

# Hero or Victim: Narrative Framing and Visual Representation in Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas (Dziga Vertov, 1931) and Modern Times (Charlie Chaplin, 1936)

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## Abstract

This essay analyzes the narrative framing and visual representation of the hero victim protagonist in Dziga Vertov's *Symphony of the Donbas* and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, as well as their symbolic roles in portraying industrial and war ideologies. Through avant-garde film styles, both filmmakers depict characters conflicted between empowerment and victimization, reflecting the psychological contradictions of war, labor, and societal expectations. In *Symphony of the Donbas*, Vertov employs montage, symbolism, and eccentric framing to situate the protagonist within the apparatus of Soviet industrialism, where the figure oscillates between heroic labor and victimized submission to state authority. In *Modern Times*, Chaplin uses comedic timing and visual satire to present the protagonist as a victim of dehumanizing industrialization and a stoic hero, navigating oppressive institutions with humor and determination. By comparing these films in terms of narrative structure and visual imagery, this study reveals the psychological dimensions of the hero's life in war and industrial society.

## Introduction

This essay analyzes the representation of the protagonists as victims and heroes in Dziga

Vertov's *Symphony of the Donbas* (Enthusiasm, 1930) and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), two classical films using avant-garde film language to depict the ideological and social effects of industrial labor.

Through their innovative uses of montage, visual satire, and symbolism, the two directors offer multi-dimensional portraits of the individual's position in their time's industrialized and mechanized world. Vertov's Soviet documentary-style fiction film portrays the protagonist as a worker caught in the cogs of industrial progress, revealing both the heroism of collective labor and the implicit victimization in the system. In contrast, Chaplin's *Modern Times* parodies the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism through Tramp's position as a victim of mechanized labor and a resistant figure who endures through wit and determination. Through a comparative analysis of the films according to narrative framing and visual representation, this paper will contrast how each director's unique style constructs the protagonists' double identities as empowered and oppressed characters.

While Vertov emphasizes collective labor and ideological symbolism through montage and unconventional framing, Chaplin uses slapstick comedy and rhythmic editing to parody industrialization, depicting the Tramp as an individual hero fighting a mechanized world. Both filmmakers utilize visual means to mediate the paradox of the protagonist's agency and subjugation, offering contrasting yet complementary reflections on the human

condition in an industrialized world. This comparative analysis demonstrates the power of film style as both a vehicle for ideological commentary and an art form in the early 20th century.

## **1. Historical and Theoretical Background**

### **1.1. Avant-Garde Cinema in the 1930s**

Avant-garde cinema in the 1930s evolved as a response to the time's technological, social, and political evolution. Filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and Charlie Chaplin pushed the boundaries of conventional film narrative, experimenting with new forms of narrative structure, visual style, and cinematic devices to convey ideological content. Filmmakers like Vertov in the USSR were mainly influenced by the constructivist movement, which sought to use art for political and social transformation (Bordwell, 1997). Vertov's films, notably *Symphony of the Donbas*, employed montage—a technique that involved the rapid juxtaposition of images to create new meanings—to highlight the work and heroism of industrial workers in Soviet society. The montage technique, as theorized by Vertov and his contemporaries, was also seen as a revolutionary tool to shape the viewer's perception of social and political realities, emphasizing the place of collective labor in the Soviet state (Bordwell, 1997). In the West, filmmakers like Chaplin used film as social commentary on industrial capitalism, more precisely in slapstick comedy and visual satire.

Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) starkly contrasts the Soviet model of the collective worker in its focus on the individual in the

capitalist system, where the dehumanizing force is mechanization. Chaplin's satirical humor in *Modern Times* reflects concerns over the adverse effects of industrialization on workers. This theme was also addressed by social theorists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, who critiqued the alienating impact of labor in capitalist economies (Hirsch, 2003). By portraying the Tramp as a rebellious hero who lives despite oppressive institutions, Chaplin dramatized broad anxieties about the decline of individual freedom and dignity in an increasingly mechanized world (Hirsch, 2003).

