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IB Film: Textual Analysis

Playtime (Jacques Tati, 1967)

Sequence Chosen (20:48 - 25:48)

Word Count: 1341

Playtime is a French film that first premiered in France on December 17th, 1967. The film was directed by auteur Jacques Tati. Tati was born in Le Pecq, France, and was initially a performer, but that quickly changed as he served in the French military during World War II until the German-French Armistice was enacted. After returning from the army, Tati began making films.

The films Tati made were visual comedies that were heavily inspired by the silent era, with direct inspirations being Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Similarly to Charlie Chaplin's character, The Tramp, Tati has a recurring character by the name of Monsieur Hulot. Hulot's purpose is not only to pay homage to Chaplin but also to give the audience a blank slate of a person who is new to the absurd world in which Tati is exploring. The similarities to the silent era do not stop there. Tati wanted to take the tempo, scale, and mannerisms of old Hollywood silent comedies, but modernize them with post-World War II themes using the technical advances available at the time. Film analyst Malcolm Turvey describes Tati's ambitions in an interview, "Tati was very self-conscious about the fact he was making comic films in the wake of one of the greatest traditions in the history of cinema ... Tati questioned whether he could make an original contribution to this tradition. His answer was that he could modernize it." (Turvey). Through his first batch of films, Tati grew a reputation for his attention to detail and perfectionism within the genre. Giant and elaborate set pieces engulf his strange, unique, post-modern worlds. Unique, complex contraptions, and brutalist, strange architecture, comment on the industrialization of France. To fully portray his message, Tati did not rely on basic coverage. Almost every shot of a Tati film is a "fly on the wall" ultra-wide static shot. This distance makes the audience an observer, never a participant. This visual style and production design is used at its largest scale in *Playtime*. Mehruss Jon Ahi and Armen Karaoghlanian, journalists for Interiors Magazine explain Tati's ambition, "The director constructed more than just production sets for this film; he created a false city in the outskirts of Paris, complete with paved roads with streetlights, working water and electricity and even a functioning escalator in one of his sets. This city space became known as Tativille. The budget of the film quickly escalated during production and its failure at the box office destroyed his once-successful career." This large scale was not underutilized. Tati used his faux city to overexaggerate the mundaneness of urban life. All city streets look the same, all buildings have the same tone of concrete, grass is few and far between, and color is scarce. Even the extras are mannequins, as a commentary on the loss of individuality in a world like this. Tati used every dollar and talent at his disposal to create a dystopian city that feels as grandiose as any other bustling metropolis.



Figure 1: Original poster for 1967's *Playtime*.

Tati's restrictive filmmaking is best utilized within the "Blue Folder" sequence. Mr. Hulot is looking for a character by the name of Mr. Giffard, though the audience does not know why. Hulot sees Giffard walking past. Giffard looks like every other character (grey, formal businesswear) in the world of *Playtime* with the only distinction being the blue folder he's holding. Most directors would get a close-up of the folder to show its importance, but Tati, by extracting all the color in the rest of the shot, directs the audience's attention directly to the folder, all in a wide, still maintaining the perspective of the observer.

Hulot follows Giffard to an office building with a labyrinth of cubicles. Hulot is immediately lost within the office's dull, colorless interior design. Hulot finally spots the blue folder and runs up to Giffard, who tells Hulot to wait. As Hulot is meandering around the office, he stops to read a map posted on the wall. The map itself is a visual joke, as it's overly complicated and seems to start randomly and lead nowhere, a commentary on the complex and meaningless designs of modern workplaces. Hulot inches closer to inspect the map, but Hulot does not realize that he is standing inside an elevator, and the elevator closes in before Hulot can realize where he is. With this sequence, Tati is commenting on the issues of modern minimalist

architecture, and the confusion it brings. Again, Tati shot this sequence in a wide so the audience can observe how seamlessly modern contraptions blend into modern architecture.

Tati then cuts to a wide exterior shot of two almost identical buildings, blocking the beautiful blue sky. Tati again draws the audience's attention by having the only color (other than the sky) be a yellow light moving up the building on the left, visualizing Hulot going up in the elevator. Tati shot from outside the building in a wide to visualize how Hulot is such a small player in modern France, barely making up a fraction of the frame. Hulot is not only lost within the gigantic building but also in modern France itself.

