# The Architecture of   Modern ▼ Time:
## Charlie Chaplin's Take

Silent comedian, director and producer, Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) had seen celluloid filmstrips spooling their way through the wheels of his projector, backwards and forwards, countless times. It is not surprising that one of the iconic clips from the film *Modern Times* (1936) was of himself—as an unhinged factory worker sucked into the giant gears powering a conveyor belt—winding and unwinding through it in exactly the same way.
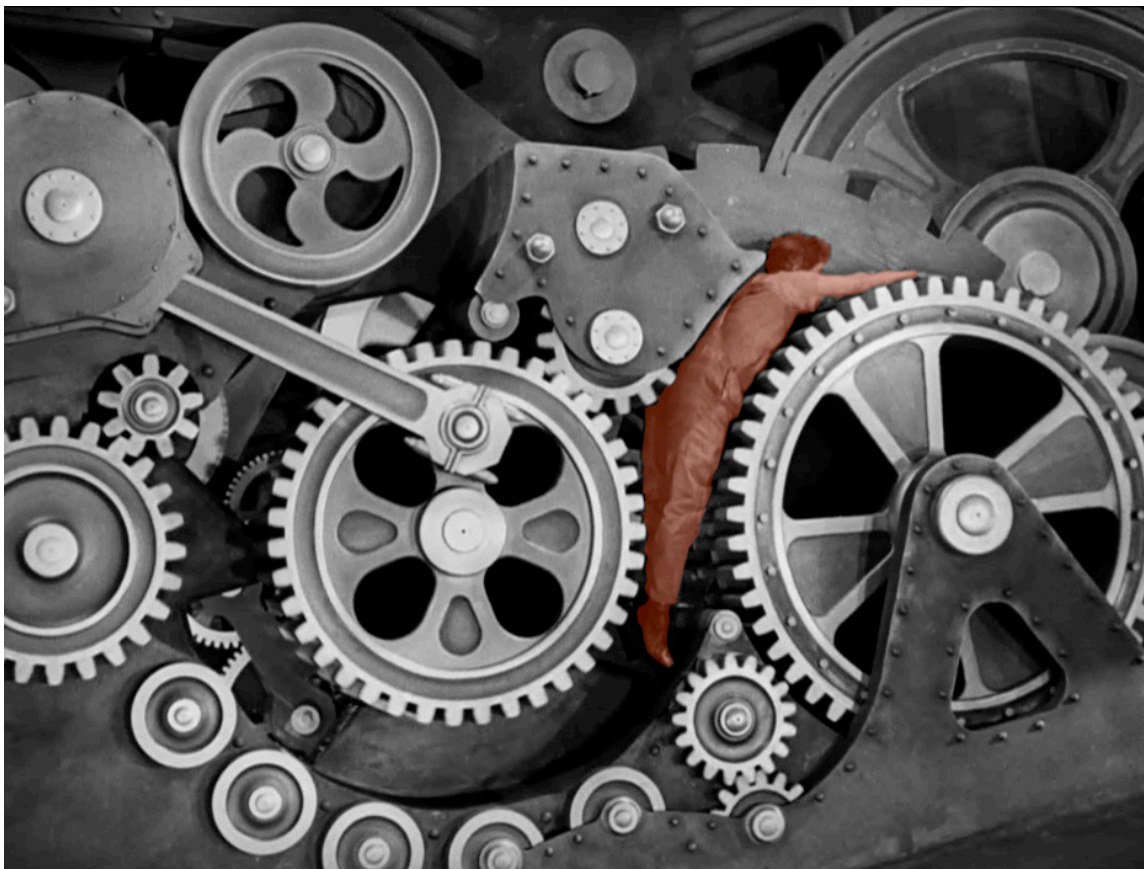
The architecture of this factory was controlled by the President of Electro Steel Corporation, who remotely communicated the pace of labor by appearing on a large screen to a muscular