### **1.2. Film Style as a Political Tool**

Vertov and Chaplin used film style as a political tool, though their various cultural and ideological orientations shaped their strategies. Vertov's montage was innovative in conveying complex ideas and political symbolism by editing the time and space of the frame. Montage theory in Soviet cinema, spearheaded by theorists and filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein, contended that the editing of shots could create emotional and ideological effects, buttressing the collective ideals of the state (Pudovkin, 1970). Vertov's *Symphony of the Donbas* is a classic instance of this approach in portraying workers as cogs in a collective machine, graphically demonstrating the tension between state control and individual agency. The hero in Vertov's film embodies both the heroism of labor as a participant in the socialist venture and the victimhood of the worker trapped in the impersonal machinery of industrialization. On the other hand, Chaplin's *Modern Times* uses slapstick comedy and visual

irony to satirize capitalism's social and economic inequalities.

His style is more individualized, focusing on the protagonist's individualistic struggle with the dehumanizing aspects of factory work. The Tramp's ability to maintain his dignity and resilience in the face of industrial alienation testifies to the humanist ambitions of Chaplin's films (Cohen, 2004). Whereas Vertov's montage indicates the collective mode of labor within the Soviet state, Chaplin's comedy emphasizes the strength and capacity of the individual for resistance to oppression from the system. Chaplin's approach is consonant with humanist cinema, which attempted to delineate the individual's struggle within the grander social structures, using comedy and irony to strip the contradictions embedded in capitalist society (Cohen, 2004).

### **1.3. Film as Ideology and the Hero-Victim Binary**

Both movies elaborate on the hero-victim binary in their protagonists, but their ideological underpinnings are decided by the Soviet Union's and capitalist America's respective political economies.

In Vertov's *Symphony of the Donbas*, the hero is a socialist labor hero, emblematic of the ideals of the Soviet state but also victimized by the very repressive industrial order in which he works. This complex portrayal aligns with the Marxist class struggle theory that recognized that laborers, while essential to the production process, were routinely exploited and alienated (Marx, 1867). The acceptance of collectivism

and industrial progress of the Soviet Union found in Vertov's film starkly contrasts Chaplin's portrayal of the individual as a hero who attempts to maintain individual autonomy in a capitalistic society. Chaplin's satirical critique of the capitalist system in *Modern Times* illustrates the contradictions of capitalist ideology, wherein workers, despite being at the very core of the system, tend to become themselves no more than cogs in more excellent economic machinery (Hirsch, 2003). The visual style and narrative framing in both films dictate the ideological messages about work, industry, and the role of individuals in these systems.

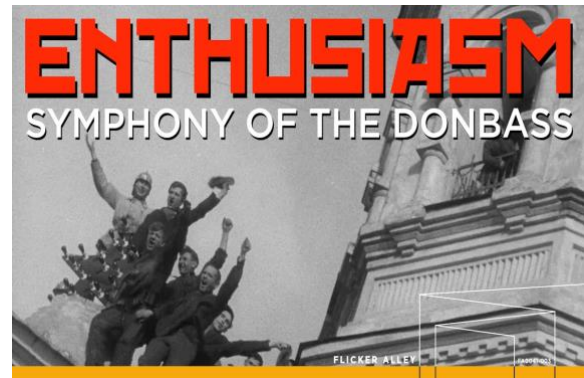
The battle between heroism and victimhood is played out in the character's struggles and the stylistic choices of the two filmmakers. Vertov's synthetic montage and abstract imagery emphasize the collective power and alienation of the hero. At the same time, Chaplin's comedic timing and rhythmic editing reveal the individual's victimization in capitalist society, even as the hero's resilience and dignity are preserved (Bordwell, 1997; Hirsch, 2003). These aesthetic and ideological differences are rich territory for examining how film style can inflect our perceptions of labor, heroism, and victimhood in industrial society.

## 2. Symphony of the Donbas Analysis

### 2.1. Film Overview

*Symphony of the Donbas* (1930) is a documentary-style Soviet film by Dziga Vertov that documents the industrialization of the Donbas region in Ukraine. The movie is a quintessential example of Soviet montage cinema, in which rapid editing and symbolic

imagery create a narrative that reflects both the hope of industrial progress and the exploitation of the worker. Vertov employs montage not as a stylistic principle but as a political tactic for demonstrating the interconnectedness of industrial labor, class struggle, and Soviet ideology.



