Charlie Chaplin's Film 'Modern Times' A Treasure of Visual Communication Art&Technique

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Abstract

This Research intends to understand the visual aspects of Charlie Chaplin's film Modern Times..This paper will also try to contemplate other Chaplin's film to vividly understand the dynamics of visuals in Chaplin's film journey. In this paper I would try to explore Visual communication as a perception through films and its impact on the viewer's mind. Charlie Chaplin's films have always had a hidden meaning in his story plots. Let it be A great dictator,TheGold Rush, City Lights etc. Through hilarious scenes he always tried to imbibe his narrative on the minds of viewers. Watching his film without dialogues and sometimes without subtitles never became a barrier for understanding the story of the film and his broader message. His subtitles are also apt and precise "We ain't burglars — we're hungry is the sentence in the Film Modern Times. When so called thieves enter into a department store and caught by police this sentence pop up. This is a most valuable commentary made to show the condition of the recession and unemployment era in US.

When we talk about imagination, it's all our brain activity and perception process. As what we see in a film is our physical and optical experience, but it doesn't go straight to our brain, but it goes with our own interpretation about the scene &visual we see. So necessarily our imagination and perception are two slightly different stages of our viewing experience.

There are three major approaches for our experience of watching film. Matravers put, it is a matter of perception where imagination plays no significant role, particularly in the fiction film genre. Currie has a different outlook. While watching a film perception boils down to the input of imaginative feelings. The third approach accepts imagination & perception are essential factors in experiencing a film.

Key Words –

1) *Visual communication2) Visual Literacy 3) Filmstudies 4) Charlie Chaplin's film Modern Times.*

Objectives:

1) To explore visual communication aspects in Charlie Chaplin's film Modern Times.
2) To study the scenes of various moods and feelings Portrayed in the film Modern Times
   To understand the approach of the film maker/director/script writer.

Introduction –It is said that a single visual speaks a thousand words. It is true that visual appeal is more effective than audio communication. We have observed it in our day to day routine work also. If you are driving a vehicle and go near to Chowk, you see a traffic signal and by its color you immediately come to know your next course of action if it is red you have to wait till it turns green and so on.

Visual communication definition an optical point of view is an ability to see things and perceive its meaning of our past knowledge of images, signs, patterns and so on. The eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears. (Ref -http://rickmarshall.blogspot.com/2004/12/things-are-not-what-they-seem.html)is a famous quote of Heraclitus and highlights vision as most significant things in all the other senses. It is

said that vision is very important and for the human beings, seeing is the predominant way to get information about the surroundings.

The second aspect of visual is, perception as our visual literacy is closely associated with the perception.Ourknowledge and understanding of our surrounding, people and events and so on constructs perception phenomena. According to the Oxford Dictionary- perception is described as the way you notice things, especially with the senses. Perception also means belief, a belief or opinion that many people hold based on how things seem to be. For example, when we perceive lord Ram or Laxman as human beings, we have specific images in our mind and that is based on the mythological books we had read in our childhood and pictures, sketches we had seen published therein. Perception comprises of the process of identification, interpretation and assimilation of information. In this paper researcher intends to find out visual communication aspects in the film 'modern times 'of Charlie Chaplin. Most of the Charlie chaplain's films are silent in nature as far as sync dialogues are concerned. You will find only subtitles for the dialogue. Of course background music score is an important element of his storytelling skills. He was very conversant with miming skills that has added to his ability of visual communication's power.

Skinny tramps with a cane stick in hand, bowler hat and prominent mustache had dominated the screen for almost two decades entertaining and educating spectators by his crisp screenplays and precise presentation of the theme. This paper will try to explore all communicative aspects of the film that enables viewers to understand the contents of the films in the perspective.

Research Methodology-The qualitative text analysis method is adopted while performing this research. Here the text is classified into two major categories. A) Visual text 2) sound text (that includes background music & surround sound effects) the analysis would not be shot by shot, but a few significant scenes are taken into account for consideration. The sound element of this film has also an important presence in the film. Though the film has no dialogue as such in spoken form (except jobless song) background music and atmospheric sound of the film has enhanced the communication process. So, though the research is about visual communication the sound has integrated with a visual in such a way that a researcher has to consider this aspect while doing this research.

