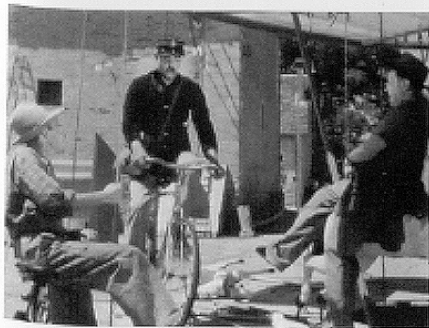


## Architecture in the Films of Jacques Tati

François Penz



*L'École des facteurs*



François at the fair (*Jour de fête*)

### Background

The French mime and music-hall artist turned film-maker Jacques Tati,<sup>1</sup> made six films from 1949 to 1973. He is interesting firstly as a chronicler (a witness) of the architecture of the post-war period, secondly as a critic of it, but no less importantly as a humorous observer of its effect on the culture and on the individual.

Each film can be seen as a chapter of an on-going story with a series of themes which Tati develops and elaborates as he progresses. Central to his preoccupation is his suspicion of modern technology in general and more particularly of modern architecture. It is on this aspect which I shall concentrate here by looking at his first four feature films<sup>2</sup> with a particular emphasis on the last two: *Jour de fête*, (1949); *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, (1953); *Mon Oncle*, (1958); and *Playtime*, (1967).

Tati's suspicion of modern technology became apparent in *Jour de fête*. Although it is a film which celebrates rural France and in that sense has an almost timeless documentary-like quality about it, we are reminded that it is the post-war period through the projection of two American films<sup>3</sup> in the market square. One in particular is a pseudo-documentary concerning technological advancement in mail distribution in the USA. When François (Tati), the postman, tries this out the next day, it creates a whole series of hilarious mishaps.

In fact, if we step back a couple of years, in 1947 Tati had already tackled this theme of the 'human robot' in *L'École des facteurs*. In this film we can already discern a number of the characteristics of a Tati film, such as the use of the long shot/long take, the simplified narrative structure and the use of Tati himself as the main character and as a source of humorous slapstick effects.

*Jour de fête* received numerous awards and was compared (Fischer, 1983) by Marcel L'Herbier (Director of *L'Inhumaine*, 1924) to Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (released the same year, 1949) because of its comparable film realism and the use of the bicycle as a central prop.<sup>4</sup>

In his next film, *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, Tati develops the accident-prone character, out of step with the routinely organised world. Mr Hulot's antics are a classic example of the Bergsonian idea of the comic arising when 'something mechanical is superimposed on the living'. With the creation of the character of Mr Hulot (named after

an architect whom the family knew), Tati had finally found the vehicle for his comic genius to represent the individual in the face of modernism.

In his article entitled 'Monsieur Hulot and Time' (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1953), André Bazin called *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* the 'most important comic work of the international cinema since the Marx Brothers and W. C. Fields and an event in the history of the sound cinema'. André Bazin gave Tati the intellectual credentials he needed; Tati was not just a clown any more but somebody who had to be taken seriously, which was of course important if you were an independent film-maker.

In the same article André Bazin highlighted four major points concerning this film, but which are valid for all of Tati's films:

1. The unachieved quality of the Hulot persona;
2. The extraordinary temporality of the film and its lack of traditional narrative structure;
3. The film's innovative soundtrack which caricatures sound;
4. The observational style of Tati's comedy.

*Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* established Tati as a major film-maker who rapidly gained an international reputation. It is also worth mentioning that, although Tati is not usually thought of as a New Wave director, he certainly was seen by many, including Truffaut and Godard, as somebody breaking new ground in several areas. His lack of narrative structure in particular has attracted comparisons with directors such as Robbe-Grillet and Godard himself.

#### *Mon Oncle*

In 1958 Tati finished *Mon Oncle* and said that he wanted to show us who Hulot is 'where he lives, where he works, his family and friends'. On one hand we have Hulot living in the old quarter of Paris while his sister and brother-in-law and nephew lived in a modern house in a new part of town. The story revolves round the clash of those two worlds, the old and the new, or Hulot versus Arpel, with Gérard, the little boy (Tati's nephew) providing the link.

In this film Tati makes explicit his growing suspicion of modern architecture. If the 50s can be seen as the triumph of modernism, he certainly expresses some strong reservations, in particular regarding the type of built environment developing everywhere at the time. The post-war reconstruction boom was in full swing in the 50s and a large housing programme was in progress. It was the era of the 'HLM' (high-rise council housing).

