

The Alien Occupation of Space in *Playtime*: Parallels between Jacques Tati, Henri Lefebvre and The Situationists.

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Abstract: 2008 has seen various events to mark the 40th anniversary of the political events of May 1968. For a brief moment of time art, politics and philosophy seemed to coincide in its challenge to late twentieth century capitalism. The cultural and intellectual climate of France in particular seemed to offer a perfect breeding ground for disquiet and revolt. It was the epoch of several great French intellectuals including Roland Barthes, Jean Paul Satre, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Louis Althusser y Henri Lefebvre, to name but a few.

In the world of the arts Guy Debord and *The Situationists* were picking up on the ideas laid out by some of these theorists whilst in film, *The New Wave* was challenging all sorts of social and cinematographic norms. Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut and Jacques Rivette were to produce some of the most radical and groundbreaking film of modern times.

On the edge of this artistic and socio-political circle was Jacques Tati. Replacing intellectual rigour with simple irreverence and direct action with ironic humour, Tati trod ground remarkably similar to many of these thinkers and artists. Certainly the ideas of Debord, Baudrillard and Lefebvre run throughout his masterpiece, *Playtime*, 1967.

The subject of this paper will be the way in which the political, social and architectural ideas of Debord, Baudrillard and Lefebvre manifest themselves in the work of Tati. It will begin by outlining themes from *The Society of the Spectacle*, *Consumer Society; myths and structures* and *The Social Production of Space*. The issues will then be identified by reference to specific scenes in *Playtime*.

The conversion of architecture into control environments of consumption will be highlighted, as will the social control of people by their architectural setting. We will also underline the ways in which Tati shows people intentionally and unintentional misusing the spaces they inhabit and the fact that he leads the viewer through the various environments of Paris.

As a result, the *Situationist* notions of the derive psychogeography and detournement will be discussed alongside the Baudrillardian idea of a consumer society and Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space. By illustrating various examples it will become evident that the social agenda regarding the use of space found in *Playtime* is far more acerbic and insightful than is generally perceived. The final aim of the paper then is to present *Playtime* as a distillation of many of the social and political criticisms of modern architecture and urbanism.

Key words: Situationists, Tati, Society, Architecture, Urbanism

Introduction

The last film of a trilogy that began in 1953 with *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, continued in 1958 with *Mon Oncle* and finished in 1968 with this film, *Playtime* would eventually be considered the masterpiece of the French directing genius Jacques Tati. The most expensive and ambitious of the trilogy it was a film that represented the finale of his cinematographic career and led to his economic bankruptcy. It was released in a French intellectual climate dominated by thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jean Paul Satre, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Louis Althusser and Henri Lefebvre. In the world of cinema this intellectual circle

included conceptual artists such as Jean-Luc Godard y Francois Truffaut and, from a more art house perspective, Guy Debord and the Situationists.

This paper will argue that *Playtime* offers an example of what happens when architectural spaces designed with specific aims in mind and according to specific conventions are occupied and mis-used by individuals with conflicting spatial expectations and needs. As such, it will be argued that it offers unintended and comic examples of the *appropriation of space* as explained in the work of Henri Lefebvre and spatial *détournement* as evidenced in the work of the Situationists.



Figure 1 Playtime. Jaques Tati.

Lefebvre and the architectural background to *Playtime*

Although this text will discuss the work of Tati in the context of intellectually recognised theorists he is more generally associated with cinematic figures such as Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and, above all, Charlie Chaplin. In fact, the analogies between Chaplin and the star of Tati's trilogy, *Monsieur Hulot* are as abundant as they are inevitable. As the architectural critic Iain Borden points out, Chaplin's tramp and Tati's Hulot are somewhat pathetic characters; *clumsy, distracted and humble to the point of seeming slow and unintelligent*.¹ Out of place in the modern world with its rationally designed cities, mechanised and commercial lifestyle these stalwarts of times past show a certain perplexed indifference to the absurdities of modern life they see taking shape around them. It is precisely this dislocation of the character from the society he inhabits that is at the heart of this paper's argument. It is in this context that we see his unintended *mis* or *re-appropriation* of that society's architecture and spaces.

With the publication of his most famous work, *The Production of Space* in 1974 modern architecture and more specifically, urbanism would become one of Lefebvre's central concerns. However, it was an issue that had been integral to his thinking for some years before then. In his 1962 work *Introduction to Modernity*, he took on the subject through a direct comparison between the historical town of Navarrenx and the modernist new town Mourenx, just a few miles away.

