**WRITING 312 EXAM: Analyzing Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*** (1936)

Some quick facts that may help you make sense of certain scenes:

* “Nose powder” is a form of semi-refined cocaine that was commonly used by wealthier men. It was not a controlled substance in the way that it is today, but the powder the prisoner hides was likely stolen and certainly a “luxury” a prisoner would have been disallowed.
* A “gamin” (gamine) is defined as:
1. An often homeless girl who roams about the streets; an urchin.
2. A petite, charming girl or woman, especially one with a playful demeanor.

**READ THE CONTEXT MATERIAL, THEN RESPOND TO ALL PROMPTS.**



***Modern Times* as Historical Political Artifact:**In 1947, during the McCarthy era (1940s and 50s), FBI director J. Edgar Hoover launched an official investigation into filmmaker and entertainer Charlie Chaplin, suspecting him of communist sympathies. At this time, Hollywood entertainment figures (as well as government employees, academics, labor union organizers, and others) were accused of “Anti-American activities” and put on trial. In the conservative political climate of 1950s America, Hoover claimed Chaplin was "dangerously progressive and amoral."At the time, it was a crime under the Communist Control Act to be a member of the Communist party. The Supreme Court later overthrew the act because it was incompatible with the First Amendment.

Hoover reportedly had a strong personal dislike of the English-born Chaplin, and he wanted a reason to kick him out of the country.Portions of *Modern Times*, made 11 years before Hoover’s 1947 investigation, were brought forward to convince the court that Chaplin was a communist. But Hoover waited until 1952 to issue his accusations until the entertainer had left the country with his family for the London premiere of one of his films. Hoover claimed the FBI had an incriminating file on Chaplin--a claim revealed in 1980 to be false. But in 1952, this accusation complicated Chaplin’s re-entry to the U.S., and he elected to cut ties with his second country. He took up residence in exile in Switzerland.

Chaplin always denied being a communist, calling himself a "peacemonger.” But he felt the government's effort to suppress the ideology was an unacceptable infringement on the civil liberties of others.

**<*American*** [***anti-communist***](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-communist)[***propaganda***](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda) ***of the 1950s, specifically addressing the entertainment industry***

**NOTE:** While completing this exam, you may use a device to consult any reliable reference--dictionaries, Wikipedia, history articles, etc.

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**PART A--HOOVER’S HENCHMEN: *Speak for the men trying to indict Chaplin***.

**Write a one-sentence definition of “Bad for America:”**

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**Find and describe THREE specific scenes or moments in the film that Hoover's team might select to prove that Chaplin had communist sympathies, that he was “bad for America.” Please indicate an approximate timestamp.**

**Then, for each of the three scenes, answer these three questions.**

A1: Name the “un-American ideology” that is depicted or suggested in this scene.

A2: What rhetorical choices did Chaplin make in this scene--visual, narrative, or

otherwise--to communicate this ideology?

A3: According to the values and goals underpinning the investigation, what makes this

visual depiction of the stated “anti-American ideology” dangerous to the American

people? What makes it “bad for America”? Be as specific as possible.

**Your Scene 1 Description [Approx. timestamp: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_]**

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**A1:**

**A2:**

**A3:**

**Your Scene 2 Description [Approx. timestamp: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_]**

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**A1:**

**A2:**

**A3:**

**Your Scene 3 Description [Approx. timestamp: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_]**

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**A1:**

**A2:**

**A3:**

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**PART B--BEING CHAPLIN’S DEFENSE: *Now speak for Charlie Chaplin himself.***

**Write a one-sentence definition of “Good for America:”**

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**Find and describe THREE specific scenes or moments in the film that Chaplin’s legal defense team (had he chosen to fight Hoover) might have selected to *exonerate* Chaplin and invalidate Hoover’s accusations that Chaplin is “bad for America.” Please indicate an approximate timestamp.**

**Then, for each of the three scenes, answer the following three questions.**

B1: Name the “peacemonger ideology” that is depicted or suggested in this scene.

B2: What rhetorical choices did Chaplin make in this scene--visual, narrative, or

otherwise--to communicate this ideology?

B3: According to the beliefs that Chaplin promoted in his work, what makes this

depiction of the stated ideology “good for America”? Be as specific as possible.

**Your Scene 1 Description [Approx. timestamp: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_]**

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**B1:**

**B2:**

**B3:**

**Your Scene 2 Description [Approx. timestamp: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_]**

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**B1:**

**B2:**

**B3:**

**Your Scene 3 Description [Approx. timestamp: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_]**

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**B1:**

**B2:**

**B3:**

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**PART C--INTEGRATION:** Respond briefly and clearly to each of the prompts below, using the skills and tools we’ve explored all semester. Your audience is me, your instructor.

* **Could one argue that being a “peacemonger” is incompatible with being loyal to America? How or why could this be or not be so? What terms must first be defined? Choose a position and explain.**
* **What understandings or beliefs does a declaration of “bad for America” or “good for America” depend on? How *should* we measure and weigh what counts as “good”?**

**What does America’s “goodness” depend on?**

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**PART D--*Modern Times* as Prescient Commentary on Society, Industry, & Technology**

**Read the contextual info and then respond to each of the following prompts.**

**D.1:**

In making this film, Chaplin was partly inspired by news stories of healthy farm boys leaving for the city to work on factory assembly lines in the wake of the Depression, who then suffered from nervous breakdowns due to the unnatural nature and extreme pressure of factory work. In fact, this very tragedy (and its willful neglect by the industrialists) is parodied in the entire opening sequence. Many otherwise healthy young men were overworked into psychotic breaks. This piece of medical history from the industrial revolution is one of the many reasons adult labor laws came to be.

Chaplin said, “I believe in the power of laughter and tears as an antidote to hatred and terror.” And he also said, “I am at peace with God. My conflict is with man.” Some historians and biographers have claimed that Chaplin felt a particular urgency to encourage people, through art, to take care of each other in a socially benevolent, Christian way.

**If Chaplin were living and making films today, what do you suppose he would be making comedies about? (1) Imagine and describe one film idea he might pursue in hopes of drawing attention to an issue. (2) Then tell me how successful you believe this film would be, and why.**

**D.2:**

Some of the technology shown in the factory in *Modern Times* was absolute science fiction at the time--particularly the idea of live video surveillance. The only “real-time” communication was radio; everything else was created long before any audience experienced it. People were familiar with radio and film, of course, and in 1936, television did exist--but not yet for the general public.

Because all moving pictures were recorded on physical film, which had to be mechanically and chemically processed, then edited, finished, and reproduced as many times as there were theaters to send it to, the idea of a “live feed” that someone could watch from a remote location was unheard of. Today we are surrounded by cameras and the omnipresent possibility of being recorded, so while many may find this uncomfortable, we accept the fact of it.

So it is important to remember how shocking the idea of live monitoring (by an authority) would have been for audiences at the time.

**When the factory worker tries to go the bathroom for a short break a giant screen appears, from which his boss shouts at him to get back to work. What role does this intrusion play in the film? What might Chaplin have been trying to say at that time?**

*End of exam. Thank you!*