In an interview in 1958 for *Cahiers du Cinéma* Tati deplores the 'blandness and uniformity of the new cities' as well as the demolition of some old quarters of Paris. For *Mon Oncle*, he idealised the old quarters, shot in St Maur, a suburb of Paris. This is where Hulot, *Mon Oncle*, lives. Hulot's house was built specially for the film and was exactly tailored to Tati's height and bulk in order for the audience to follow intermittently his progression up and down the stairs. Through this tailor-made architecture, Tati is able to show his idea of architecture on a human scale both in a literal and a metaphorical sense.



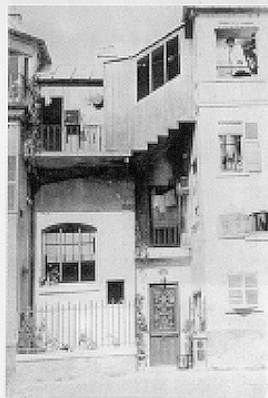
*Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*



50's suburban development around Paris



The 'old' St Maur  
(*Mon Oncle*)



Hulot's house  
(*Mon Oncle*)



The 'threshold' (*Mon Oncle*)



The Modern house (*Mon Oncle*)

Quite crucial to Tati is the in-between or interface between old and new, which is very symbolically interpreted by the crumbling old wall in the foreground and the new city (in this case Créteil) in the background. The Villa Arpel in the new quarter symbolises the brave new world. It was built in the Victorines studio in Nice and designed by Tati and his long-time colleague, Jacques Lagrange, a painter. Tati has here gone out of his way to make it visually ridiculous. It was originally designed and assembled by Tati and Lagrange<sup>5</sup> as a collage from images of architectural reviews of the time.

In an article published by the *Journal des Monuments Historiques* (Sichère, 1985) Tati describes the design process: 'We had all sorts of architectural reviews and journals which we had gathered. We also had some scissors and glue. So I did a montage. I cut some features, a round window here, a ridiculous looking pergola there, some garden with a tortuous path to give the impression to be bigger than it really was etc., in effect it's an architectural "pot-pourri".'

The resulting villa is a strong statement by Tati posing here as a critic of modern architecture. The garden is virtually a desert, sprinkled with pink gravel. The house is in fact turned into an exhibition space for a string of visitors and loses all intimate and poetic quality, which Tati no doubt saw in the old quarter.

But it is not only the architecture which is in question, it is a whole way of life; in the old quarter Tati portrays the colourful market and the crowded café with immense affection and gives us a timeless view of what France may represent in its most convivial sense. By contrast, the sharp lines of the Arpel villa seem to have an effect, as if by osmosis, on their occupants and visitors alike, who, in terms of body language, have all the rigidity and severity of the surrounding concrete. Tati also takes the opportunity to unleash his humour on all the gadgets in the house, with Mr Hulot, the dog and the little boy playing havoc with them, reinforcing further the point made earlier about the Bergsonian ideal of 'something mechanical superimposed on the living'. Not surprisingly, this particular vision has spurred critics to compare *Mon Oncle* to Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and to René Clair's *A nous la liberté* (1931).

He also gets the sounds and noises to reinforce his point. Tati was indeed a master in the composition of post-production sound effects which so often replace meaningful dialogues. In fact for the Villa Arpel he was trying to invent new types of sounds, such as the 'strangled fountain' and the 'aggressive-sounding cooker and cupboard', all to great comical effect. He realised that if he was to describe and propose to us a 'new architecture', it was not only a matter of how it looked but also very much about how it sounded.

Overall Tati expresses strong views on the architecture of his time through *Mon Oncle* (Tati the critic), taking housing as its central theme, which was of course the main post-war preoccupation (Tati the chronicler). By contrast, *Playtime* concentrates on the world of office buildings, skyscrapers and the like, which is of course very central to the 60s.

#### *Playtime*

In 1964, for *Playtime*, Jacques Tati built with the help of his architect/art-director, Eugène Roman,<sup>6</sup> an extraordinary setting which, in Tati's own words, was the 'real star of the film'. It was on a vast scale, built in the outskirts of Paris near Vincennes.<sup>7</sup> It was gigantic

and became known as 'Tativille', possibly after Godard's *Alphaville* (1965),<sup>8</sup> which had just been completed. But, of course, it wasn't just any city: it was the city Jacques Tati needed to continue to explore his idea of the modern city, and, in order to get the shot that he required, the office blocks were in fact on wheels and tracks and could be moved at will. No 'real city' could have given him that flexibility. It was a gigantic enterprise<sup>9</sup> which was adding to a distinguished list of sets in the history of French cinema such as Meerson's sets for René Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930) and *A nous la liberté* (1930) or Trauner's design for Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945).