### 2.2. Narrative Framing and the Heroic/Victim Dichotomy



In *Symphony of the Donbas*, Vertov situates the protagonist, represented through the industrial worker, within a dual context of heroism and victimhood. In a style typical of Soviet montage cinema, the protagonist's identity is forged through the editing of imagery, enabling Vertov to create a dynamic image of labor that draws attention to both the heroic and tragic aspects

of the worker's life (Eisenstein, 1949). Through rapid, sometimes vertiginous editing, the film depicts workers' contribution to the success of the socialist enterprise, both as a member of the collective endeavor and as a cog in the vast industrial machine. The image of workers' empowerment propels the Soviet system forward, and they are the heroes of this narrative of national construction (McDonnell, 2013). However, Vertov is not afraid to show the darker side of industrial labor.

The juxtaposition of human labor and mechanized activity is shocking, rendering the workers as victims as well as heroes of the dehumanizing tendencies of industrialization. The workers' faces, shown in close-up and often impassive, convey their exhaustion and alienation (Bourgeois, 1988). These shots are employed to show the subordination of the workers to the machinery they are a part of and their place in a more extensive system that works to render them faceless and interchangeable (Lasky, 2006). The rhythmic editing heightens this contrast, as the workers' movement appears to sync with the industrial process. Yet, the workers themselves are trapped in this endless cycle of labor. By doing this, Vertov's film warps the line between heroism and victimhood, and a more complex image of the workers' contribution to industrialization emerges (Kenez, 2003).

### 2.3. Visual Techniques



Vertov's film uses several visual techniques that reveal the victim and heroic nature of the protagonist. Central to his approach is the use of symbolism, odd framing, and close-ups to highlight the dual role of the hero in the factory complex (Eisenstein, 1949). The film's montage creates a rhythmic tempo that mimics the mechanical aspect of factory labor, highlighting the integral role of the workers in the socialist effort and, simultaneously, their dehumanization in the face of overwhelming mechanization (McDonnell, 2013). The most notable technique that Vertov employs is extreme close-ups, which are repeated frequently to frame workers' faces as they carry out repetitive tasks.

These close-ups, often featuring sweat-drenched, expressionless faces, visually help to emphasize the workers' exploitation and alienation (Bazin, 2004). For example, in one shot, a worker's face is shown in a close-up, his face a blank as his hands mechanically tighten bolts on a racing conveyor belt. The depersonalization and emotional detachment of these close-ups emphasize the worker in a powerful image of both the hero (since their labor is crucial to the socialist undertaking) and

the victim (since they are likened to a cog of the industrial machine) (Lasky, 2006). The other significant aspect of Vertov's visual style is his utilization of symbolic imagery.

The film frequently shows abstract images of gears, wheels, and factories, which represent both the industrial progress of the Soviet state and the alienating force of mechanization (Buchman, 2005). For example, images of workers' hands operating machinery are often intercut with shots of cogs and gears, symbolizing the workers' role as cogs within a vast industrial machine. This repetitive imagery reinforces the worker as a cog metaphor but also suggests the subordination of the workers within the industrial hierarchy (McDonnell, 2013). The images make a point about the entire theme of the film: despite the workers being integral to the state's success, they are simultaneously relegated to the repetitive, draining, and ultimately alienating labor that supports it (Maltsev, 2017). The second key aspect of the visual style is the unconventional framing, whereby the worker is frequently positioned in wide shots of him being dwarfed by huge industrial landscapes or machinery.

These wide shots, which frequently incorporate machinery as part of the frame, visually enhance the sense of diminutiveness and insignificance that the individual worker feels in the industrial complex (Kenez, 2003). The framing conveys the powerlessness of the hero in the face of industrial and state forces. No matter how heroic their labor is, the workers remain trapped in the system and cannot escape the cycle of mechanization (Kenez, 2003). Rhythmic

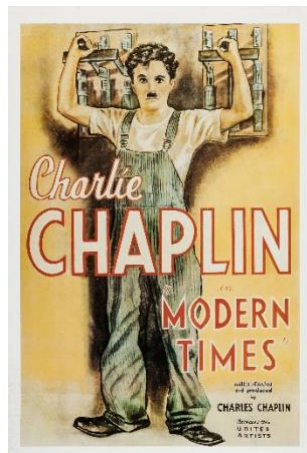
editing in *Symphony of the Donbas* is finally utilized to emphasize the mechanized nature of industrial labor.

