls the technology through which it articulates its demands,

and a laboring class silently subjected to capital" (50). Howe thus attributes the use of sound in *Modern Times* a political function. More subtly, Garrett Stewart referred to the film as a "self-conscious anachronism," in which "silence's poetic license was being revoked by the spoken epoch's dubious new hegemony. Chaplin's *Modern Times* is in part, brilliantly, about just this" (303). In the following I will take a closer look at the nature of these "self-conscious," "inventive ways" (Stewart 303; Howe 50), which result from the transitional experiences in the evolution of film sound technology and are thus intricately attached to the historical moment in which they appear.

In what follows, I propose a juxtaposition of *Modern Times's* engagement with the mechanics of sound as it was used during Hollywood's transition from silent to sound film, and its treatment and criticism of assembly-line labour. In foregrounding both sound as mechanism and the mechanization of manual labour, the film employs sound to ridicule the assembly line while simultaneously using a depiction of the modernized work environment as a metaphor to frame synchronized sound as specifically unnatural, that is, mechanic. Before the intervention of human agents such as mechanics or speaking film actors, both the assembly line and sound film merely provide a 'pre-digital hum,' which is constituted by the rattling machines in the factory and the hissing of microphones and recording machinery. In conclusion, that 'pre-digital hum' will be read as the sound of modernity, and as the sound of *Modern Times*.

**The Sound of Mechanisms / the Mechanics of Sound**

*Modern Times* begins with the famous factory scene, in which the Tramp performs the repetitive task of tightening two bolts on an endless amount of small boards running by on an assembly line at increasing speed. Chaplin's Tramp proves unable to adapt to the structure of assembly-line labour and fails to maintain a steady speed in his work. He constantly falls behind or gets distracted, until he is eventually swallowed by the machine. Consequently, the assembly line first stops and then moves backwards in order to set the Tramp free. In an interesting analysis, Howe takes this "cross-section view of the Tramp being drawn through the gears and sprockets" as a visual allegory for "film stock being drawn through the mechanisms of the camera and the projector" (53). Having been released from the clutch of the machine, the Tramp dances through the factory and with gestures of insanity continues the repetitive tightening of bolts on his co-workers noses, buttons and similar objects.

The sound score in these instances is composed of classical silent-film music and sections of synchronized sound that accompany the start and stop of the machine. The scene also provides intermissions of recorded voice, which are framed as mechanically produced within the diegesis of the scene. Instead of entering the production hall, the president of the Electro Steel Corporation addresses his employees in the plant via a screen image. Thus the mechanical quality of the president's voice, which is an unavoidable side-effect of 1930s sound technology, is legitimized within the diegesis of the scene. The screen

machine<sup>1</sup> produces a short sound before the president can speak, and, after his command to speed up the work process, a mechanic's switching of gears causes the machine to produce another mechanical sound. The music then starts simultaneously with the "cranking up" of assembly line five (*Modern Times*). Although the classical sound of the extra-diegetic soundtrack seems to refer to the bygone tradition of silent film, the fact that the music follows the mechanical steering of the machine makes it appear exceptionally framed. Instead of accompanying the film in a traditional sense, the music refers to the nature of its own mechanical recording by responding to the machine. The sound suggestively produced by the assembly line's increase in speed at the same time functions as a sound that might appear if one rewound and started a recorded concert. This diegetic incorporation of non-diegetic music into the film blurs the lines between the inside and the outside of the cinematic narrative.