The primary inspiration of the office buildings was the Esso building, which was built in 1963. In turn the Esso building was probably inspired by Lever House from SOM, built in 1952. The Esso building was the first office building erected at *La Défense* and Tativille is in effect a mock-up of how *La Défense* might ultimately look.

After a year's work on site, Tati started shooting in 1965. The plot is in typical Tati style reduced to the minimum. In his own words he summarises it as follows:

A group of foreign tourists arrive to visit Paris. On landing at Orly they find themselves pretty much in the same airport as those which they had left in Munich, London or Chicago. They ride in the same buses that they had used in Rome or Hamburg and arrive at a highway bordered by street lamps and buildings identical to those in their own capital (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1958).

Clearly in *Playtime* Tati becomes more radical than in any of his previous films by keeping the narrative structure to the bare minimum.

In this film, for the first time he shoots in 70mm wide-screen format, which he combines to great effect with his love for the long shot/long take. The main reason for this is to give him enough space on the screen for the eyes to wander. What Tati was doing with long shots is opening up a large window onto the world with actions taking place in more than one spot in order to let the spectator's eyes track across the whole screen very much as in real life. The long shot also allows him to lose Hulot, who is no longer the centre of attention (in fact in the opening sequence Tati does not appear for a while), and put non-professional extras at the centre of attention. He said 'I want to make people participate a little more, to let them change gear themselves; not to do their work for them.' This is in a sense a new concept, which the American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum called 'Tati's democracy'.

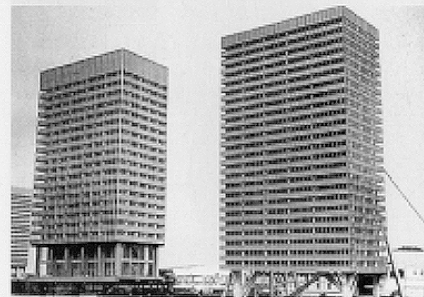
Wide-screen 70mm is a perfect format for embracing a large panoramic view of architectural spaces. Moreover, Tati practically never changes the lens throughout the film in order not to confuse the audience about the scale of the objects (he did the same with *Mon Oncle*). 'If I start on a long shot in a scene which has a table and a chair with a 40mm lens and then move closer and change to a 28mm lens, then it's not the same chair because the overall surface of the back of the chair would have increased proportionally' (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1958). This concern for scale and sense of perspective in space in relation to the technicalities of cinematography make him a particularly fascinating filmmaker for architects.<sup>10</sup>



Lever House  
from SOM



The Esso  
building  
*La Défense*



Movable sets (*Playtime*)



Office space (*Playtime*)



The ambiguous space (*Playtime*)



Hulot experiencing the sound of the furniture (*Playtime*)

I will now highlight four elements which are closely related to his views on architecture: spatial ambiguity, sound, colours, and glass.

#### Spatial Ambiguity

In an interview with Bazin and Truffaut (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1958), Tati declared: 'I found uniformity unpleasant. I always feel nowadays that I am sitting on the same chair. While sitting in a brasserie in the Champs-Élysées, one feels as though one is in an airport, one never knows whether we are in a grocery shop or at the chemist. When I was little I used to go to the charcutier with my grandmother, there were tiles on the floor and sawdust and at the grocery shop it smelled of pepper and oak'.

Years later in *Playtime* Tati had the opportunity to vent his feelings about the uniformity of space in the modern world. In the opening sequence in the airport, Tati cultivates the spatial ambiguity of the international style and leaves us in doubt as to the function of the space. In fact he tricks us and makes us believe that we could be in a hospital. A couple wait anxiously in a corner, a nurse briskly passes by, people pace up and down a spotlessly clean and shiny corridor – and it is only when the tannoy sound resonates calling for various destinations and the tail of an airplane becomes visible, that we clearly understand that we are in an airport. In fact the same area will be used later on, but this time disguised as an office building.

But perhaps the best example of what he meant by uniformity and confusion of spaces is in one of the last scenes at the drugstore. There the guests, having left the Royal Garden in the early hours of the morning, assemble for a cup of coffee and a snack. But the space is part pharmacy, part café-bar, and even the food acquires a greenish tint more suited to clinical spaces than to a snack-bar.

