

Analysis of the Unique Styles of Chaplin's Films in the 1920s-1930s

-- Taking "City Lights" and "Modern Times" as Examples

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Abstract: Charles Chaplin is recognised as a master of comedy, and his unique film style is widely discussed. However, the formation of his style went through a long process. This article uses the documentary research method to gather and review relevant information on the two films, "City Lights" and "Modern Times", analyse Chaplin's unique film styles of the 1920s-1930s, and examine the sources of these styles. This article concludes that his films in the 1920s-1930s formed a mixed story style of sorrow and joy, contained themes with personal views, and expanded visual styles for the theme. Chaplin's unique styles come from subjective personal experiences, caring attitudes towards society, and the objective impact of the development of film technology at that time.

Keywords: Charles Chaplin; Film style; Hollywood; Economic crisis; 1920s-1930s.

1. Introduction

As a recognised master of comedy films, Chaplin always maintained unique styles, including visual elements such as his much-talked-about appearance—ill-fitting suit, funny beard, and baggy leather shoes. Chaplin's films also had deeper and unique styles of plot, theme, production, and other elements.

This article takes Charles Chaplin's masterpieces, "City Lights" [1] and "Modern Times" [2] as examples, using the documentary research method to reorganise the primary and secondary information related to these two classic films, including their scripts, performances, production processes, era background, public opinion environment, and other aspects, analyse the uniqueness displayed by Chaplin in the two films, and examine the sources of this uniqueness.

2. Masterpieces: How His Films Became Classics

In the trailers of "City Lights" and "Modern Times", the word "masterpiece" appears in a very prominent position. "Masterpiece" is a reasonable description of both films at the time and their impact on later generations. In addition to connoting "excellence" and "wonder", this noun "masterpiece" contains a meaning of "distinctiveness". Because these two films are different, they can stand out and be talked about by people. Thus, how did Chaplin, as the screenwriter, director, and starring role in these two works, make them become classics?

2.1. "City Lights"

2.1.1. Inspiration from Real Experience

According to "Chaplin and American Culture" by Maland [3], "City Lights" should be classified as a Chaplin film of the 1920s because the project began in 1927—however, it was not screened until 1931. Therefore, the temperament shown in this film was still like Chaplin's early comedy films in many ways, involving tools that don't work, the main character's identity as a nobody, and other typically early-

Chaplin elements. When this film was released, there was already a serious economic crisis in the United States, but "City Lights" succeeded at the box office because unemployed ordinary people wanted to escape reality in the film world and Chaplin's vivid expression of everyday suffering deeply moved the audience. As Andre Bazin said in his analytical article on Chaplin, "Chaplin is different from other directors who describe hunger. He really felt hunger" [4]. Thus, when Chaplin made "City Lights" in 1927, even though he did not predict the economic crisis, because he expressed his deep feelings about poverty in the film, it became popular and relevant to the era.

In his autobiography, Chaplin said that the film's original premise derived from an idea he encountered by chance—namely, to design a film about blind people [5]. Although his narration was very simple, two very interesting childhood experiences echo the plot design of "City Lights".

Chaplin described how he spent most of his childhood with his mother and brother. His mother was an unemployed actor, so the family's financial resources were very unstable, and the three of them lived in poverty. During this time, they used to entertain themselves by taking a stagecoach ride to the market during the weekend, and in the carriage, he would often catch a glimpse of flower girls standing in the sun. Because the young Chaplin was very relaxed when he was riding in the carriage, in his eyes, the scene was extremely beautiful. In "City Lights", Chaplin endowed the role of the blind flower girl with all the good looks and virtues. The source of this flower girl seems to be inextricably linked with fragments of his childhood impressions.

A more distinctive connection between Chaplin's childhood and "City Lights" relates to the tramp played by Chaplin, who is always treated warmly as a friend by the drunk, rich man. This relationship was used as an important developmental element of the plot. Later, the tramp adapted to being treated in this manner and attended the high society ball with the drunk, rich man. In Chaplin's autobiography, he recounted a childhood experience that resonates with this plot detail. When his mother lost her job and faced food and clothing problems, his mother's former acting colleague

married into a wealthy family. On one occasion, she invited Chaplin and his mother to live in their manor for a while. Before living in the manor, Chaplin lacked food, but when he lived at the estate, everything changed, and he was treated like a child from a rich family. After some time, the young Chaplin slowly became accustomed to the new lifestyle and continued to live the dream until the end of the holiday. This childhood experience can be said to strongly reflect the main plot of the film.

