

# ***Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism*, by Malcolm Turvey.** **Columbia University Press, 2019, 282 pp.**

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Rather early on in *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), Christian Metz takes a full paragraph to detail the type of love for cinema that a “theoretician of the cinema” should have (15). It is a complicated affair; the thinker negotiates a safe distance between herself and her cinephilia, which she must forget about, rediscover, and ultimately keep in check—as if the work of theory were not already quite the handful in and of itself. Now, I cannot say whether Turvey is a theoretician/born-again cinephile in the Metzian sense, but, while reading his latest book, *Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism*, I certainly felt his love for cinema, and in particular for that of French filmmaker extraordinaire Jacques Tati; a clear, sincere, and undoubtedly personal, love. This makes Turvey’s already famously limpid, precise, and accessible thinking and writing even more enjoyable than usual. I would in fact argue that his patent investment in the book’s subject is clearly a crucial cog in the functioning of the whole study, ensuring that every reader feels involved and present at all times, as she goes through the work’s vast and deep analytical and conceptual apparatus.

It is difficult to overestimate the richness offered by *Play Time*, whose full title—*Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism*—directly addresses the two major ambitions of the study: to provide an extensively researched critical exploration of Tati’s cinema, as well as an understanding of it as a form of comedic modernism, which Turvey defines as “the employment of the comedian as a subject and/or model in modernist theory and practice” (12).

Much of what the book delivers seems to stem from a close analysis-based, dedicated breakdown of the cards up Tati’s comedic sleeve. However, as a contemporary film theorist and historian of cinematic modernism, Turvey discusses the place of cinema in our more general appreciation of modernist art, and comments on behaviours and expectations typical of cinematic audiences—something more important than ever, given the constant expansion of the galaxy of the moving image. Eventually, by combining a careful review of primary sources with theoretical insights, Turvey advances his fundamental thesis about Tati: that he infused into his works an idiosyncratic and original form of comedic modernism, which aimed to stimulate the perceptual and cognitive habits of his viewers, making them possible accomplices in his humorous, critical treatment of modernity.

Thus *Play Time* is not only a lean, mean, example-driven and conceptually clear machine in support of its thesis; it is also a very welcome addition to our field of film studies, expanding

and updating a section of it that, as Turvey comments, needed a fresh entry. In fact, books in English about Tati's work are scarce and, for the most part, dated—especially with many of his films having been recently restored, while other Tati-related materials have become more accessible.

*Play Time*'s four chapters plus introduction and afterword boast an impressive set of 239 images (almost one per page), which is worth stressing because it supports, within the limit of still images, Turvey's investment in providing his readers with a tangible grasp of Tati's filmmaking.

In the introduction, primarily through a very enjoyable analysis of some early shots from *Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967), Turvey advances some of the book's core concerns, and in particular the connections between Tati's cinema and modernism on one side, and comedian comedy on the other—two traditions that, he will argue, Tati joined through his comedic modernism. Furthermore, Turvey uses the opening of the book to clarify his decision not to resort to either Miriam Hansen's vernacular modernism or David Bordwell's parametric narration to discuss Tati's cinema, even if both might seem good fits to do so. Suffice to say, these explanations make for compelling reading, especially for cinema scholars. In a similar vein, Turvey also explains his reliance in this study on single authorship and authorial intentionality, two notions whose philosophical controversies he is very much aware of, but whose employment he convincingly defends on very practical grounds.

In the first chapter, "Comedic Modernism", Turvey provides a thorough critical reading of the figure of the clown/comedian as a crucial component for and within the work of many European interwar avant-garde artists and intellectuals, and, more in general, Modernists. Many might be already familiar with Modernists' fondness for performers like Chaplin and Keaton, whose incredible acrobatic feats and odd characters they heralded as symbols of their own rejection of the bourgeois art, life, and penchant for interiority and psychology. Turvey scrutinises the core tenets and various manifestations of this relationship, eventually providing a fresher, deeper, and more richly nuanced account of it.