Whilst not wholly critical of Mourenx he expresses a certain horror for the notion of thousands of "machines for living in" organised in a geometrically controlled plan that is repetitive and infinitely extendable. He asks the question whether this type of architecture is in any way liberating for its inhabitants; *are we entering a brave new world of joy, or a world of irredeemable boredom*.² Beyond simply questioning its pros and cons however, he muses on the reasons behind its development. Is it a form of architecture that will bring social benefits or

is it simply a new form of architecture that results from the dynamic but controlling forces of the capitalist mode of production.³

In order to understand what Lefebvre may mean by an *architecture of a capitalist mode of production*, it is necessary to pause a moment and define a few of the ideas he would later expound in *The Production of Space*. In his seminal text Lefebvre rejects the notion of some sort of ideal space; spaces, cities or buildings conceived, designed and built by an architect as pure artistic creations without any interference from external material forces. Lefebvre defines such spaces, together with abstract philosophical definitions of Cartesian space, as attempts to divorce space from what he calls social practices.⁴

Examples of what social practices may be include the state's desire to eliminate pockets of social anarchy, as with Haussmann's designs for Paris under Napoleon III. It may also include a property developer's need for quick and immediate profit and thus the endless selection of repetitive architectural forms and models; the Wimpy home for example. It may also include a manufacturers desire to promote the use of a given building material or element such as glass, steel and concrete, which must have happened in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is a combination of such *material* factors with more abstract and artistically orientated ideas that lead to what Lefebvre calls the production of *real* or *social* space. Seen in this context, the new town of Mourenx is consequently seen as little more than the inevitable manifestation of the socio-productive forces at work under state capitalism. Such schemes are thus seen as the large scale application of cost effective manufacturing and construction techniques designed to facilitate economic growth and profit; their status as a response to the need to house large numbers of people being just another contributory factor.

Central to projects such as Mourenx was the controlled, rational planning of the city at an urban scale; namely, the division of the city into zones and the clear separation of functions and modes of transportation. By the time of its construction the world of architectural urbanism had become dominated by CIAM and its notion this future city. Laid out in its 1938 manifesto, *The Athens Charter this Future City*, often referred to as *The Functional City*, was to be based on *four points of doctrine*.⁵ The British architectural critic Eric Mumford considered these four points of doctrine (the division of the city into four zones for habitation, work, play and circulation) as *the most important contribution to urban design thinking ever*.⁶



Figure 2 The City of the Future.

Seen by many as analogous to the application of mass production techniques found in factories, the intention was to create an efficient and effective city whose principal of zoning was based on the division of tasks on the factory floor. Lefebvre would define it as the

imposition of abstract space; a space in which the division of labour seen in the capitalist mode of production repeats itself in spatial organisation at a city-wide scale.⁷

Concomitant to this to approach to urban planning and its moves towards cost and speed efficiency in construction was a certain aesthetic homogeneity brought about by the logic of mass production and a visual sensibility for abstraction. Seen as representative of a new spirit, this aesthetic would be applied to buildings of all types, from town halls to houses and offices to churches. This new rationalised, logical approach to architecture however, was not only seen in the layout of the city and its aesthetic appearance. Other more psychological effects invariably came in its wake. The use of glass and open plan buildings would break down individual privacy and the minimalist aesthetic would require a lack of clutter in ways of living. The social, productive and economic forces that would shape the second half of the twentieth century were not only physically evident in architecture but in the behaviours that architecture would initiate in its users. It is precisely this set of consequences that Jacques Tati investigated in *Playtime*.

The Architecture and Urbanism of Tati

Without entering into an Lefebvre like political critique of modern architecture Tati and his usual set designer, Jacques Lagrange, set out to parody and define *The Functional City* on celluloid as heartless and dehumanised. Situated in the outskirts of Paris Tati and Lagrange conceived a reduced scale replica city that was later nicknamed *Tativille*. It occupied a site plan of some 15.000 metres squared and was a completely modular, rationally organised city in which the clear division of functions corresponded precisely to the urban planning principals praised and championed by the majority of urban design's leading intellectuals.



Figure 3 Playtime. Jaques Tati.

The design of Tativille's individual buildings also took its precedent from the architecture of the modern movement by basing their design on the ESSO building in *La Défense*, Paris, built in 1963. Seen as quintessential international style architecture, the ESSO building was endlessly repeated in *Tativille* in order to create a city of homogenous and monotonous glass skyscrapers. Each one of these building replicas was mounted on rails so that they could be organised in varying dispositions for different scenes. Consequently, what happens in *Playtime* is that the viewer is presented with numerous scenes apparently set in different parts of the city but whose architectural backdrop is virtually identical. Exaggerating both the planning and aesthetic characteristics of the "international style" to the point of ridicule Tati presents us with protagonists who get lost in the city and, at times, even deliberately confuses the viewer.

The spatial and aesthetic uniformity that characterises Tativille and its building exteriors is carried through to their interiors with hotels, hospitals, airports and offices all appearing to be

the identical and thus indistinguishable. The interiors Tati creates is one in which everything shines with the sparkle of the new and is so clean and pure that it very quickly becomes comically aseptic. Seen in one of the film's opening scenes these characteristics combine to produce a comic, insightful but ultimately critical commentary on modern architecture.

Set in some sort of institutional building the scene opens with an image of nuns walking through some of the innumerable passageways of the set. Subsequently we are presented with a shot of a uniformed officer crossing one of the building's enormous empty spaces. Apparently lost in this space are a number of other characters who, wander about aimlessly in a building that has no distinguishing characteristics. From amongst these people comes a somewhat perplexed cleaner who, with pan and brush in hand, looks hopelessly for a fleck of dust to clean. Around him are other building users who sit in seats so far apart from one another that they condition a total lack of verbal communication.