From the examples listed above, it can be seen that Chaplin made conscious or unconscious dramatic adaptations of real-life experiences, and it is this feature that creates the sense of reality that “City Lights” can impress the audience. Due to specific plot needs, his action design and characters’ psychological expressions were undoubtedly exaggerated, but this exaggeration did not affect the film’s expression of true emotions. Furthermore, because he expressed cruel facts through jokes and exaggerated performances, he enabled the audience living in the era of economic crisis to feel rare relaxation and happiness. Therefore, due to his seamless combination of reality and exaggerated drama, “City Lights” not only brought joy but also impressed the audience, laying a solid foundation for the film’s box office success.

2.1.2. A Personal Style with Both Sorrow and Joy

In contemporary Hollywood, in addition to Chaplin, many other comedy stars were also making comedy films. However, their film styles were quite different. For example, Buster Keaton liked to express comedy elements through exaggerated actions, such as his wonderful performance in “The General” [6]. Chaplin’s films often contained atmospheres of joy mixed with sorrow. This amalgamation is particularly obvious in “City Lights”. The tramp he played in the film suffered significant injustice from fate and society, but Chaplin made these tragic passages hilarious through comic application. For example, in the scene where the protagonist was mistaken for a robber by the police and the rich man’s servant, he mustered up the courage to protect his rich friend but was ultimately wronged. This event should be something that would never make people happy, but Chaplin used wonderful scene design and body language to make the scene tense and full of jokes.

2.1.3. The Pragmatism of the Shooting Style and the Meticulousness of the Shooting Process

In that era, many different styles and genres of film shooting techniques emerged around the world, and most could be said to be excellent—a series of expressionist films were released in Germany, the Soviet director Eisenstein developed the role of montage to the fullest, and Griffith and others developed incomparably exquisite editing techniques in the United States [7]. In “City Lights”, which began filming in 1927, Chaplin, a famous director who already had the title of master, did not use too many skills while creating this film. In his previous films, he often used various novel shooting techniques, such as the passage of holding a cabin on the edge of a cliff in “The Gold Rush”. But in “City Lights”, most shots were ordinary medium-range long-range shots. Even the action scenes were mostly shot with fixed cameras, and some close-up shots only appeared when expressing the inner activities of the characters. Why did Chaplin abandon the high-tech so often used in the filming of this film, and why did he neglect to use any of the popular shooting techniques of the time? Perhaps his pursuit of pantomime might explain his filming decisions. In this romantic comedy film set in a modern city, there were few opportunities for adventure. It

was more necessary to express the character’s state through body language and expressions, and smooth, stable lens language could maximise the effect of this type of performance.

Although the lens language was simple, the film took a long time to shoot. In his autobiography, Chaplin wrote that once, to shoot a scene in the film, it took dozens of shots to achieve the desired effect. Thus, a large part of the reason for the film’s long filming cycle is a result of Chaplin’s serious work attitude and perfectionist artistic pursuit. In the era of celluloid films, this shooting method was time-consuming and costly, but Chaplin’s attitude ultimately resulted in the masterpiece “City Lights”.

2.2. “Modern Times”

2.2.1. Weakened Comedy elements; Strengthened Deep Thinking

Unlike “City Lights”, “Modern Times” was shot and released entirely during the economic crisis. Although it performed well at the box office, “Modern Times” was less successful than Chaplin’s previous works. Because this film was released at the end of the economic crisis, it stands to reason that it should have faced a better market environment than “City Lights”, which was released during the worst economic crisis. However, because Chaplin included significant contemplation about the economic environment when creating the film, it was lacking in comedy [8]. Most ordinary audiences of the period pursued entertainment, especially due to their experiences of the poor social and economic environment, so the entertainment function of films would be amplified. However, Chaplin chose to use comedy to explore profound social issues. Therefore, “Modern Times” ultimately failed to achieve ideal box office results, though it still became a classic.

2.2.2. The Prison of Industrial Linear Structure: Chaplin’s Dislike of Mechanisation

Chaplin has always had a feeling of resistance and aversion to mechanisation. Towards the end of his later sound film “The Great Dictator”, the barber he played gave a speech called “A message for all of humanity reaction”, which can be said to be Chaplin’s true expression of thoughts. In his speech, Chaplin mentioned that although mechanisation has enriched the material lives of human beings, it has aggravated human desires, and the rapid development of society makes everyone a slave to speed.

