

Jacques Tati's 'Playtime': An Architectural or Social Critique?

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After the Second World War, Paris experienced many changes to its architectural landscape. As a result of many modernist building projects, a layer of concrete, glass and steel was added to Paris. The city's neoclassicist Haussmann aesthetic began to shift from decorative stone facades to minimalist glass tower blocks. Attempts to 'Americanize' Paris led to regions of completely reimagined urban topography, such as La Défense, which started construction in 1958. The architecture of this change was largely influenced by modernist ideologies, of which architects such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were figureheads. Key phrases such as 'form follows function', 'the house is a machine for living in', and 'less is more', largely dictated both physical architectural change, as well as social interaction with the built environment. It was through the observation of this societal and architectural shift that Jacques Tati's film 'Playtime' was born.

Making 'Tatville' (the set), both Tati and the architect Eugene Roman were greatly inspired by the aesthetic of New York buildings such as The Lever House (1952) of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and the Seagram Building (1958) by Mies van der Rohe. They believed that these buildings were intrinsic to the modernist image of efficiency and standardisation to a corporate client. They were also aware that Parisian buildings such as the Esso Tower in La Défense, the Gare Montparnasse (1958-64) and the notorious Sarcelles (1959-66) had come to look almost identical to their New York counterparts. The film places Tati's character, Monsieur Hulot, in the centre of an exaggerated modernised Paris. The comedy comes from the various ways in which Hulot struggles to navigate his way through the alien changes of the city he once knew. This artistic response seems to be a rigorous critique of all the problems with modernist architecture, with repeated digs at its controlling, sterile and homogenous nature. Humour also comes from the irony that excessive functionalism can often result in dysfunction. However, it becomes unclear as to whether Tati's satirical approach is in response to the architecture itself, or the society inhabiting it. In order to understand Tati's intentions, I will be progressing through the film chronologically, breaking down the visual elements of individual sequences whilst analysing tangential literature.



The Lever House



Sarcelles



The Seagram Building

The film starts with the audience being immediately placed in a pristine, shiny interior space, confined by glass and steel with a distinct lack of colour. The function of the space is initially unclear. Mannequin like figures, all dressed in black stand motionless at the end of the corridor. A nurse holding a baby emerges and walks past a janitor who is having a hard time finding anything to clean. A series of well dressed men carrying briefcases pace through the confines of the building. Are we in a shopping mall, hospital or an office building? Eventually a tannoy announcement reveals it to be an airport space. These 5 disorienting minutes raise two major recurring themes: the first of which imposes modernist ideologies directly onto

the screen. Le Corbusier stated that “everything should be in the form of a mass production and a standardization. Everything should be arranged and perform its function efficiently. It should be a system.” Tati’s orchestration of the airport sequence undermines this statement, as the standardisation of space ultimately provides intense disorientation, hence prompting an ordered space to cause disorder in the audience’s mind. The visual similarity of the shots on location at Paris Orly airport and the Tativille set design emphasises this further.

The second critique introduced in the airport, is the idea of modernist architecture trying to dictate movement, therefore preventing free will. Tati directs the characters to move in straight lines and in accordance with the architecture. An example is when the group of American tourists, including Barbara (the main female character), mimic the rigidity of the building by standing in line and subsequently blocking the exit of the airport. Jonathon Rosenbaum wrote, ‘pursuing the action in straight lines, we become victimized, imprisoned by the architecture’. This becomes very apparent, as characters are confined to a limited range of motion, despite being in such open and expansive rooms. Introducing the critique that intense functionalism can unintentionally cause heightened dysfunction, an idea which Tati frequently revisits throughout the film.



Airport interior



Blocked exit

Later in the film, Hulot’s character enters an office building for a meeting with M. Giffard. Upon entry it becomes apparent that not only are the surrounding buildings all identical, but the outfits, cars and furniture have also succumbed to uniformity. This is Tati’s first hint that maybe the problem of modernisation is not as a result of architecture, but a consequence of a wider social change. In John Engelen’s article on the film, “Modernism neutralizes everything. Individuals are the same, they dress the same, and act the same ... Same types of dresses, same car, same unit of houses, make everything seem ordinary.” Modernism is described as a wider cultural movement, something not purely architectural.



Even Tati stated that if “he had been against modern architecture, he’d have shown ugly buildings”, suggesting that damning the architecture wasn’t his primary focus. Some moments in the film however would suggest otherwise: for example when Hulot enters the office space, a man is seen asking for a cigarette light through the glass of the building, eventually noticing the glass as a barrier and as a result deeming this action ‘daft’. This portrays the modernist architecture as the source of social change, with the materiality of the building being depicted as the primary cause of disruption in a social interaction. Hulot’s wait for the meeting is extended through the architecture itself, with Tati using a long shot of M. Giffard pacing down a lengthy corridor only to direct Hulot into the waiting room which happens to be directly behind him. Essentially the architecture causes Hulot to ‘wait to be waited’, an example of the over functionalist approach of modernism becoming illogical. When Hulot finally progresses into this room, ‘waiting’, which is generally a boring activity, is made even more boring by the transparency of the architecture. The glass walls hold no surprise for Hulot, causing him to pace through a new room that he is already familiar with. This boredom leads him to engage with the room in a childlike manner, the irony being that formal architecture has caused informal actions. This is a glaring critique of modernist architecture’s lack of unfolding. The building doesn’t surprise you, instead the materiality and honesty causes all the elements to be presented at once. The American businessman, sitting next to Hulot, adds to this critique, with his mannerisms being as ordered and stiff as the building around him.



