Modernization. Isolation. Connection. (Iftin Abshir Critical Comment #2)

Filmed in 70mm in an entirely manufactured set, *Play Time*’s “Tati-ville” set is a continuation of Tati’s idea of modernization that began with his previous film *Mon Oncle*. In these films Tati represents a version of Paris that is an unrecognizable, urbanized city-scape where our only images of the classic Parisian iconography come in the form of fleeting reflections in the glass and steel of the modern skyscrapers in which the film is set.¹ For the group of American tourists who are supposedly in Paris to visit the sights, there is very little left of the old Paris and instead they are shuttled from one modernist location to another. When the most independent of the tourists, Barbara, finds the flower stand on the street corner she exclaims, “this is really Paris!” However, when she attempts to take a picture of the stand she is not able to capture the perfect image because people keep getting in the way with their modern attire and continually ruining her idea of the typical Parisian scene. Time and time again, Barbara gets summoned by her friends as they call for her to come inside the exhibit hall with them to see all the modern things they have. One tourist even excitedly tells Barbara that they even have “American stuff!” It is at this point, when Barbara is going inside the building that we get a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower in the reflection of the door as she wistfully looks at the reflection before finally turning away to rejoin her tour group.

From multiple travel posters sprinkled throughout the film, we quickly begin to realize that in Tati’s world of *Play Time*, all locations, be it Paris, London, Switzerland, Mexico or any other country in the world, looks exactly the same with identical, modern high-rise buildings dominating the skyline. This architectural identically represents Tati’s commentary on the process of the rapid post-war modernization taking place throughout the world. In this way the changes have only served to take away the individuality of each of the locations, leaving them stark and monochromatic. As Miguel Sicart writes, this understanding of modernization and procedure “leads us to an understanding of play, and leisure, as mechanical outcomes of

¹Jones, Terry, *Play Time* Introduction, DVD, *Play Time* directed by Jacques Tati (1967; City:
processes.” Sicart continues by saying, the “‘[a]musement under late capitalism is the
prolongation of work (...) mechanization has such power over a man’s leisure and happiness,
and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are
inevitably afterimages of the work process itself.” Therefore in Play Time we see the breakdown
of leisure activities where the American tourists travel to Paris and experience nothing more than
the inside of an exhibit hall identical to countless others all over the world.

Play Time opens to a stark, white room, which suddenly transforms from a hushed, sterile
environment into a bustling airport terminal. Monsieur Hulot, played by Tati himself, appears out
of the midst of the crowd and recognizable as a character, the viewers are never tied to Hulot or
another character for an extended amount of time. In fact, throughout the film, Tati deploys a
number of faux-Hulots throughout the city, further calling into question what the audience knows
about any of the characters. Additionally, the entire narrative structure of Play Time is loosely
based on the intersecting actions of Hulot and a group of visiting American tourists. Both Hulot
and the Tourists are shown in various locations throughout the town but neither are given any
kind of motivation or in-depth characterization. Joan Ockman refers to this lack of

---

2 Sicart, Miguel. “Against Procedurality.” Game Studies. 11.3. (December 2011).
http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap/.

3 Ibid.
characterization as the “ballet mécanique” that marks this film as excessive [and] outside the bounds of normal space-time relations” it becomes apparent people are characters in Play Time.

Throughout Play Time Tati utilizes a great depth of field in order to compose shots with a foreground, a middle ground, and a background. Additionally, long takes allow for the viewer to wander into the film at their own pace and to look at what they want within the screen. Because Tati does not call particular attention to the main action in the films, the audience is given the ability to take what they chose from the images presented to them on screen. Even though the audience could potentially miss some important action, this style of filmmaking more closely mimics real life in which our field of vision is privileged at certain points and we are not truly seeing or taking everything in at the same time. Tati utilizes the realist techniques described by Bazin in which the staging and framing of scenes in Play Time are used to create images which “[employ] a depth of focus” in which the camera lens “takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field.” This creates the effect of a “checkerboard of space” in which “[i]t is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an a priori significance, it is in the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern, as in a sort of parallelepiped of reality with the screen as its cross-section, the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene.” Because the spectator makes the choice as to what to look at on the screen, not the editing, the task of discerning at what to look becomes even more difficult and yet at the same time more realistic. Sicart touches on a similar concept in games through his description of “simulation fever.” When looking at games or films through this lens, Sicart claims that “[b]oth mental modeling and cognitive mapping show how the interpretation of a games relies as much or more on what simulation excludes or leaves ambiguous that on what it includes.” Therefore, we can see how Tati’s laze fair filmmaking style actually provides viewers a level of agency to experience and explore this fictional world he created in a manner more similar to game playing than the traditional film viewing experience.

---

Thematically Tati’s *Play Time* touches on issues of alienation in the modern world. For example, the scene with Hulot at the office is one example of the alienation created through modernization. As Hulot attempts to get together with a man for a meeting, they keep missing each other in the maze of cubicles. This gag continues throughout the film when the man thinks he sees Hulot later in the day; however, it is one of the fake Hulots Tati has incorporated throughout the film, and the man runs into a glass door chasing after him. Then later when the man gets home with his nose all bandaged, we can see that the real Hulot is in the apartment next door. The audience is able to see both men through the large windows facing the street, but the men do not know that the other is there. For Tati these are the types of interactions that are possible in the modern world.

While other people constantly surround the characters in the film, the interactions between them are at a distance and only really possible through barriers. As Sicart brings to the focus, what happens when people lose their individuality through their connection to the modern? “This perspective has strong ethical, political and cultural implications. By depriving players of their capacity to express themselves through play, and by turning play into an instrumental action, the proceduralists are ignoring the acts of appropriation and configuration that constitute the players’ expression.”

It isn’t until the façade within the Royal Garden restaurant begins quite literally to come down around them that the people in *Play Time* are truly able to let go and interact with one another.

---

As Sicart writes that “players don’t need the designer- they need a game, and excuse and a frame of play” which we see manifest itself on screen throughout the Royal Garden sequence in which the designer, in this case the architect, is literally pushed out of the way as the restaurant falls to pieces all around him. But as the restaurant deteriorates so do the constraints of society and we begin to see people truly connect and enjoy their lives. This breakdown of the façade of modernity Sicart describes as an illustration of “how the curve succeeds.”

Quite literally, in fact, as at the end of the film the once straight and orderly street is transforms into a carousel of colour and music showing how once again “the messiness of humans, the ways in which we appropriate what we are told to do configure our experiences of space, place, and meaning.”

---

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.