Moreover, the rhythm of the music matches the mechanical movements of the Tramp as he works on the assembly line. When the Tramp finally loses his mind over his repetitive task, the music becomes slow as he slows down and rewinds as the machine rewinds. Afterwards, it accompanies the Tramp's frenetic dance through the factory with single notes that highlight his search for objects that are

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<sup>1</sup> Garrett Stewart has read the presence of this screen machine as a forerunner and criticism of the introduction of television to American homes: in the scene's "miniature documentary on the president's dictatorial voyeurism, his (Chaplin's) satiric genius has jumped forward to a glimpse of film (or TV) as an intrusive, bullying manipulation of the viewer—propaganda quite literally stripped of its aesthetic distance—forward even to Orwell's vision of film personified as an obscene presence that can actually see and hear *us*" (Stewart 309).

similar to the bolts he was meant to tighten. It remains inconclusive in this instance whether the Tramp's actions are accompanied by the music, or whether the Tramp performs a dance to prerecorded sound, anticipating single notes and planning his movements accordingly. The film thus leaves us undecided about whether the music serves to synchronize the picture, or whether the action on screen at certain instances follows the dictate of the sound.

In either case, the music's close relation to the functioning of the machines lets the sound of *Modern Times* appear particularly unnatural. In fact, the Tramp's famous tap dance scene can also be read as an indicator of the Tramp's inability to become accustomed to synchronized sound film. First, he is urged to sing but cannot memorize his words, and then his public performance immediately results in his companion's arrest. In a self-reflexive reading of the scene, the arrest would symbolize a direct punishment for the Tramp's attempt at sound film. The film's ending then shows the Tramp and his companion, the Gamin, walking away from the camera, towards the horizon, in silence, as a gesture towards the Tramp's retirement from cinema. In connection to the character of the Tramp, silence is thus framed as a natural environment, because the ending is set in the countryside, with the Tramp metaphorically escaping from sound. Sound, by contrast, is inherently connected to the mechanic—that is, to the unnatural<sup>2</sup>. This classification of sound proposes an inversion of a similar dichotomy, which was present

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<sup>2</sup> Thus relating to and reversing the dichotomy as addressed by Shane Denson in the context of *Frankenstein* ("Incorporations" 212).

during the sound transition, when sound was deemed the naturalizing alternative to silent pictures.

Analyzing the influence of the sound transition as apparent in the *Tarzan* films of the 1930s, Shane Denson describes how synchronized sound was envisioned to be a naturalizing element in film that would contribute to cinema's realism and eventually disappear behind the story. But during the sound transition, roughly between 1927-1932, when sound had not yet undergone a full narrative integration, synchronized sound repeatedly drew attention to itself as a technical artifact. Whereas audiences understood sound's potential to enhance realism, during the first years, sound often distracted the audiences because they appreciated its novelty and marveled at the cinematic sound apparatus ("Tarzan" 114-115). Film experience during the sound transition was thus constituted by a constant back and forth between an immersion in the film's story and an awareness of the sound mechanism—a tension that Denson fittingly terms a dichotomy of "science" and "fiction" ("Tarzan" 118). This back-and-forth, however, was something a filmmaker sought to avoid in favor of a spectator's immersion in the "fiction." Already by 1934, the second *Tarzan* feature includes instances that frame the transitional-era foregrounding of sound as primitive. While saving Jane from a civilized suitor, the ape-man is distracted as a nearby gramophone attracts his attention. According to Denson, in this instance the film draws an analogy between Tarzan's fascination with the gramophone

and the appreciation of sound technology expressed by film audiences a few years earlier ("Tarzan" 119).

While Hollywood employed synchronized sound to naturalize the film experience, Chaplin saw potential in the transitional-era experience of sound. *Modern times* fosters a controlled medium awareness by offsetting the sound sequences from silent ones, and it then uses the spectator's awareness of sound for comic ends. What had been an unwelcome by-product a few years earlier became a modus of comedy. This becomes possible because *Modern Times* frames sound as specifically unnatural and thus prevents it from disappearing behind the diegesis. This unnatural nature of sound, in turn, comes into being as the film refuses to grant the ability of speech to diegetic characters. All we hear is the sound of mechanisms: from the assembly-line machines, to the technical workings in the minister's wife's digestive tract. Because it marks sound as unnatural, *Modern Times* is specifically not a relic of bygone styles, but an informed comment on the transitional-era film experience.