#### Sound

The use of sound or the caricature of sound is extremely important in Tati as I have said above with regard to *Mon Oncle*. In *Playtime*, he records and post-synchronises the sound on five stereophonic tracks<sup>11</sup> (by contrast with the 'natural sounds' of the New Wave films). The sound here reinforces the echoes, the metallic resonance, and ultimately it is an added way for Tati to define a space, and in this case it is another attribute to make the spectator feel that the space we are in is not comfortable, slightly hostile, not just visually but acoustically. Two examples come to mind when thinking of Tati's 'architecture of sound'. One is when Giffard comes along the corridor to meet the awaiting Mr Hulot for the first time; here the infinitely long glassed corridor is made even longer by the painful punctuating and increasingly loud tapping of Giffard's shoes on the resonant surface acting as the invisible clock of 'time/space' wrapped together in the stillness of this long shot/long take. The other example is when sound gives life to furniture in the next scene, which has Tati alternately sitting down and standing up, experiencing the musical 'deflating and re-flating tunes of the modern-style fake-leather' chair, to great comical effect. Tati had understood not only that sound can say something about the nature of the space (a large space with hard surfaces may sound resonant, for example) but also that with sound he could tell us something about materials and their texture to complement the visual information on the screen.

### Colour

While preparing to shoot *Playtime* Tati conducted an experiment. He asked a number of people very familiar with Orly airport to colour (from memory) black-and-white photographs of the inside of the airport, trying to match the reality (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1968). Not only did nobody get it right but Tati was struck by the diversity of the colour schemes proposed. It simply reinforced his feeling that 'colour in space' is not a fact of life, not something that we all universally remember and agree on. Except for a few 'primary examples', such as that London buses are red and a no-entry street sign is white on red, he saw colour as subjective, and in Tati's mind it was therefore to be manipulated to best effect.

In *Playtime* it is worth noticing the colours or the lack of them. Everything is vaguely blue/grey, not only to make a point about the blandness of the architecture, but also to focus one's attention on a particular detail or person by suddenly introducing a garish colour. For example, in the scene of the waiting-room where Hulot experiments with the seating (see the comments on sound, above), the only obvious colour present in the room is in the portraits of corporate executives, where an obviously garish red decoration is pinned on the chest of those proud and sinister-looking men. He uses colour in that way to draw our attention to a particular detail or character and otherwise he is happy to let our eyes wander in the 'grey modern world', concentrating on movements, actions, expressions and comical situations without further distraction from 'Technicolor fireworks'.

### Glass

Tati uses glass as the ultimate symbol of modernism which contributes further to spatial ambiguity. He uses glass in many different situations and in many different ways.

In one scene in particular Tati uses to great effect the theme of glass and reflection: we see Hulot trying to find Mr Giffard and they both get confused by the glass reflections. He also uses glass to give us glimpses of the 'real Paris', which appears only as reflected in glass doors opening and closing. Glass is high on his agenda as it became such a symbol of the office building right up to very recently.

In another scene the camera is outside the flat of an old army friend, adjacent to Mr Giffard's flat.<sup>12</sup> The scene is mute and the sound is the street noise. We are in the position of a voyeur observing a domestic scene. People undress, pick their noses, behave very much as if they were behind closed doors but they are visible to everybody in the street. Surprisingly, no passers-by seem interested and it's only us the audience who are watching.

Most architects would surely see this set as a pure sectional perspective with the characters providing a sense of scale. It also reminds us of Tati's background as a mime artist. It is again an excellent example of the long shot/long take potential, framing perfectly the world of architecture. Tati, the critic, here also pursues the theme of glass invading the housing sector, giving us no sense of privacy.

In conclusion, I would say that Tati's *Playtime* and his elaborate sets and his use of the wide screen represent his ultimate vision of the cinema, namely to provide a large window onto the world in order to allow the spectator to observe individuals functioning in a modern world where accidentally and sporadically comical situations arise. There is a



Sectional perspective (*Tout va bien*)



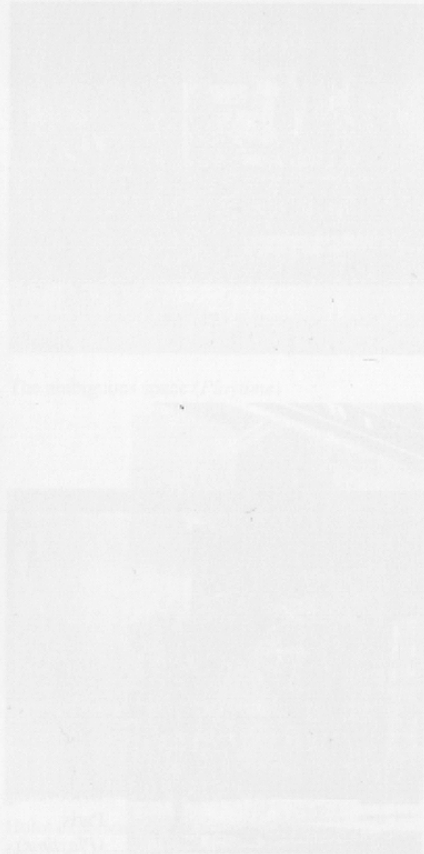
...Sectional perspective (*Playtime*)