foreman. The foreman's operation of the appropriate lever sped up the conveyer belt, which increased the quantity of repetitive tasks performed on an endless line of parts being assembled by the workers, thereby increasing their productivity.
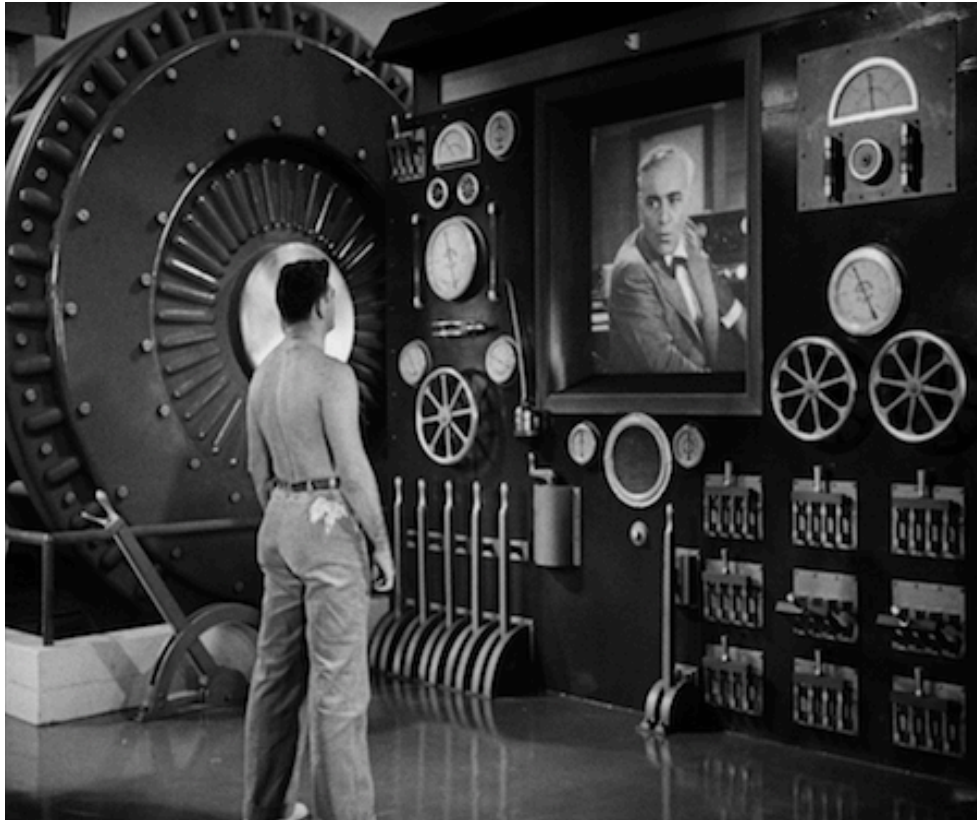
Modern Times addresses an aspect of modern architecture that continues today with its automation and specialization of the activities that are housed within it, known as Taylorism.[1] But, it is not only the arrangement of space in time that automation effects. It also limits our ability to personally feel time's duration. 'Pure duration' was the concept linked to free will by the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941). *Modern Times* can be seen as a perfect