When *Modern Times* appeared in cinemas in 1936, the sound transition had taken place and silent film was a thing of the past. The obstacles of early sound production had been overcome and self-reflexive highlighting of sound was now rare ("Tarzan" 119).

Nevertheless, producers and audiences in 1936 may very well have been aware of the transitional era's complications. Early sound film technology consisted of heavy machines, whose operation produced hissing noises that threatened to manifest themselves on the film's



sound score. In other words, early microphones recorded not only a speaker's voice, but their own sound. As a consequence, Robert Spadoni notes, "flowing nondiegetic music became a scratchy quiet that engulfed the figures and their speech" (7). Just like the machines in the factory provide an ever repeating pattern of noise, a scratchy hiss of the recording machinery made itself heard throughout film at the time (Kelleter 116). Actors had to speak louder than their enabling technology, just like the factory workers have to turn up the sound in order to hear their supervisor over the rumble of the machine in *Modern Times*. Thus in transitional-era film, silence becomes technologically impossible because the sound mechanism provides an indeterminable hum.

But that is just one way in which silence becomes impossible in post-sound-transitional film. Whereas the Tramp's relying on his distinct physical movement was a given in silent film, the possibility of sound provokes the question of why the Tramp does not speak. Before the introduction of synchronized sound, silence was unmarked, but by 1936, the firm establishment of sound had marked silence as an indicator of a missing element. *Modern Times* employs this notion for comic ends when the Tramp sits next to the minister's wife in the police station. The silent pause conveys the awkwardness of the moment when neither of the characters knows what to say. The clearly audible movements of both character's digestive tracts break the awkward silence with an even more awkward sound. Silence becomes unbearable, and the Tramp tries to find relief by turning on

the radio, which fails to provide a sound alternative because the radio plays a commercial for digestive tract problems. Although this scene primarily serves comic ends, it points to the fact that sound can be used to drown out all sound that shall remain unheard, because the Tramp's attempted tactic to hide the sound of his bowel movements corresponds to the use of film music to hide the scratchy byproducts of early sound production. This practice then results in a mass of sound that encompasses all screen action and culminates in white noise.

### **The Tramp's Dying Venture into Sound**

*Modern Times* is most remembered as the occasion for two relevant events in film history: it was the famous Tramp's last film, and it was the first time the Tramp spoke in synchronized dialogue. But rather than being a turning point in history, the Tramp's venture into sound is staged in a distinct moment, the tap dance, and afterwards the little character resumes his former silence. Instead of trying to implement his character in the world of sound film, Chaplin frames the Tramp's speech as a musical intermission—a format his audience would have been familiar with since Warner Bros.'s famous introduction of sound in *The Jazz Singer* (1927). *The Jazz Singer* was not a fully synchronized picture, but it featured seven distinct sound fragments that included a lip-synced song with a few sentences added before and after the musical performance. Even though *Modern Times* featured a continuous sound track, in opposition to the technically

less advanced forbearer of 1927, Chaplin highlighted the Tramp's song in a similar way. *Modern Times* thus frames the tap dance scene as an attraction in its own right, as if to indicate the singularity of this onetime event. In 1927, synchronized sound, as such, was enough of a novelty to serve as *The Jazz Singer's* main attraction (Kelleter 116). Additionally, the film's advertisement highlighted the fact that the film's protagonist was played by the famous vaudeville actor Al Jolson. In *Modern Times*, sound itself could not serve as an attraction anymore, but because Chaplin had refused to let the Tramp speak for almost a decade, the tap dance scene sufficed to provoke an awareness of sound that was otherwise considered passé (cf. Maland 157-58). This framing of the Tramp's speech as a distinct attraction rather than a break-through with future implications results in a continued view of the Tramp as a silent character. The fact that he fails to convey any actual informative content, since he forgets the lyrics to his song, adds to the idea that even though we heard him sing, we will not hear him speak. Nevertheless, the Tramp was not the only mute character to make it into sound film. In fact, by the time *Modern Times* appeared, Frankenstein's monster had already assumed the role of the classic non-speaker in sound film.