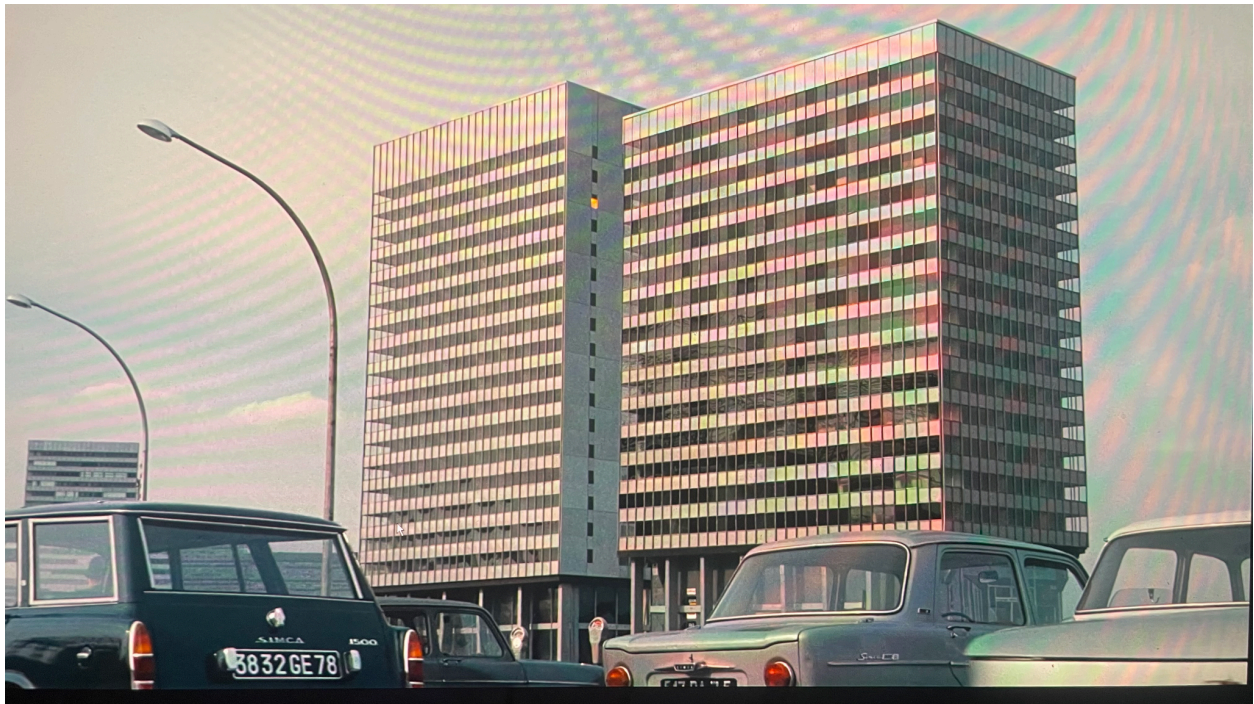


Figure 2: Wide static shot of two buildings.

Tati then cuts back to Giffard for the punchline of the sequence which is that Giffard is now looking for Hulot. The audience knows that Hulot is somewhere else entirely. This irony creates humor in this sequence. Tati then returns to Hulot who is completely lost on a higher level of the building. As Hulot aimlessly wanders around, Tati cuts to a high angle of Hulot looking down at the lower-level cubicles. Within this static shot, we see Hulot framed in the center, closest to the audience. Hulot is observing with us, looking for the blue binder, lost in the mundaneness of the room. Within the cubicles, Tati hides a plethora of visual gags. Extras are talking to mannequins, mannequins are working alone, and two secretaries who look the exact same and wear the exact same outfit interact with each other. Tati inserts these almost invisible visual gags in ultra-wide shots to comment on the silliness of life, and how it can get lost in the scale of a capitalist culture.



Figure 3: Wide, high-angle shot of Mr. Hulot looking at lower-level cubicles.

Hulot spots the blue folder and starts moving towards Giffard. Returning to the main floor of cubicles, taking an escalator which should be impossible if he had ridden so many floors up. On the main floor, Hulot again gets lost in the labyrinth of cubicles. The editing in the sequence has faster cuts of Hulot going around and around the floor and always seeming to end up in the same place around the secretary. The quicker cuts, compared to the slower, more methodical cuts of all the previous sequences, are attempting to catch up with Hulot as he is more frantically running around the office space.

Tati then cuts to another wide in which Hulot is framed all the way to the left, almost out of the audience's field of view, and Giffard is framed all the way to the right. Once Hulot sees Giffard, Hulot begins to sprint, this movement attracts the viewer's attention. The audience observes that Hulot, again loses Giffard, but from the audience tracking Hulot, the audience is able to see where Giffard is, again, creating irony through static shots.



Figure 4: High angle group shot of Hulot (left) and Giffard (Right).

This five-minute sequence works as a perfect thesis statement. Not only for *Playtime* but the works of Jacques Tati as a whole. Tati fully utilizes his technical prowess and comedic muscles to visually tell a story about a man consumed by a modern capitalist metropolis. The influence of *Playtime* can still be found today. The fly-on-the-wall comedic style that Tati pioneered can be found in the works of contemporary comedic directors like David Wain and Jim Cummings. Member of *Monty Python*, Terry Jones has stated that *Playtime* is a “Terrific achievement as a piece of filmmaking”. The production and subsequent commercial failure of *Playtime* may have left Tati broke, but the endless lessons of film techniques that are shown in the film are priceless.

Bibliography

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