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[1] The practice of organizing space into a series of discrete moments—or tasks—was developed by the American engineer Frederick W. Taylor (1856-1915). Moments of activity were identified and isolated in space. Contrast this to the large, omniscient presence of the President who existed simultaneously both in his office and on a screen anywhere in the factory.

demonstration of Bergson's definition of the comic, of the natural desire to laugh at a person suddenly acting with an unnatural, mechanical rigidity.[2] The tramp had tightened so many nuts—just so—on the endless series of machine parts sailing by him that he couldn't stop. He saw the world as pairs of nuts—(or things that look like nuts)—that required his adjustment. He first tightened the buttons on the back of the skirt of a lovely lady walking by. Next, his twitchy wrenches led him outside the factory to a buxom matron walking down the sidewalk with large

hexagonal buttons, one on each breast… Comedy ensued.[3]

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[2] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 8-10.

[3] The happenstance shown above echoed the mayhem Charlie caused as a worker standing with his pair of wrenches before the conveyer belt. The assembly line depends upon men dutifully operating like machines. (One worker's delay is disaster for the rest of the other workers.)

Chaplin made *Modern Times* as a silent film, even though talkies had already taken over the industry. What did Chaplin have to "say" about modern time with his carefully orchestrated silence? Experienced cameramen in the silent era were prized for their ability to crank the camera at a speeds slightly slower or faster during the shoot as a way to add life or humor to a scene. This play with duration was later complimented by the equally talented projectionists who added to the emotive force of a movie by cranking the projector faster or slower in the theaters. The introduction of sound to the movies ended all of that. The progression of the film through its gears had to be regulated to a certain quantity per second for sound to be successfully synchronized with space.[4]

Free from a rigid meter, the atmosphere of the silent comedies revealed a more artistic movement of time. Movement was the single addition to the established mode of documentation—to 'still' photography—placing it more in the realm of dramatic work: to theater in its highbrow form, or to vaudeville in its low. And, the frame itself moved now, not just the things within it. Movement was added, but a number of reductions placed it outside its initial territory of recording reality. It was not only the absence of recorded sound, but also the absence of color and of depth. It was projected onto a single plane. The audience's "exquisitely chaste refusal" of the "superabundance" to be found in realism gave the imagination room to expand.[5] The silent era existed more because of the audience's demand for it, not because the technology hadn't yet been invented. Things moving slightly faster or slower than metered time did not make the movie look silly—as Henri Bergson's criticisms of

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[4] Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns*, 35-37.

[5] Kerr, 3-7. The technology for talking pictures existed since Thomas Edison invented a way to make "his phonograph records *visible*." While Edison was searching for ways to accurately synchronize and amplify the sound, audiences became unexpectedly enthralled with the moving silent image by itself.

'cinematographic' time led one to believe—so much as amazingly *alive*.[6] Chaplin's response to the close of the silent era—with its new regulation and metering of time—was to compose the music and sound for his films in a way that kept the delicate balance of the silent dream intact.[7]

It is curious that Bergson was disenchanted with the early silent pictures, since the successful ones were based on the very principle he proposed: that time is entirely personal. Bergson's mistake in his early analysis of film may have been the closeness of the film analogy to his thinking about duration. He was tempted toward the wrong conclusion because the metaphor was too apt.[8] The idea of seaming together isolated moments in time into the "specific feeling of duration which our consciousness has when it does away with convention and habit and gets back to its natural attitude" was essential to Bergson in the early twentieth century if we were to understand ourselves.[9] It was a serious matter, not one to be confused with Keystone Kops. For Bergson, there was no pre-existent direction along which man had simply to advance, a prevalent attitude of the time. On the contrary, there is within the cyclic nature of a developing society, a *constant need*, after each orbit (often occasioned by the forces of new technology) for a creative effort. *Modern Times* was just this kind of creative effort, Chaplin's

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[6] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution,* 306. Bergson's dissatisfaction with a 'cinematographical' method of thinking grappled with the turning of 'ordinary' knowledge into 'extraordinary.' Bergson wanted a picture of reality that was *real*, a better reality, with the right rhythm,—not the choppy rhythms of silent movies—, a reality that was created with the imagination, an imagination that believed in its own splendid skill, that understood its own character, that could invent a new reality. Chaplin contemplated this very thing in *Modern Times*, but in 1911, silent film was a series of visual gags, still in adolescence, discovering itself.

[7] Throughout *Modern Times,* Chaplin played with the perception of sound. There were moments of synchronous talking, but they always appeared through the guise of the devices shown in the film. The President of the Electro Steel Corporation "spoke," but, through a screen. Similarly, the inventor of the Billow's Feeding Machine "spoke" by placing a stylus on the phonograph, and bowing, as the machine articulated the Machine's virtues. (The phonograph introduced itself as "the mechanical salesman.") Interestingly, the end of the phonograph's pitch to the factory owner neatly summed up Chaplin's understanding of silent cinema: "Let us demonstrate with one of your workers, for actions speak louder than words." Only once does Charlie "speak" at the end of the film, and his words are a song made of nonsense syllables.

[8] Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion,* 3-4. Though he is speaking about a different topic (society's propensity to look at obligations as nature's inflexible rules), Bergson acknowledges that analogies often mislead us. "The obligations which it lays down, and which enable it to subsist, introduce into it a regularity which has merely some analogy to the inflexible order of the phenomena of life. And yet everything conspires to make us believe…"

[9] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness,* vii.

entirely personal reflections on the new age.[10]

In another iconic scene in the movie, the tramp gets selected for the demonstration of the Billow's Feeding Machine, which would potentially enable the workmen to work through their lunch break.
Things go terribly awry…