Shane Denson points to the history of muteness as it has been addressed in Peter Brooks's influential study of melodrama, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Brooks explains that, due to political repression, the French melodramatic stage tradition was originally a silent form (45-60). It influenced the American stage tradition, which

was then taken up again in silent film. Tracing this genealogy to the advent of classical Hollywood cinema in the late 1910s, Denson establishes that “rather than undergoing radical transformation, sensational stage melodrama was essentially continued by filmic melodrama of the early and ‘transitional’ eras: not only the narratives, but also the mise-en-scène and theatrical acting style of these films (not to mention actors, writers, and others involved) were simply imported from the theater” (“Tarzan” 217-218). The character of the Tramp strongly relies on melodramatic acting styles and broad gesture, in part, because Chaplin himself entered the film business after a theatrical career. Charles Maland traces a similar influence when he observes that “the authorities’ persistent threat to the budding relationship between Charlie [the Tramp] and the gamin in the last phase of the film [*Modern Times*] provides a melodramatic situation, rooted in Chaplin’s apprentice years in the English theater, similar to the one he had used well for emotional effect in *The Kid*. Here Chaplin’s aesthetic view that the intensification of emotion is important to art is evident” (Maland 152-153). In this sense, *Modern Times* is not simply a comedy film, but it is also rooted in a melodramatic tradition that resulted from times of enforced muteness on stage. The change towards sound film thus not only challenged the sophistication of the Tramp as a character, but it impacted the style, formula, and narrative structure that went with it.

As I mentioned earlier, at the advent of sound, producers and exhibitors believed in its potential to enhance realism in the moving

pictures. However, silent pictures had their own myths. As Denson summarizes, “the medium of film itself, due to its non-verbal means, was figured widely in the transitional period [to Hollywood film, in the 1910s] as a ‘universal language’ legible to literate and illiterate, rich and poor, recent immigrant and long-established citizen alike” (“Tarzan” 218). Silent film was thus considered a natural language that united its spectators despite linguistic language barriers. That idea preceded the thought that sound enhanced a film’s realism—a realism based on a supposed resemblance of the audience’s natural, non-cinematic experiences that include sight and sound. Consequently, from the 1910s onward, the cinematic medium referred to some myth of naturalism. A mute character in sound film therefore refers back to another cinematic era, another style of acting, and another notion of naturalism.

Frankenstein’s monster, Denson’s example for a carry-over from silent to sound film, cannot speak as a consequence of his dubious creation by the hands of Dr. Frankenstein. The monster is an altogether engineered and essentially unnatural character. Therefore his muteness, which would have matched silent film’s mute universal language, is now explained by means of his unnatural birth. As Denson concludes, whereas “mute gesture (and film itself) allegedly reaches the plane of *natural* language at its origin—a universally legible form of expression—the muteness/monstrosity of the creature is a result of unnatural forces that account for his incomprehensibility” (“Tarzan” 219).

What we gain from Denson's analysis is the insight that James Whale's *Frankenstein*, which appeared during the sound transition in 1931, already marked muteness as specifically unnatural, although it referred to the natural universal language of silent cinema. Five years later, Chaplin reconsiders the universal language myth by juxtaposing the Tramp as a naturally mute character to an unnatural notion of sound as a mechanic invention of modernity. The figure of the Tramp thus carries its own pre-sound-transitional notion of naturalism into an environment of sound that is in contrast marked as unnatural. The Tramp romanticizes his own past and engages in self-historicization before disappearing from screen forever. Thus, whereas Chaplin, as a director, works with the options enabled by sound film, his character of the Tramp is severely entrenched in the tradition of silent film.