Review of Literature:

The researcher has gone through many websites and research articles understand the purpose of making the film Modern Times. The important aspect of any film is the approach and treatment. It is mostly based upon the understanding of the issue by the director. For this purpose the Official Website of Charlie Chaplin's work - www.charliechaplin.com proved useful. Here researcher got to know about the background of the film and a world tour made by Mr. Chaplin before starting this film project. An Interview to a journalist regarding this film had many details that show the ability of a filmmaker to present such an engrossing artwork on an important social issue. Another important document 'Films Of Charlie Chaplin' authored by Gerald D. McDonald, Michael Conway & Mark Ricci. Had given this research an insight about the perspectives of film scholars Charlie Chaplin's films. The overall reception of his films have been illustrated in the book gives the perception of the general audience. My Autobiography-by Charlie Chaplin is a first-hand material about his film making techniques, skills and approaches which has been reviewed.

An important document called 'A model Map about Charlie Chaplin's visual thinking.' By Paul Foreman-Mind Mapper at 'Mind Map Inspiration 'had developed a model Map Charlie Chaplin's visual thinking. This map has 6 attributes like simplicity, fun, expression, story, hope & possibility. He has explained and elaborately discussed crawls visual thinking power. Simplicity in his character and costume, creating a recognizable representative image of a little Tramp in the spectator's mind is his specialty.His fun making scenes made the audience to take the serious issues in the lighter vein. Fun is an emotion makes people release their tension, this aspect is commonly observed in Charlie Chaplin's films.   In short This

graphical representation indicates the plight of Charlie Chaplin asa great communicator through visual elements.   (Ref-http://www.mindmapinspiration.com/the-charlie-chaplin-guide-to-visual-thinking/)

Kathy Puckett, a researcher and speech language pathologist in her LANGUAGE PLAY: LEARNING COMMUNICATION WITH SILENT FILMS had described the importance of silent over sound. She has pointed out in the article that facial expressions and body language are 55% of entire communication. She also emphasized that kids who are creative, silent movies offer a great basis to experience the nature of film as a communication. (Ref-https://hilltownfamilies.org/2013/05/29/language-play-learning-communication-with-silent-films/?v=7516fd43adaa)

Apart from these textual contents researcher has seen his films, particularly where he played a little tramp. Those films are the circus & city light. Though the film under research has not mentioned him as a tramp in the credit lines, but mentioned him as a factory worker. The character is not less than a little Tramp he already played several times in his lifetime including in some short films too. In addition to these books and digital content researcher has gone through the paper on nonverbal communication aspect. Albert Mehrabian and colleagues wrote a paper in the '60s, where they concluded that the total meaning in a message is "7 percent verbal, 38 percent vocal, and 55 percent facial. Of course these research findings were applicable only to the emotional aspect of the population selected for the survey. So this number cannot be taken for any other communication process. However the research underlines the importance of nonverbal Communication.

Curtain Raiser for the main text of research –As this research paper intends to focus on visual communication in Charlie Chaplin's film 'Modern times. It is necessary to go through the major aspect of visual communication in any performing art like theatre and film; and that is body language. Body language has a history of thousands of years before words came into existence .Charles Darwin the scientist of repute had written a book titled 'The expressions of emotions in man and animal' where he had stressed the importance of visual communication amongst all living mammals. Ray Birdwhistell an anthropologist and communication theorist observed that an average person speak only for about 10 minutes in a day. The average time for each sentence is about 2.5 seconds. Above all, his study reveals that a person can make & recognize about 2500 facial expressions. (Ref-Charlie Chaplin: A Pioneer of Body Language Skills by Loratis Institute)

This signifies that Visual Communication is a routine exercise of mankind. However, in the context of film and screenplay domain it requires a systematic approach and design. Charlie Chaplin was not just an actor, director, but also had a capacity to compose music which he has done for his several films. These qualities helped him to put his message precisely on celluloid by crafting appropriate scenes, by articulating the screen play and using sound elements like music and background score along with sound effects enhancing the events in the film.