The remainder of the film abruptly switches from the indignities of an automated factory to a reflection on the modern house, as: a sanatorium, a jail, a suburban daydream, a department store, and, a shanty. After getting out of the sanatorium—(the factory causes Charlie to have a nervous breakdown)—he is mistaken for the leader of a protest and lands in jail. After being released from jail he finds a 'gamin', and the two of them proceed to imagine what their ideal house could be. Homeless, they daydream together while sitting on the sidewalk in front of an ideal suburban home. Next, they play-act living in a home when the tramp lands a new job as a night watchman in a luxurious department store. All of the elements for a 'happy' life are there in the store: the food, the clothing, a pair of roller skates for his amusement, a fur coat for hers. There are even beds to sleep in. Finally, after being dismissed from that job too—(he is again thrown mistakenly into jail)—the two discover an abandoned shack on the edge of the water which they proceed to inhabit, but the material embodiment of their dream is less stable than the earlier pretend versions. The lintel over the door falls and knocks Charlie on the head as he enters, the table collapses when touched, the roof rafters sag, and the surrounding lake has no depth when he dives in. Chaplin's dreams about the modern house are incomplete, left for the audience to imagine as he and his girl walk into the future at the end of the film.

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[10] Chaplin was not a product of the studio system. He retained control over all of the aspects of his creation.

Would there be Taylorism in their future dream house? Clearly not. Should there be measurable, discrete areas designed for specific tasks at all? Bergson and Chaplin each lead us to another resounding "no."[11] In Chaplin's telling, being a factory laborer did *not* lead to his daydream of owning a house with a pretty wife. It led to a forgotten dream of someone else: an abandoned shack. Modern time—Chaplin's take on it—adds up, in the end—to a kind of openness to reinvention, with no regrets, and no expectations.[12] The film ends as it usually does, with Charlie heading

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[11] To better understand what Chaplin was (silently) saying in *Modern Times*, a jump back to a few years before—just after he finished *City Lights* (1931)—found him taking a trip around the world to "enjoy all he could of the best and hobnob with the nobs." He had dinner and interesting conversations with some of the luminaries of the time, including Mahatma Ghandi, Winston Churchill, Aristide Briand, Sigmund Freud, Bernard Shaw, and, H. G. Wells. Chaplin and Wells had much in common. They both began on the poor side of life in Dickensian London in the late nineteenth century. From 1914 to 1919, while Chaplin was becoming famous making his silent slap-stick comedies, Wells shifted from his dystopian *Time Machine* mode to comedy, writing novels about daily life in England. Wells's next endeavor was to tackle certain social and economic issues. When meeting with Chaplin in 1931, he was just finishing the book *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind.* But during Chaplin's trip, Wells did not encourage him to continue making films that dabbled in social commentary like *The Kid* (1921). Interestingly, he thought that Chaplin should return to his shorter comedic subjects. Chaplin quotes Wells: "…you set yourself a difficult task, adhering to a plot and theme so much. Who remembers the plots of Dicken's books—*Pickwick Papers*, for instance? It was their incidents and characterizations that made the appeal. Personally, I would like to see you oftener on the screen in those two-reel pictures, which had so much spontaneity." Chaplin, *A Comedian Sees the World*, 93; Although *Modern Times* borrows the overall theme of Wells's *Work, Wealth and Happiness,* Chaplin took Wells's advice. Otis Ferguson (1907-1943), a music and film critic who wrote for *The New Republic* claimed "the film was really several two-reelers, *The Shop, The Jailbird, The Watchman,* and *The Singing Waiter." The Shop* is the Tramp at Electro Steel Corporation, *The Jailbird* comes about because he is mistakenly thought to be leading a labor demonstration, *The Watchman* is the Tramp and the gamin's time at the department store, and *The Singing Waiter* is their night at a Music Hall. Chaplin claimed that social commentary was not the aim of his work, but plenty of people (and countries) saw that differently. Russian spectators were puzzled. "Why does Comrade Chaplin laugh at such a thing?" Fascist Germany and Italy banned the film. Hitler eventually banned *all* of Chaplin's films "because of the tramps's physical resemblance to the Führer." This precipitated his next film, *The Great Dictator* (1940). McCabe, *Charlie Chaplin,* 186-88.