In “Modern Times”, Chaplin did not employ the simple filming techniques of “City Lights”. Instead, he used an exaggerated design to show a modern, inhumane factory. The factory comprised various straight lines and gears, the walls were adorned with huge monitors, and the workers were almost as one with the machinery. The film also contained several prison scenes, and the composition of the interior of the prison was identical to that of the factory—from the walls to the fences, there were straight lines everywhere, imprisoning people inside. Chaplin was possibly hinting that the factory environment was little more than a prison. Furthermore, the small, dilapidated house that the unemployed hero and the homeless heroine call “home” is also an important building in the film. The house sits in the wilderness and may collapse or be damaged at any time—but it is called “home”, a detail that can also be interpreted as a hint by Chaplin that the former idyllic life has become endangered in the industrial age. Thanks to these compositions, alongside Chaplin’s scene design that

combines action and environment, "Modern Times" contains many classic film scenes.

3. Sounds in Films: Chaplin's Persistence and Compromise

Many people classify "City Lights" and "Modern Times" as silent films. However, in my opinion, these two films are not silent in the fullest sense.

Douglas Gomery's book "The Hollywood studio system: a history" [9] states that by the time filming of Chaplin's "City Lights" began in 1927, there had been many sound films in Hollywood. So, what was Chaplin's attitude towards this matter? In his autobiography, he stated that, at the time, he, like many filmmakers who did not accept sound films, believed that adding sound would destroy the artistry of the film. Many wonderful mime acting skills are an advantageous feature of Chaplin's films, and mime performance itself does not require many elements of sound.

As mentioned above, Chaplin's attitude towards sound films at the time was characterised by resistance. For example, at the beginning of "City Lights", when the statue in the city centre is unveiled, and the big man makes a speech, what comes out of his mouth is a mechanical sound that resembles a telegraph.

However, in the face of the trend of the times, he also made compromises, as we can see in two places in the film. Firstly, background music runs throughout the film. Chaplin added this orchestral music to the film himself, and the tunes changed with the plot. Secondly, in one of the film's scenes, Chaplin's character accidentally ate a whistle, which made an embarrassing sound when he was talking to others, and this was the first time Chaplin used sound to create jokes in a film.

Chaplin filmed "Modern Times" when sound films were developing. Therefore, he made more compromises with sound in this film. In addition to the background music that runs throughout the film, various machines in the factory also make various noises, and questioning characters, such as Chaplin's boss and the machine salesperson, all speak out. Even Chaplin himself had his first taste of voice when his character sang a witty song to a crowd in a restaurant. Although the film was still largely dominated by Chaplin's pantomime performance, it is evident that Chaplin's negative attitude towards sound films started to ease.

By observing the voices in these two films, we can find that Chaplin, as a comedy master in the silent film era, changed his attitude from complete resistance to acceptance of the innovation of film technology—yet, despite his compromise, he still maintained his strengths and traditions, such as those wonderful pantomime performances.

4. Giving Opinions: Chaplin's Concern with and Participation in Social Affairs

Andre Bazin wrote that Chaplin was not on the side of the

"poor people" in his films but on the side of "humanity". In "City Lights", the tramp played by Chaplin was the light of the city, and he shone with desirable qualities. At this time, Chaplin did not criticise and reflect on the social structure but focused on human nature. For example, the rich man, servant, and other characters in the film were undoubtedly indifferent, while the tramp and the flower girl brought warmth to people.

In the years after "City Lights" was released, Chaplin travelled the world, visiting politicians like Churchill and befriending scientists like Einstein when the economic crisis was at its worst [10]. He realised that as a Hollywood comedy star, his remarks on society were influential. Thus, in "Modern Times", he decided to use this ability to speak out for the people within the lowest echelons of society and express his views on social development. However, as mentioned above, the film did not perform as well as expected at the box office, but was is a vivid portrayal of Chaplin's involvement in social events as a Hollywood star.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis of Chaplin's "City Lights" and "Modern Times", the following conclusions can be drawn.

First, Chaplin's films formed his unique style after the 1920s, which included not only some of his original visual elements but also his thinking about society and the tragic yet happy story style, while he expanded the visual effects according to the theme of the film. Second, on a subjective level, Chaplin's personal experiences and caring attitude towards society laid the foundation for the shaping of his style. Third, on an objective level, the development of related technologies such as sound films made him change his attitude and experiment, thus affecting his film style.

References

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