Textual Qualitative Content Analysis –

Film Modern Times-Theme- This film is about modernistaion of the civilization with the help of automation. Film narrates the problems of worker class in the era of 19th Century. Modern Times is a story of machines and men "Modern Times: a story of industry, of individual enterprise, humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness."   With this sentence film begins. In short this line speaks of core theme of the movie.

The film is set on the great depression of 1930s' that made whole world miserable in terms of earning and job acquisition. The poverty gave birth to crime and society had to face multiple social problems. The automation process was in its infancy that also gave rise to mass unemployment. The film also shows class conflict existed and its side effects. In an interview to a newspaper Charlie said "Unemployment is the vital question. .Machinery should benefit mankind. It should not spell tragedy and throw it out of

work."(Ref-https://www.charliechaplin.com/en/articles/6-Filming-Modern-Times   )Poverty, unemployment political agendas, conditions of industry, addictions& crime have been dealt in this film very profoundly.

The film is a silent movie, though talkie was very much in place in the film industry almost for a decade. It has been revealed from his interview that in the beginning he planned to make a talkie film. He had also prepared dialogues for the film, some recordings also took place. It is evident that he was not satisfied with the outcome. And King of pantomime preferred to keep it a silent movie with all its communication tentacles intact. Of course in some places we do listen, sync voice, for example the boss addresses his workers from CCTV & a sales executive giving instructions for using feeding machine. In the era of silent movies, facial expressions and body language were the most important aspects of the film. Charlie Chaplin had mastered this art. The beauty of non-verbal communication is showcased in this movie, you will find many actions, movements, body reflexes became alphabets in the film.

The researcher has selected few scenes of the film to substantiate my assumption about the visual communication power of Charlie Chaplin as an actor, writer & director. His film starts with wonderful metaphoric visuals. The film begins with Sheep larger numbers are walking this shot is followed by a big crowd walking on the road coming from factories. Here Director indicates that human beings are like a herd of sheep.

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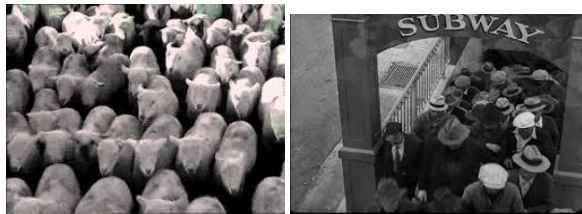
Factory workers are shown like cogs in the machinery. In the entire factory scene the monotony of the life is displayed as Charlie featured as a factory worker repeating his hand movements constantly withoutpurpose.

The director had illustrated his observations about socioeconomic surroundings through comic scenes. Particularly, he had made a remarkable comment on automation through a scene in the factory. The scene where Charlie as a factory worker is sitting for the demonstration of a feeding machine as a guinea pig, a conveyor belt is used to test a machine to feed workers as they work, just to save lunch Hour time for more productivity.

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This is an exaggeration, but taking into cinematic liberty point it fits well in the scene and the story. While showing workers routine life he also made a point to put before us, how the owners contribute in the industrial outputs. In a 30 second shot, the owner has appeared as a happy goes lucky type man doing supervision in between his newspaper reading and solving crossword puzzles.

On the floor of the factory- The director has introduced the new era of industrialization by showing big floors assembly lines. This is a general visualization of machine room, but in this film the director has shown a man and machine relationship. He tried to indicate a man attempt to dominate machine. This could have really a new thought at that time.

The most classic scene in the film is Charlie waves a red flag. The situation is the flag is dropped from the open truck and Charlie tried to invite the attention of truck driver by waving it. Incidentally a crowd of agitating workers is approaching from his backside. So it looks like he is a leader of the group, obviously police arrests him. The shot has been so meticulously composed for this situation that Viewers experience the naturally flowing   nature of his screenplay.