Turvey also helps us reframe the interwar avant-garde love for clowns as the continuation and development of a previous interest that cut across the arts in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth Century, and that can be found in the works of, among others, Gustave Flaubert, the *fumistes*, Alfred Jarry, and, later, Picasso, Degas, and Cézanne. This last argument, impressively researched and presented, really stands out through the entire chapter, and allows us to rethink the intersection between Modernists and the history of cinema in a wider scenario that does not hide it behind a perhaps facile layer of medium exceptionalism.

The end of the chapter ties these arguments together by presenting René Clair as a bridge between the interwar Modernists and postwar figures like Tati himself, who will continue to work in the tradition of comedic modernism. Turvey here focuses on what Clair called lyricism, which he saw as a distinctive affect of cinema qua art form brought about by the cinematic capture and rendition of movement, both visually (the pleasure of experiencing mere movement on the screen), and in a more conceptual way, as in freedom of movement of the spectator's thought, opening toward free-ranging associations under the sway of the film's visual stimuli, and orchestrated through editing. Importantly, Turvey's analysis of lyricism here is not "just" another iteration of his extensive and

solid scholarship on classical film theory; through it, he also puts the reader in the right mindset to take a proper look at the interests and cinematic strategies that, as he will argue, define Tati's oeuvre.

In the second chapter, titled "Comedy of Everyday Life", Turvey (inspired by Noël Carroll's taxonomy of the sight gag (1996) presents a comprehensive account of the strategies that Tati employed to extract humour from actually rather mundane situations and not intrinsically funny characters that he deployed in his films, focusing in particular on how these strategies justify references to Tatian cinema as democratic and realist.

Through extensive case studies paired with Tati's own words from numerous interviews, Turvey carefully chronicles Tati's employment of many visual and aural gags and comic metaphors which he adjusted from the comedian comedy, severing them from the latter's investment in centre-stage, creative showmanship. Instead, Tati redistributed the comic weight of his films across a range of unwittingly amusing characters (showing his democratic vein), with their being entangled in, or entertained by, the quirky, funny, and aleatory aspects of the events of everyday life (evidence of his—painstakingly scripted—realist approach).

Turvey's brilliant analysis presents these Tatian aesthetic choices as manifestations of a cultural concern felt by the filmmaker. Tati was in fact explicitly preoccupied by the rampaging standardisation of everyday life that affected Europe after the Second World War, in particular with the Americanist version of mass culture that he saw transforming people into consumerist, passive subjects. Instead, Turvey tells us, Tati wanted to use his films to revamp a notion (of European derivation) of the individual as an active observer, as someone willing and able to participate in communal life and to take in the world and the unfolding of life, especially its most amusing moments. In fact, most of the Tatian characters at the centre of his comedy of popular modernist inclinations fit this description, from the well-known, recurring Monsieur Hulot to those more anonymous and occasional. With these characters, Turvey tells us, Tati sought to inspire his spectators to resist modern life's push toward passivity, showing them how to be more active, careful, and lively perceivers and seekers of comedy.

Turvey's analysis of how Tati's concern with people's passivity influenced the strategies of his comedic modernism employs a wider lens in the third chapter, "The Beholder's Share". Here, in fact, he shows how the filmmaker's desire to make his spectators into more active perceivers and thinkers is exemplified not just through the characters, but also in the very ways Tati's gags were designed and organised, from *mise en scène* to editing.

Turvey meticulously describes how Tatian cinema challenges our film watching and listening habits through a plethora of strategies for gag development aimed at fostering more active models of spectatorial attention, and that result in what he calls an opaque style of comedy—opaque, because it makes spectators work for their enjoyment of comedy, rather than providing them with entertainment that requires no effort on their part.

Tati's entire gag arsenal is thus accounted for, from its most traditional and straightforward parts, to the more innovative, perceptually and cognitively challenging ones. Nothing escapes Turvey's analytical coverage, which is a pleasure to read in itself, as it is powered by a richly

illustrated cascade of examples from almost the entire Tatian oeuvre. It was genuinely fun to recognise and categorise, with Turvey's help, the various Tatian strategies for developing gags: from eliding parts of them, to repeating, fragmenting, delaying, suspending, or even hiding their cogs and payoffs through image and soundtrack alike. It is perhaps in analysing Tati's use of sound (while dispensing with widely accepted misconceptions such as Tati being a predominantly visual filmmaker) that Turvey's exegetic capacities are tested the most—but they still glow.