Discovering Paris (*Playtime*)



The 'real' Paris (*Playtime*)



clear progression in his work right from *Jour de fête*, filmed entirely on location with a very voluble main character, François the postman, right up to *Playtime*, with a near mute and self-effacing Mr Hulot meandering, ducking and weaving a tortuous path in sharp contrast to the straight lines of the international style. In other words, the less he talked, the more important the sets and the architecture became. When asked about architecture and architects, Tati always denied that he hated modern architecture, saying he was merely offering a comment, a way out. In the case of the Villa Arpel, he acknowledges the caricature but also blames the snobbish Arpels for turning their 'machine for living' into a showcase for neighbours and work colleagues. In the case of *Playtime*, he offers the vision of individuals gradually reappropriating for themselves bland and uniform spaces – the little old lady at the street corner, or the scene in the drugstore, which he felt ultimately one could not mistake for a drugstore anywhere in the world other than France. Finally, I would say that Tati as a chronicler, a critic of modern architecture and a humorous observer of his time offered us a good example of an architectural vision reinterpreted through the eyes of a film-maker, in which the film acts as a mirror for architects who can see buildings and cities reinvented on the screen. Although in many cases they might not like it.

#### Notes

1. Tati was indeed an accomplished mime artist who had performed in music halls throughout Europe for fifteen years before making his first feature. Many critics have likened him to Max Linder, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and others, pointing out their common years in the music hall before taking up working in films.
2. Tati acted in and scripted a number of shorts prior to his first feature, in particular *On demande une brute* (1932), *Soigne ton gauche* (1936), *Retour à la terre* (1938) and *L'École des facteurs* (1947). *Soigne ton Gauche* was directed by René Clément.
3. L. Fischer (see bibliography) argues that on one level *Jour de fête* can be read as a criticism of the 'invasion' of American films in France, which would have been particularly resonant in the French film world of the time and which also reminds us of current debates about quotas to improve European cinema.
4. *Jour de fête* was shot in colour and black-and-white. However, due to technical difficulties, the Thompson colour process was never processed until recently. *Jour de fête* currently enjoys a second career with the release in January 1995 of its long-awaited colour print.
5. Jacques Lagrange is a painter who comes from a family of architects. He has worked on most of Tati's films, turning Tati's ideas into drawings (private communication).
6. Eugène Roman is an architect turned art director at the end of the war when the Studio Victorines in his native Nice was heavily used by the film industry. He worked with Tati on *Mon Oncle* supervising the building of the Villa Arpel in Nice. After finishing *Playtime* he went back to Nice and worked for the rest of his career building and refurbishing casinos (private communication).
7. Sadly the entire set was demolished shortly after the film was completed. Tati had always wanted it to be a sound stage for film schools and young directors. The site was used instead for a gigantic motorway roundabout.

8. Paradoxically, Godard's *Alphaville*, which is describing a nightmarish sort of futuristic world, was shot on location, whereas Tati's supposedly realistic vision of newly built post-war world was entirely fabricated.
9. In 1961 in *The Ladies' Man* Jerry Lewis built the most enormous and spectacular set and one can only speculate that Tati might have been influenced by his approach. It would hardly be surprising given the extraordinary respect and fame that Jerry Lewis has always enjoyed in France.
10. See Zbig Rybczynski's article about issues of scale and perspective in films.
11. The work on the sound was so considerable that Tati had to spend many months in post-production on this aspect alone. Combined with mounting production costs and delayed release, it all contributed to Tati going bankrupt after *Playtime*.
12. Godard seemed to have used the same idea with *Tout va bien* (1972), where we often have shots of the interior of the factory as a sectional perspective.

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### *Cahiers du Cinéma*

Three main articles have been published in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* concerning Tati: 1953, 'Mr Hulot et le temps', by André Bazin; 1958, 'Entretien avec Jacques Tati', by Bazin and Truffaut; and 1968, 'Le Champ large', an interview of Tati, by J. A. Fieschi and J. Narboni.