[12] Vitruvius, *On Architecture,* Book VI, 164. As Vitruvius put it 2,000 years ago in his introduction to a book on the design of houses: "I equipped my mind with those intellectual assets, of which the principle fruit is that there is no necessity to own more and that the richest possession of all is to wish for nothing whatsoever." In this introduction, Vitruvius is actually making a case for himself as an architect who writes books rather than seeking important building commissions. The sentiment could apply to all of an architect's pursuits, though, including the design of houses.

down an unknown road. This time though, he is not alone. He holds the hand of his girl. He finds happiness.

He has also shown *us* how to find happiness while working or making a home, and, given us a clue about the design of a place to work or live. It is not about efficiency or functionality or the plentitude of objects from a department store distributed about. In a Chaplinesque house or workplace, design grows from the still relatively new art of cinema. In 1921, French doctor, art critic and essayist Élie Faure (1873-1937), once a young pupil of Henri Bergson in Paris at the *Lycée Henri IV,* described Chaplin's cinema as "a new art, the art of movement, an art based on that which is is the very principle of everything that exists. […] The mechanism of this art is so directed as to bring before man's eyes the whole universe of moving form, reconstituting it for a space in which time precipitates itself."[13]

The form of things often translates into something new for Chaplin because of his skill for pretend and play. This understanding of time and motion shows slight regard for Taylor's ideas about maximizing productivity. Faure explains: "There, upon the cinema-screen are forms that move, faces that reveal, a confused continuous play of values, lights, and shadows, composing and decomposing unceasingly…" The gestural tip of Chaplin's hat, the hop, the about-face, the kick, the twitch, the practiced lean on his cane, are always in "equilibrium about the central idea, at once sad and comic, from which it derives its motion."[14]

The result of Chaplin's 'work' is more valuable than Taylor's calculated series of movements related to space because he activates his (and our) imagination. Chaplin takes a spontaneous

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[13] Élie Faure, "The Art of Charlie Chaplin," 146-47. Faure singles out Chaplin as the man "that has shown that he knows how to use this art as if it were a keyboard where all the elements of feeling that determine the attitude and form of things merge and convey in one cineographic expression the complex revelation of their inner life…" Faure sees a Chaplin movie as "essentially architectural in its construction. Each scene is determined by Chaplin's conception of the whole, just as the smaller cupolas surround the great central cupola in the old Byzantine churches, or as music ordains the song of the spheres and controls the continuous harmony of their motion."

[14] Faure, 147.

series of things that happen—slap-stick things—and transforms them via the camera's ability to orchestrate points of view in slowed down, sped up and cut pieces of time, which are then seamed into a new whole.[15] Chaplin demonstrates that the ability to pretend—to orchestrate and imagine—may be our most valuable asset "where fantasy is liberated, where imagination is riotous and healthy."[16]

Chaplin provides an antidote to the functionalism and consumerism that saturates our thinking. He hints at a design process that could elevate the things cherished about slap-stick—clever, artistic slap-stick—the kind where the audience watches Charlie get drunk, then get dragged away by a policeman, but, is happy to see him pick a flower on the way.[17] Looking to Chaplin to elevate the spontaneous parts of our soul means using Chaplin's cinematic view of time and space. Chaplin's instinct to entertain—and, most importantly, his mastering of a form of representation—give us a way to celebrate our lost illusions—and then avenge ourselves—

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[15] Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts*, 23-24. In 1924, as slap-stick started to disappear, it captured the attention of Gilbert Seldes (1893-1970), a cultural critic who wrote for *Vanity Fair* and the *Saturday Evening Post.* He made a plea for its survival: "I would like to see it saved; I would like to see a bit more of its impromptus, its unpremeditated laughter; I would like to do something to banish the bleak refinement which is setting in upon it. […] It is one of the few places where the genteel tradition does not operate, where fantasy is liberated, where imagination is still riotous and healthy. In the economy and precision are two qualities of artistic presentation; it uses still everything commonest and simplest and nearest to hand." He goes further: "…to appreciate slap-stick may require a revolution in our way of looking at the arts; … [and] having taken thought on how we look at the arts, I suggest that the revolution is not entirely undesirable." This 'revolution' is in sharp contrast to the Russian revolution of 1917. Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*, written for a capitalist society, became textbook procedure for communist Russia. Taylor did not live to see this. He died in 1915; In *Modern Times,* Chaplin's uses *his* version of economy and precision to poke fun at the economy and precision prescribed by Taylor. Chaplin combines creative energy with freshness and humor. Taylor, on the other hand, gives the object of 'Scientific Management' as the realization that "every single act of every workman can be reduced to a science." Play and spontaneity are entirely left out of the equation. When organizing seventy-five men who load pig iron onto cars, Taylor discusses "how many foot-pounds of work a man could do in a day." His method increases the productivity of a man from lifting 12-1/2 tons to lifting 47-1/2 tons of pig iron per man per day. He determines this by having his "college men" perform experiments on the workmen, timing their movements with stop watches, and collecting data in record blanks. Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management,* 26-31.