Wait for M. Giffard



American businessman

Has the architecture caused people to act in this way, or have people like this have led to the modernist design?

The former is conveyed in the ‘office maze sequence’, where Tati emphasizes the homogeneity of modernist design. The office cubicles resemble the airport toilets, and the tannoy notices even sound identical. The doors to meeting rooms are confused with those of a lift, disorienting the space to the point where Hulot unknowingly walks into an important office meeting. Tati presents the lift as the only dynamic and changing part of the building, giving it warmer light and even highlighting its motion from the outside of the building. However the praises are subverted, with each floor seemingly identical. The lift’s dynamic and somewhat exciting function is therefore eroded when the surrounding uniformity of spaces deem it pointless to those who use it. This demonstrates Tati’s awareness of the necessity for modernity but his critique of the way it is being implemented. Lisa Landrum summarises this criticism, “modern architecture’s promise of transparency and fluid interconnectivity into instances of discontinuity and disorientation”. The latter part of the question above is portrayed when the characters progress into the trade exhibition, occupying another very similar building. This scene involves a German salesman whose slogan is ‘slam your doors in golden silence’; the stand is later robbed by a thief mistaken for Hulot. This extends the notion of what Joan Ockman describes as the “absurdity of excessive logic”, with a silent door ironically adding stealth to the act of robbing a space. What Tati showed earlier through the

dysfunction of modern space is being paralleled in the impracticality of commercial consumerism, hinting that this is a societal problem rather than an architectural one.



Office meeting



Trade Exhibition

Throughout the film Hulot's lookalikes represent intrinsic problems with modern society, as Engelen points out, "his 'copies' are often busy disrupting ... so that Hulot might indeed be seen as a type rather than an individual, or even something like a virus...Hulot contaminates others around him". Tati has identified that modernist attempts to unify architecture neglect the diverse nature of humanity, leading to the rejection of minorities unable to adjust, reducing them to a nuisance in a modern city. Tati's use of Barbara's American tourist group questions whether it is the architecture or society to blame for this exclusion. Landrum writes, "the tourists obediently follow a prescriptive itinerary ... Hulot accepts directions from strangers and, more ambivalently, searches and drifts, taking filmic audiences along with him wherever he goes. Unlike the tourists, whose every move is efficiently managed while on their way to do nothing of particular importance". Regardless of the architecture, society is still free, suggesting that the built environment may simply be facilitating these consumerist activities rather than dictating them. The group of tourists only ever encounter traditional Parisian Landmarks as reflections on a series of glass doors. This may draw attention to the abundance of modernist architecture forcing historical sites to be hidden, but I think more importantly it shows Tati's resentment for those who refuse to look for it.



Reflecting landmarks



Uniform buildings

Hulot's alienation from the city is further emphasised when an old friend drags him off the streets to show him his new apartment. At a surface level it seems like an onslaught of the materiality of modernist architecture, pointing out the absurdity of steel, concrete and most importantly glass. The whole sequence is observed from the street elevation of the apartment, indicating its lack of privacy, using van der Rohe's idea of 'glass nothingness' (exhibited in his Tugendhat House, which utilises a mechanism of lowering glass to frame surrounding nature) to amplify its impracticality. From this external elevation view, it also becomes obvious that the neighbouring apartment, owned by M. Giffard, is the exact mirror image. The

humour from this scene arises when Tati angles the camera so that the wall separating the two apartments is hidden, making it seem as if the exterior glass panelling has extended to the interior of the building and that the two families inhabiting each room are watching one another. Through this visual trick, Tati creates a glass box, with the apartments now lacking both external and internal privacy. This ironically demonstrates that the material which Van der Rohe intended to draw people closer to rural environments, instead gives them insight into the sterility of their urban lifestyles. Ockman summarises this point when she writes, “The underlying and pervasive trope in *Playtime* is absence or lack or emptiness: the absence of a “real” Paris, the lack of substance at the heart of a consumerist society founded on nothing but exchange value, the emptiness of glass architecture.”



Glass apartments



So is this an architectural or social problem in Tati's eyes?