Whereas *Modern Times* deliberately marks sound as unnatural, many films during the transitional period received criticism because the sound unintentionally appeared unnatural to their audiences. Their experience that synchronized speech sounded awkward resulted from the technological infancy of the apparatus, which often provided human voices with a mechanical twitch. Corinna Müller writes that silent film characters often appeared to have a godlike aura that lifted them above profane existence. When Chaplin's Tramp finally talked, Müller resumes, he ceased to be the famous Tramp because he lost his poetic illusion (285). Robert Spadoni adds to this observation by asserting that the novelty of synchronized speech had the power to

make filmic characters appear uncanny in the Freudian sense. He claims:

sound also brought to the foreground certain uncanny qualities that had always been present in the cinematic image. It complicated the general viewing sensation of the presence of the figures speaking and moving on the screen. Sound changed the visual appearance of these figures in ways that made them look to some viewers like ghosts. This widespread, sporadic, uncontrolled, and temporary film reception phenomenon possibly influenced Hollywood film production trends in ways that long outlived the three and a half years of the sound transition period.

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Although Spadoni acknowledges that some viewers found a new intimacy with their favourite screen characters, the spectators also felt further removed from the action on screen. They felt a renewed awareness of the filmic apparatus that was similar to the film experience of the cinema of attractions (cf. Gunning). This awareness was partly caused by the sheer novelty of sound film, but the awareness of the medium as well as the audience's uncanny feeling also resulted from the sound machinery and microphones that produced awkward side-effect sounds and thus caused voices to appear artificial, or unnatural. Additionally, the sound originated from a single box behind the screen and many viewers would have attributed the sound to any source but the mouth of the person on screen (Spadoni 4-7).

When *Modern Times* was released, these first technical problems were sorted out and spectators had become accustomed to sound pictures. Nevertheless, the Tramp's tap dance scene and his inauguration to synchronized dialogue proved to be an attraction in its own right, therefore threatening to produce a feeling of the uncanny. The scene circumvents these issues in three distinct manners. Firstly, the Tramp's French-influenced mock-Italian refuses to produce any meaningful content and thus enables the audience to focus on the sound of his voice. Secondly, the strange sound of the made-up language itself is intended to be awkward, relieving a possible uncanny in comic intent. Thirdly, the intelligibility again draws attention to the Tramp's physical gestures, which the audience was accustomed to enjoying. Another factor, however, deserves attention: the hiss. In early sound film, the hiss and crackle produced by the machinery always threatened to be heard. The voices thus rang over a rhythmic background that seemed to originate from nowhere. The scene re-stages this early form by recording the tapping of the Tramp's feet in the restaurant. The immense impact of tap sounds at the time will be traced as one crucial aspect of the 'pre-digital hum' in *Modern Times*.

### **Tap and Click and the Pre-Digital Hum**

So what is the pre-digital hum? It is a restructuring of time into ever smaller rhythmic patterns. Modernity restructured time in a number of ways, cutting human action and human sense perception into ever



smaller sections. As Jodi Brooks ascertains in a profound article on tap dance, American film and stage art in the 1920s assumes a “Taylorist-Fordist aesthetic regime” that is “driven by the clock” (357, 360). The sound of stage art such as tap dance, when produced by large troupes, highlights rhythmic patterns that are similar to the sounds of factories or the rhythms of typewriters in office environments. Sound thus fosters an “aestheticization of mechanization and mass production” (156).

Under this aesthetic regime, sound structures time. The relation between time and sound changed in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the invention of the telegraph enabled the possibility of reading and “writing in sound” (364). Not only typewriters and tap dance, however, foregrounded the new structuring of time according to mechanized beats—it was essentially film itself that foregrounded the new structures of time. After all, the quick succession of images was only perceivable by means of the accompanying rattle of the film projector. In other words, the sound of the filmic apparatus structures each second in concert with the succession of frames on screen. In Brooks’s analysis, that sound signifies the animation of the machine. As she ascertains, “in tap, the click of the taps can appear to animate the body’s movements, recalling and playing with ideas of the machinic. This effect can be even more pronounced in screen tap, where the sounds of the taps can serve to suggest or mimic the suppressed sounds of the camera-projector apparatus” (358). What needs to be emphasized at this point is that sound is not essentially

the driving force of dance or screen action; it serves, rather, as a signifier for all those machines and practices (the film apparatus, the assembly line, typewriting, tap dance) that changed the structuring of time. The sounds of tap, of typewriters, of the machine become “aural signifiers of twentieth century modernity” (356).

