

Playtime: A Review

Parker Stenseth

Created on the heels of *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* and *Mon Oncle*, *Playtime* was Jacques Tati's most expensive picture, most arduous production, and greatest box office disappointment. It's also his greatest work and one of the most daring comedies to be put on film. It's unusual, especially to modern sensibilities which view the genre as extremely pleasure-oriented, to see a comedy that is formally challenging and offers an unwavering look at world alienation as its subject.

The film is effectively plotless, a meandering journey through postmodern Paris. Tati's Monsieur Hulot is the main character only insofar as he is in frame more often than anyone else. The other difference between him and other characters is that he seems out of place in the world, unable to act within it to achieve his goals. The film rotates through a series of locations, each outlandish in its new normalcy. It opens in an airport terminal—establishing open spaces and glass panels as instrumental to the film's design—and demonstrates the film's leading formal principals, deep focus and multiple ongoing interactions with the environment at any given moment. Hulot doesn't show up for some time, and the audience is introduced to a human aquarium. A full aquarium doesn't have a single focal point and neither do the frames in this film. Occasionally new elements will be introduced and grab attention by way of their newness or the volume of space that they occupy, but they have not *a priori* been given preference over the other elements in the frame.

Watching *Playtime* is an act of choosing where attention is being directed, making selections when too much information has been

provided. Herein lies part of the film's postmodern logic. Even when Tati is in-frame—despite movie-star, main-character conditioning—his presence is not overwhelming in a way that would compromise the film's structure. Tati is one of film's most magnetic physical performers, but he understands composition in a way that lets him join the environment. This joint display of humility and brilliance allows the film to oscillate between individual and society, showing how the latter might have outmoded the former.

In an early scene, Tati arrives at an office building to seek a meeting. The old doorman uses an impossibly complicated panel to call his superior and ask what to do with Hulot. They send him to a waiting room where he struggles to sit in a chair of a new design. Another man enters. He's younger, impeccably dressed, and of particular manner. He sits for a brief moment before being asked to enter. Hulot continues to wait. When it appears as though he's been forgotten, Hulot wanders out through long hallways and endless cubicles. This extended sequence observes his struggle against the world in both a physical and social structure. This, of course, is a common theme for comedians—especially the silent or near-silent films—but with Tati there is a difference, a matter of emphasis. Most comedians want to direct focus to the struggle and mine this area for laughs. Tati decides to focus on the world, on the context (or, ultimately, the source) of Hulot's struggle. This is effective because it demonstrates that the world alienation experienced by Hulot is not his alone. We see it everywhere in the frame, flooding with life. We see it in the American tourists gawking at glass buildings. We see it in Athenian-pillar garbage cans. And we see it in a dinner club whose upper-class façade can't last through its opening night. With these tapestries, Tati demonstrates a mature understanding of life and an overwhelming ability to communicate it on film.

Parker Stenseth is an undergraduate student studying English, Economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, particularly the silent comedians and French cinema, and will be pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.