[16] Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts*, 24. Of course, Chaplin 'works' long, hard (and successfully) to craft movies about this tramp that has difficulty holding down a job.

[17] Faure, "The Art of Charlie Chaplin," 149. Faure: "He has that exquisite imagination which enables him to discover in every incident and in every act of daily life, a reason for suffering a little or much, for laughing at himself…"; Chaplin's father was a successful, talented Music Hall performer who disappeared from Charlie's life due to alcoholism. Many of the scenes in the movie are a way for Chaplin to reimagine his sad beginnings as a child in Dickensian London, forced to work in an orphanage. McCabe, *Charlie Chaplin,*17-18.

"playing out a heroic farce" like the funny assembly line blunders in *Modern Times*.[18] Chaplin's cinematic architecture of time enables us to 'get along' with industrialized time.[19] Walter Kerr (1913-1996), drama critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times* remembers his first experience of seeing the silent clowns as a seven year old. He understood them as "magical, outsized, omnipotent creatures [who] emerged from some Druidical forest to cast spells on a pliable universe." He felt passionately about them, as any little boy would. "I didn't simply laugh at him. I fused with him, psyche locked to psyche; I recognized him as something known before birth."[20]

As architects discover the antidote to the Taylorism that still pervades our thinking, and to the newer technologies effecting our understanding of space and time today—(the gregarious connected screens foreshadowed in *Modern Times)*—Bergson's idea resurfaces: that there is within the cyclic nature of a developing society a constant need to balance each orbit with a creative effort.[21] Chaplin's artistic output acts as a corrective to the concatenation of time that technology engendered and that Taylor inscribed. His aim was decidedly different. Chaplin's concern was not about the tripling or quadrupling of the quantity of things manufactured. It was about opening up our hearts.

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[18] Faure, 150. The idea of a continual reinvention of self is at the heart of Bergson's sense of how time can perpetuate itself.

[19] Chaplin buffs up the courage of his gamin at the end of the movie, telling her "We'll get along!"

[20] Kerr, *The Silent Clowns,* 10. Kerr is talking about all of the silent clowns (Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton), but this quote refers specifically to Buster Keaton, the very talented *serious* clown—a little less joyfully mischievous than Chaplin—who got into plenty of his own kind of spontaneous, ingenious 'trouble.'

[21] An essay by Lawrence Howe discusses the irony of *Modern Times* as a film which uses the very same technology it criticizes, about a homeless tramp who was in fact very rich. Lawrence Howe, "Charlie Chaplin in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Reflexive Ambiguity in 'Modern Times'," 45-65. Howe does cite Lewis Mumford's admiration for the reach of Chaplin's film's "essential conception of time and space which are already part of the unformulated experience of millions of people to whom Einstein or Bohr or Bergson … are scarcely even names." Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 342; Charlie's imaginative retelling of his own lost illusions are a good example of Bergson's "specific feeling of duration which our consciousness has" when it "gets back to its natural attitude," i.e. has the freedom to continually reinvent itself. Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness,* vii.

Modern Times was Chaplin's last silent film, and since it was made long after everyone else had abandoned the art form, it marked the end of the tradition.[22] Walter Kerr has a memory of the reels of patterned celluloid that were hand cranked in the darkness of the silent era. A murmured awe could be heard underneath the sound of the orchestra as smoke drifted up through the light and shadow dancing through an aperture onto the screen. He remembers: "The figure on the screen was enormous … weightless, extraordinarily graceful in its capacity to usher thought through a perpetual hush."[23]   The secret to the future modern workplace or house may still be suspended there.

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[22] Kerr, *The Silent Clowns*, 353.

[23] Kerr, 28.