Brooks takes into account cinema’s sound transition and explains that tap dance had a potential to demonstrate “the wonders of synchronized sound” (357-358). From the reception perspective of film audiences, she argues, “in tap, and in screen tap in particular, the clicks of the taps—those mechanical, typewriter-like sounds—do not simply punctuate the figure and the image but can appear to *generate* its movements” (364; original emphasis).

These experiences of sound as generating or governing a film’s action can only come into being with synchronized, recorded sound. Although silent film scores often included sounds suggesting gunshots, for instance, sound was always governed by the picture. In silent film, the live music always literally accompanied the images, and musicians saw the film while adding their sounds. The picture existed before the sound—in production, and oftentimes literally during the performance. Synchronized sound, however, even if is only a recorded musical score, challenges this presumption as audiences cannot simply detect which came first, sound or picture. *Modern Times* in many aspects plays with this indeterminacy.

I am nowhere near suggesting that *Modern Times* is a tap film. For some readers, I may have already stretched the argument by reading

it as a sound film, instead of as a silent film with sound fragments. I am suggesting, however, that *Modern Times* is deeply affected by the restructuring of time and of sound that Brooks describes via the aesthetics of tap. The very first scenes of the film, taking place at the infamous factory that produces nothing, negotiate questions of technological, medial, and diegetic domination. This negotiation takes place between a number of actors, the most profound among them being time, click, or the pre-digital hum.

The first potentially governing agency, which *Modern Times* introduces, is time. It begins by showing the credits against the close-up of a clock<sup>3</sup>, which functions without producing a sound. Although the inclusion and abolishment of individual sounds in *Modern Times* could have arbitrary reasons, the existence of some sounds marks silence as a lack of sound. This causes the spectatorship to read meaning into the inclusion and exclusion of individual sounds in the film's score. The inaudibility of the clock could thus suggest that audiences are about to watch a silent film, and that the clock structures the day of the crowds; however, it could also suggest that the clock itself is not the sole animator of sound, and that sound is structured by apparatuses other than the clock. In fact, the sound of the clock ceases to suffice to structure a film into at least 16 frames per second. The clock, as the time-structuring element, is challenged by other factors. The factory scene, which follows after the image of

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<sup>3</sup> Stewart, Howe and Potter read this introductory sequence in reference to Lang's *Metropolis* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. However, I believe there could also be a strong reference to King Vidor's *The Crowd*, especially since *Modern Times* was originally meant to be called "The Masses" (Howe n3).

the clock face, can be read as a battle over the domination over the structuring of time. Thus, let us return to the Electro Steel Corporation once more.

The Tramp's movement of tightening two bolts is first of all dictated by the flow of the machine. But that flow, in return, is dictated by a mechanic in charge of setting the speed, who in turn is dictated by the factory boss, or, as it is, by a screen image of the factory boss. The corporation president's communication with his employees via a visual telephone self-reflexively references the cinematic apparatus itself. After all, he is subjugated by the filmic apparatus enabling his existence. The scene thus questions the ruling capitalist's power. However, as predicted, this chain of dictate is challenged by both the Tramp himself and by the sound accompanying the scene. When the president requests that the machines run at maximum speed, the Tramp struggles to keep up and ends up being swallowed by the assembly line apparatus. Because his mishap causes the machine to stop, the Tramp momentarily dictates the factory's speed. He breaks the rule of command. Whereas the machine swallows the Tramp in this instance, a little later the Tramp is forced, in turn, to swallow the machine—in form of two bolts being repeatedly shoved into his mouth by a feeding machine. Eventually he swallows the bolts. The Tramp's frantic breakdown, when he cannot stop his trained repetitive movement of the hand,<sup>4</sup> is thus not only a consequence of assembly-line labour. It is also triggered by the machine's literal invasion of the

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<sup>4</sup> This urge to repeat trained movement could also be called, with reference to Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, the 'alien hand syndrome.'