In Modern Times he inadvertently takes cocaine, a smuggled nose powder while in jail. This scene showcases his superb ability to speak without uttering a single word. In this scene he has shown the effects of nose powder delicately and precisely and that too by not disturbing the atmosphere of the jail and its code of conduct.

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Communication through body gesture & walking style-

Charlie Chaplin's specialty is that he had created mix reactions in the viewer's mind through his acting abilities. He applied all his inborn assets of communication through facial expressions, gestures, body movement. His satirical narratives hammered us as spectators against ignorance, injustice and lawlessness. Charlie Chaplin had shown us a beauty of silence through his impeccable performances. The character Tramp is a true face of a common man. Through this he compelled the audience to identify themselves with the screen image he portrayed in his Tramp centered films. After watching his films I have asserted following important attributes of Charlie Chaplin's acting.

His walking style- His walk is the most attractive and most expressive part of his performance. He walks with his feet wide open that creates a comic feeling in our mind. Many a times he walks with loads legs that show the frustrations and sorrow. When he walks fast he takes it his character, adding acceleration and speed to the character. So he's walking is not just a style but speaks the story also. Some time we may feel that his walking style is artificial, an animal like, but he has a specific intention. This is not just acrobatic but narrates his character's role in this mundane world. Charlie's movies are not there just to entertain us, but to show us ordinary man's plight through rich visuals and his walking style is a major component of it.Sawani Vinita, Researcher from India has meticulously elaborated Chaplin's walking abilities. She wrote -The world's adorable 'Tramp', himself defines his walk. He tramps, trudges, plods, stamps, tramples, lumbers, stumps, clumps, stomps, stumbles, marches, clomps to make us laugh and cry. A person who travels from place to place, a vagabond on foot in search of work, or the one who begs, is essentially a Tramp. Though he is silent, we can hear his footsteps because they are heavy. It is the tramp of his marching feet - marching towards humanity in search of love, compassion and composure, his thirst of glee transcending the existing gloom.(Reference- The Walk That Talks-Article contributed .

Visual Communication supported by sound effects and background score

Charlie Chaplin always wanted to speak through visuals and that's why he preferred silent movie over talkie, the film under this research Modern Times is a solid proof of his conviction. But while making a silent movie he never underestimated the importance of sound in the film. His visual communication became stronger and pointed, with the help of an excellent sound design he made his films more dynamic and Modern Times is not an exception to it.In Modern Times the scene of a police station to create a sound of rumbling stomachs, he used to blow bubbles into a pail of water and that made the entire scene more vibrant and live. So in my view visual communication is not just a natural one, but it has to be cultivated, designed with proper research and reasoning, which Charlie did with supreme precision. We can also hear him using his voice in the film, but not in a dialogue form, but for a mock-Italian gibberish song which has no meaning in particular but is able to entertain the audience. Here also Chaplin proved that if you have style and approach even meaningless words can become an asset to your scene. So again, his visual thinking approach is substantiated by this inclusion.

Findings and conclusions

After going through his films and literature, websites and web content Researcher has made following observations cum conclusions.

1. Charlie Chaplin was not in favor of using dialogues in the film,
2. His comic approach got brighten by his pantomime performance style.
3. He had earned tremendous mastery over the art by hard work and continuous practice.
4. He had not just earned skills for doing it, but he had also given a thought to audience responses, the timing is the vital element in such type of comedy.
5. He studied the entire communication circle and accordingly performed. Movement and pacing, speed using body organ minutely, giving independent attention for each action, understanding the exact ambience had always been reflected in his movie.
6. His comedy scenes, characters were not merely a tool for creating comic ambience, but he had made very serious statements about poverty, social fabric, war & people.
7. There is no linear approach in his films to the social issues.
8. Charlie Chaplin's films are not just comic it has many texts and subtexts. To understand it you need, of a bit attentive and a visually literate spectator.
9. The comedy, he displayed comes in a satirical form highlighting socio- political contemporary issues. Charlie Chaplin once said, "... it is not the reality that matters in a film, but what the imagination can make of it.
10. Charlie Chaplin's film with strong visuals appeals to both eyes and heart.

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