In most sequences, the rapid cutting between shots mimics the unforgiving pace of factory work, giving the audience a sense of the monotony and dehumanization experienced by workers (Eisenstein, 1949). In illustrating the efficiency and modernity of the industrial process, the technique also adds to the alienation of workers in being forced to conform to a disciplined, unchanging pattern (Bourgeois, 1988). The disorienting impact of this editing is a reflection of the mental and physical toll that industrial labor takes on the workers, which further cements their hero and victim status (McDonnell, 2013).

### **3. Analysis of Modern Times**

#### **3.1. Summary of the Film**

*Modern Times* (1936) is Charlie Chaplin's satirical assault on the capitalist industrial system. With its iconic shots of Chaplin's character, the Tramp, battling the machines at the factory, the film is a story of survival and resistance in an oppressive industrial world. While Vertov's film focuses on the collective effort of workers in a socialist state, Chaplin's *Modern Times* is a story of the individual struggle for agency and dignity amidst the forces of mechanization and corporate control.



Illustrates factory labor's mechanical and repetitive nature—setting the tone for industrial capitalism.

### 3.2. Narrative Framing and the Heroic/Victim Dichotomy



"The Tramp caught in factory gears: a visual metaphor for the worker as part of the machine."

In *Modern Times*, Chaplin presents his protagonist, the Tramp, as a victim and hero of the industrialized system. As in *Symphony of the Donbas*, where the worker is figured in a dialectical opposition between heroism and victimhood, Chaplin's protagonist oscillates between oppressed gear in the industrial machine and figure of resistance and resilience (Chaplin, 1936; McDonnell, 2013). The Tramp's identity is constituted in comedic yet elegiac visual sequences emphasizing his struggle with the mechanical forces of the factory. Through rapid editing and dynamic sequences, Chaplin underscores the dehumanizing quality of factory work, portraying the Tramp as a single cog within an immense impersonal factory system of production (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). However, unlike the *Symphony of the Donbas* factory workers, who are shown to be part of the progress of the Soviet state, Chaplin's Tramp is shown to be a victim of capitalist exploitation, struggling to maintain his individualism and humanity in the face of overwhelming mechanization (Cohen, 2001). Chaplin also uses the factory assembly line to place the protagonist's victimization in context.

Using sight gags and exaggerated physical performance, the Tramp is made into a helpless victim, caught in the nonstop beat of the factory. His repeated encounters with the mechanical system, such as the famous "feeding machine" sequence, underscore the ludicrousness of the industrial process, creating him as both a victim and comic hero. As the Tramp is fighting the dehumanizing forces of the factory, he also emerges as a figure of



resistance and survival. In exposing the worker's resourcefulness and resilience in terms of humor, Chaplin portrays the Tramp as a hero who continues to struggle despite the oppressive system he faces. This tension between heroism and victimhood is mirrored in Vertov's treatment of workers in *Symphony of the Donbas*, whereby workers' labor within the industrial system is liberating and alienating (McDonnell, 2013).

### 3.3. Visual Techniques



He presents his position as a resistant individual challenging conformity, shifting the victim trope into heroic resistance. Chaplin employs a number of visual devices in *Modern Times* to draw attention to the protagonist's dual role within the industrialized system.

Just as in *Symphony of the Donbas*, where Vertov employs close-ups and symbolic imagery to scrutinize workers' roles, Chaplin's visual style draws attention to the Tramp's dilemma through symbolic framing and exaggerated bodily movements (Chaplin, 1936). The film's comedic approach to factory labor sets a pace in which slapstick is used to satirize and humanize the Tramp's ordeals. The film's most iconic sequence, in which the factory machine swallows the Tramp, visually depicts the

alienation and helplessness of the worker against the industrial machine. The fast cutting and movement emphasize factory work's mechanical, repetitive nature, and Chaplin's exaggerated physical comedy heightens the absurdity of the Tramp's victimization. Chaplin's symbolic imagery is also evident in the recurring image of the assembly line and the "feeding machine," both representing the mechanized nature of modern production.