Tramp's body. These instances of swallowing and being swallowed thus act out a fight between the Tramp and the machine.

Sound is, however, another actor in this network of commands. We only hear the factory president when he is visible on screen within the factory, that is, both the audiences and the diegetic factory workers experience his commands only in form of recorded sound. Sound therefore governs the speed of the production process rather than the Electro Steel Corporation's president. The impact of sound in terms of music in this scene is also intriguing. Although it does not feature the rattling of the machines, the rhythm of the music matches the movement of the assembly line and the work performed by the Tramp. When he finally attempts to take a break in the bathroom, the factory boss appears there on screen as well and orders him back to work. In the same instance, the supposedly non-diegetic music starts while the Tramp still is in the bathroom. Is it thus questionable whether the sound of the factory president or the rhythm of the music orders the Tramp to work—or whether the voice of the president starts the music. During the Tramp's frenetic dance, when he 'tightens' all objects that resemble two bolts such as the machine's screws, the noses of his co-workers or a pedestrian's shirt buttons, single notes in the film's soundtrack match each turn of the screw. The soundtrack accompanies the Tramp's movement with highlighted notes rather than the sounds of clicking metal. Instead of going insane, it appears as though the Tramp might just be dancing to the music. It is in fact indeterminable whether his actions and the

machine dictate the speed, or whether the pictures and actions on screen perform a dance that is made to match the recorded sound. It could, after all, be the film's sound that stops the machine and saves the Tramp after being swallowed, just as the sound called him to work when he was taking a break.

This close reading is not meant to suggest that Chaplin designed this scene as moving images that are orchestrated according to the music—like in a music video clip. I wish to point out, however, that at a time when sound, just as in tap dance, highly influenced conceptions of time and aesthetics, *Modern Times* acts out a struggle over the governance of sound, and thus of time, on screen. In this way, it comments on the relatively recent development of sound film by producing a scene without synchronized dialogue that could not have been made without synchronized sound. In showcasing this fight over command, *Modern Times* pictures a struggle that is essential to modern times.

Let us now answer this section's initial question: what is this pre-digital hum? It is the structuring of time into increasingly smaller rhythmic patterns. These patterns, as a combination of time and sound, combine into an all-encompassing hum. Throughout modernity, this pattern increased its beats per second, just as film moved from sixteen frames per second to, eventually, twenty-four. This hum is not the same as postmodernism's white noise, as white noise is not necessarily rhythmic. And it is pre-digital in the sense that it is perceivable to human ears. Even though a fast rhythmic

pattern may be perceived as one sound, like a drum-roll, there *is* a sound to be heard. Just as many frames add up to a moving image, in which spectators cannot perceive single frames, they still see the moving image. In the digital era, the fast movement of machines and images ceases to produce an audible by-product that indicates the machinic origin of the film.

This pre-digital hum appears when the sounds of Ford's factory, of the film apparatus, and of modernity, combine into a rhythm that drives a film's aesthetics. *Modern Times*, at times, follows the rhythm of the machine, but also stops and recollects the rhythm's impact by marking sound, and the pre-digital hum, as inherently unnatural. The soundtracks of sound film take up the rhythm of the projector and its aesthetic regime. The Tramp fails to become incorporated into a film and into a film era that is influenced by this aesthetic regime. *Modern Times* thus juxtaposes a romanticized but impossible silence against the prevalent hum of the pre-digital era. That hum is omnipresent, not just in film and factory, but in tap dance and typewriter, and it can be traced back to the invention of the telegraph. The clicks and taps of modernity in the United States describe a relation of time and sound that had not been present before. And although it works without spoken dialogue, *Modern Times* is deeply informed by the awareness of the impossibility of silence and the challenges of early sound technology as well as by the reconfiguration of an aesthetics of time on the grounds of a changing conception and density of sound. ●

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