Tati's attention to modernist aesthetic beauty in this sequence suggests that architecture itself isn't the key issue that he is trying to address. Rather, he paints the problems of modern consumerism, with Hulot immediately being directed to the family's television, serving as a modern substitute for the fireplace. The identical nature of the neighbouring flat is also as much a critique of homogenous architecture as it is of materialist trends; Giffard's family may occupy an identical space, but regardless, they have failed to furnish and decorate it in a unique way. Tati signifies that consumerism results in increasing lack of imagination, and that the combination of a growing 'trend' culture along with increased commercial inventions, has ironically led to less inventive individuals. This point is strengthened when Hulot leaves the apartment, and his friend immediately packs away the gadgets on show, demonstrating that the objects themselves have no intrinsic value other than to be shown off to people. Tati illustrates that consumerist society is so obsessed with showing material wealth and following trends, that it would gladly look into each others apartments to achieve this.

The restaurant sequence in the second half of the film summarises all of the architectural arguments introduced earlier in the film. Primarily Tati displays the limits of modernist design by showing the uniqueness of individuals. The harsh contrast between the loud and colourful American tourists, with the quieter, smartly dressed local Parisian diners, immediately signifies core differences in cultures, and how designing for a singular space inevitably neglects diversity. This is demonstrated when two young waiters interact with a mirror: one checks his hair in a vain manner, whilst the other checks the dish he is serving in a more professional manner. Both approach exactly the same material, but their individual personalities result in entirely different interactions. Tati also shows this when a waiter misjudges the height of a dwarf when directing him to his table. In this case the architecture has resulted in a uniform social mindset, causing the waiter to subconsciously neglect minorities. When Hulot, who is also portrayed as a minority in this film, enters the restaurant, chaos ensues. The clash between diversity and uniformity subsequently

causes the architecture to physically break down. Before even stepping foot in the building Hulot breaks the glass door. The doorman initially panics, but simply solves the problem by miming his job, with none of the guests even noticing its absence. This demonstrates how uniform architecture results in a lack of social improvisation, with unpredictability being the catalyst for comedy and excitement. Perhaps my favourite portrayal of the inability to adapt, is when fish is seasoned in front of a couple, but the waiter gets distracted by other diners and forgets to serve the food. Later a different waiter comes and seasons the fish again, ruining the dish. Eventually the couple end up moving tables and do not eat the fish. Had the couple alerted the waiter, or even stood up and served the dish themselves, this mishap could have easily been avoided. Here, Tati is trying to indicate one of two things: either that modern architecture has led people to expect things to quite literally be handed to them on a plate, becoming reliant on technology, or that changing social attitudes has led architecture to be designed so that this passive behaviour is encouraged. He presents the societal/architectural equivalent of which came first, 'the chicken or the egg'? Another example of this question being asked is when one of the waiters is asked to serve a table, to which he responds "that is not my area", refusing the task. This waiter has created invisible barriers within the restaurant, similar to how the transparent glass divides the surrounding architecture. Once again: does the waiter subconsciously create these restrictions in accordance with the architecture he inhabits, or is the architecture designed because more and more people think this way? Joan Ockman addresses this disparity:

"The surrogate city of Playtime is not a structuralist object lesson. If anything, it is an implicit critique of that worldview."



Restaurant sequence

Through his comedy Tati introduces this question of which is to blame, but does not seek to answer it. Maybe, that is, because it is paradoxical and impossible to answer. Instead he demonstrates that by breaking down both architectural and societal rigidity (as Matt Fajkus describes as an 'ideal grid') the potential for comedy that lies within these modern buildings can be fully released. The moment when a drunk man follows the spiraling restaurant sign into the building shows that architecture can only control a society when people are out of their minds, or in this case, intoxicated. This is further exemplified when Hulot becomes the catalyst for which the modern architecture falls apart, by breaking the restaurant's ceiling. It is from this moment that the night which had potential to be homogenous and boring, erupts into joy and excitement. In the final sequence of the film, a roundabout transforms the rigid grey city into a curved carousel of colour, signifying that regardless of space and social trends, comedy will always be present, and through minor tweaks of both elements, laughter will erupt. I think that Tati is neither trying to critique modernist architecture or consumerist society. Rather, he demonstrates how modernist spaces and societal behaviors reinforce each other's flaws. In 'The Architecture of the City' postmodernist architect, Aldo Rossi, describes urban design as both reflecting and shaping societal values. I think 'Playtime' perfectly represents this interdependence through a cinematic lens. As Tati put it "My job is not

to rubbish the architecture ... I'm there to try to defend the individual and the personality that is his." Playtime is a guide for how Tati would like society to approach new spaces, naturally and humorously criticising them in the process. The medium of film is palatable for all audiences, and allows them to be critical of their own architectural surroundings. As Iain Borden pointed out, "Barbara leaves Tativille while Hulot returns to his own life. We too, as audience, are returned to the world we inhabit, somehow changed by our temporary absence". It is through this breaking of the fourth wall that Tati doesn't force an audience to adopt his opinion, but instead encourages them to think critically, and smile in the process of doing so.



Broken ceiling



Carousel roundabout

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