Turvey's case for opaque comedy allows us to find in Tati an even more fascinating artistic figure; a filmmaker who endorsed the *politique des auteurs* of Cahiers extraction, a hyper-zealous and dedicated *metteur en scène*, and a manipulator of attention. But also, and crucially, a filmmaker that nonetheless delegated to spectators much of the chances of success of his own works, by challenging their attention and power of imagination to find, reconstruct, or keep alive the comedy in his films.

The critical trajectory of the fourth chapter, "Satirizing Modernity", in many ways ties together the many topics that Turvey has been juggling throughout the book. In fact, here he maps systematically, and in further detail than before, the connections between Tati's aesthetic solutions, and his ideas about modernity and its discontents.

Turvey reminds us that Tati worked during the three postwar decades of vertiginous growth, which drastically transformed and modernised France—a fact that prompted many to see in his comedies a satirical response to such highly-compressed social changes. However, as before, Turvey leads us to scrutinise more carefully such a generally held conclusion. He does so by canvassing, through excerpts of films and interviews, one of the most obvious sites of Tati's skepticism for modernity: his comedic treatment of modernist architecture and urban planning philosophies, especially in their more stereotypical and trivialised manifestations.

Turvey collects views and observations from critics and Tati alike, and examines them against films such as *Mon Oncle* (Jacques Tati, 1958) and *Playtime* to obtain a more complex and detailed grasp of what he argues was Tati's understanding (and critique) of modernity. Interestingly, the rich and complex result of this effort is not at all a clear-cut stance, as both Tati and his critics might have suggested. Most Tatian subjects, beginning with Hulot, are not saboteurs of modernity, but people that constantly try to fit in with modern conventions and environments—and that, for our entertainment, often comically fail to do so. So, if we enter this chapter aware of the diffuse argument maintaining Tati's flat rejection of all things modern, then we leave with a more refined understanding of his dislike for some aspects of it, and in particular for how it sanitised, controlled, standardised, and harnessed lively spontaneity and individuality, especially when such constrictions were embraced by the postwar French bourgeoisie. At the same time, we learn that if we accept at face value Tati's own downplaying of his critical outlook on modernity, we might miss out on all the moments where modernity, especially in its architectural manifestations, was ingeniously and briskly satirised for amplifying the attitudes and behaviours of the aforementioned bourgeoisie. In the end, Turvey not only gifts us with a more organic account of Tati's satirical verve and worldview, but also the more hopeful (and necessary, for satirical purposes) acknowledgment that Tati believed that if people can change their attitudes and embrace a more playful and active approach to life—of the kind he hoped to engender with his

filmmaking—then even modern life can cease to be a system of control and oppression, and it can welcome leisure and vitality, rather than torpedo them.

Lastly, in the afterword, Turvey examines Tati's final film, *Parade* (1974). Often dismissed as minor and nostalgic, mostly because of its distance from the legacy of comedian comedy. Here *Parade* becomes instead a summa of Tati's artistic efforts, and of his desire to cinematically foster a culture of participation. In fact, *Parade* constantly blurs the lines between actors and performers, between spaces on and off stage. In it, Tati fully and explicitly displays the dynamics of democratic participation and of the rediscovery of everyday comedy that characterised the design of his previous works. Turvey closes his study with a note on Tati's investment in participation, reminding us how deeply it shaped his cinema of comedic modernism, and warning us to question the technologically deterministic appeal of contemporary claims that present participation as a specific theme of our current, digital culture.

Certainly, *Play Time*, with its barrage of examples, can be sometimes intense—especially for those with only a passing interest in film analysis. Even so, I would argue that it remains a hugely enjoyable book, which pushes the reader to watch Tati's films anew and to celebrate the screen: it might be hard to ask more of a book about cinema. *Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism* must then be warmly recommended reading for all lovers of Tati, particularly since it is written by one of them, which shows. And my recommendation gets only warmer for all those who, like myself, are interested in understanding comedy and its mechanisms.

## References

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