These shots strengthen the overall theme of *Modern Times*: that industrialization, though it represents progress, also alienates the individual and turns him into an interchangeable component of the overall system (Cohen, 2001). Like the shots of gears and wheels in *Symphony of the Donbas*, Chaplin's consistent use of factory equipment emphasizes the worker's role as a cog in the overall industrial machine. Yet Chaplin's wit and athleticism allow him to transform the Tramp's victimization into a story of survival and resistance and to offer his heroism to the viewer through empathy and laughter (McDonnell, 2013). In framing, Chaplin often places the Tramp in wide shots that contrast his smallness with the enormity of the factory.

These shots visually augment the powerlessness of the individual worker against the crushing forces of industry. This sense of smallness and insignificance, similar to the long shots of *Symphony of the Donbas*, reinforces the Tramp's struggle with a more extensive impersonal system. However, unlike Vertov's film, where the worker is trapped in a collective and mechanized system, Chaplin's shot of the



Tramp reinforces the individual's capacity for humor, survival, and resilience amidst dehumanization (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010).

#### **4. Comparative Analysis**

##### **4.1. Narrative Framing and Visual Representation**

Both *Symphony of the Donbas* and *Modern Times* employ narrative framing to depict their heroes as heroic, albeit victimized, figures shaped by the processes of industrialization.

Vertov depicts the worker, by utilizing Soviet montage conventions, as an empowered agent of collective labor, celebrating socialist ideals (Eisenstein, 1949; Kenez, 2003). The identical montage sequences also depict the worker as overwhelmed by machinery, highlighting the motifs of alienation and depersonalization (McDonnell, 2013; Bourgeois, 1988). Chaplin's Tramp, by contrast, is a figure trapped within a capitalist system whose comic resilience mocks mechanized oppression (Cohen, 2001; Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). Chaplin's recourse to slapstick humanizes the Tramp, depicting him as a heroic victim but still insisting upon his frailty. This juxtaposition of characters—one collective, one individual—emphasizes the varying ideological underpinnings of the Soviet and Western industrial myths. While Vertov's hero is absorbed into state machinery, Chaplin's Tramp manages to exist through cunning and obstinacy.

##### **4.2. Film Style as a Reflection of Ideology**

Vertov's and Chaplin's film styles directly reflect

their ideological contexts. Vertov's rhythmic montage, industrial symbolism, and collectivist framing epitomize Soviet values of labor solidarity and progress (Buchman, 2005; Maltsev, 2017). His workers are socialist heroes but faceless cogs in the industrial machine (Lasky, 2006). On the other hand, Chaplin satirizes the capitalist system through humor and stylized movement, emphasizing the psychological and physical expenses of factory work (Chaplin, 1936; McDonnell, 2013). While Vertov's film glorifies industrial progress, Chaplin's reveals its folly and dehumanizing consequences. Despite their stylistic and ideological difference, both directors highlight the paradox of modern work: its capacity to liberate and enslave. In this way, film style is not merely aesthetic but also a vehicle for political expression and social critique (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010; Cohen, 2001).

#### **Conclusion**

The comparative analysis of *Symphony of the Donbas* and *Modern Times* illustrates how cinematic form reflects and critiques the industrial ideologies of their respective eras.

Dziga Vertov's montage, symbolic imagery, and rhythmic editing portray the Soviet worker as a heroic participant in socialist progress and a dehumanized cog in a vast industrial machine. In contrast, Charlie Chaplin's visual satire and comic narrative in *Modern Times* satirize capitalist labor's alienation and mechanical drudgery while representing the Tramp as an indestructible emblem of individual resilience. Both filmmakers use varied visual lexicons to deal with the same dual identity of the

protagonist—as empowered and oppressed—within modern industrial society. Despite opposing political systems, both films show how visual style can be harnessed to convey complex ideological messages about labor, identity, and technology.

Vertov's collective framing aligns with Soviet propaganda and glorifies industrial solidarity, whereas Chaplin's emphasis on individual suffering and humor underscores the social cost of mechanization under capitalism. Yet both directors ultimately use cinema to humanize the worker—either through montage-inspired abstraction or character-based satire. This study highlights the significance of visual and narrative framing in the construction of images of industrial labor. It contributes to broader discussions of how film represents, reinforces, or contests dominant ideological paradigms.

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