Figure 4 Playtime. Jaques Tati.

When somebody passes through the shot in a wheelchair this empty institutional and clinically clean building acquires the character of a modern hospital, in whose gigantic waiting room reins a respectful silence. The confusion surrounding the building's function is only resolved when the arrival of a flight from the United States is announced over a loud speaker. However, before this is resolved Tati plays with the silence and size of the building with numerous sound gags; in this architecture of hard surfaces and exaggeratedly large spaces even the most innocent or insignificant sounds, footsteps, a conversation or an umbrella falling to the floor for example, echo so much that they become the cause of great embarrassment as everyone turns to look at the paranoid culprit.

The most obvious observation being made in these opening scenes regards the aesthetic homogeneity of modern architecture which, as a result of the economies of mass production, applies one design language to multiple social situations; hospitals, airports, monasteries etc. Architecture is parodied as a mass produced consumer product. However, in addition Tati also parodies the de-humanised nature of this architecture; within its spaces humans are represented as uncomfortable inconveniences. The open plan of the building (possible due to new forms of construction) mean that individuals sit at exaggerated distances from one another worried that their every word, action and movement will be heard and seen. In this new architecture suggests Tati; the intricacies of what Lefebvre calls *everyday life*, are seen as alien.⁸

Beyond these somewhat standard observations and criticisms however there is a moment in these opening shots that brings into play more general socio-economic arguments around industrialisation in all its forms. A common argument used by those on the left and the right to promote industrialisation in all its facets, was that liberty from work could be found through the productive processes of industrialisation. Essentially the equation was that increased capacity for production brought about by industrialisation would lead to a decrease in the amount of

time dedicated to work. Indeed the national curriculum in the 1960's and 1970's in the UK had classes on how to best use the increased social time that would be available to *workers*. The reality was however somewhat different.

Following the logic of capitalism and the need to increase profit, increased industrialisation was translated into increased levels of unemployment and an ever increasing pressure to increase productivity on those still in work. Tati's cleaner is a very subtle reference to this reality. Helplessly looking around for a scrap of dust to clean up he is a *traditional* employee whose *traditional* job is now under threat. The threat comes from a new form of industrialised, aesthetically minimalist architecture that discourages building users to litter or clutter and seemingly keeps itself clean. In numerous ways then, the buildings of Tati are seen to alienate, confuse and disorientate their users.

The juxtaposition of events and spaces; *détournement* and appropriation

These moments in which we see protagonists lost at sea in a new architectural setting they do not understand are key to the argument put forward in this paper; that we see examples of appropriation and *détournement*. What they represent are moments of disjunction between the uses envisaged by architects and the actual uses people made of their buildings. Although in Lefebvre's discussion of appropriation in *The Production of Space* does not focus on the accidental, it is clearly resonant with what Tati presents the viewer in *Playtime*. For Lefebvre, appropriation is a social practice in which the nature of a project has building has been modified, often by individuals working outside any set or state rules and regulations, in order that it satisfies different needs.⁹ They thus apply one set of behaviours and norms of behaviour on a setting designed with others in mind.

Détournement had its origins in the collage but, as argued by Libero Andreotti, unlike the collage it was envisaged as something that was endlessly repeatable and applicable to a number of contexts; cinema, writing art and even the urban environment.¹⁰ Developed by the Situationists in the 1950s it was seen by Guy Debord as a potentially useful urban strategy in the general struggle to stimulate and accelerate social change. Quite simply, at this urbanistic level it would involve the imposition of alien architectural elements and personal activities in set spaces.

A prime example of which was the re-appropriation of the Halles Centrales in Paris between 1969 and 1971 that both Lefebvre and the Situationists praised. For a brief period the building, designed for the distribution of food, was effectively occupied by artists who imposed new actions and events upon it. Again, although a more deliberate subversion of space than anything Tati presents in *Playtime*, the principal is the same; juxtaposition. Time and time again, Tati juxtaposes the actions and behaviours of his main protagonist with an architectural setting that is both alien and alienating. In short, he plays with a form of cinematic *Détournement* between events and spaces for light comic effect.

Evident in the scenes we have already described, it is also evident in the scene in which Hulot finds himself in a waiting room of a new office building prior to an interview. Placed inside a glass cube he is presented like a goldfish in a goldfish bowl. The scene plays with a series of sound jokes such as his every footstep on the newly cleaned and polished floor producing an artificially loud squeak or his every movement whilst sitting in a leather covered seat being accompanied by the sound a whoopy cushion. Even the acts of walking and sitting is presented as something alien to the world of modern architecture.



Figure 5 Playtime. Jaques Tati.

This disjunction between modern architecture and existing behaviour, or perhaps more accurately a traditional understanding of buildings, is taken to extremes in the subsequent series of shots in which Hulot, having been separated from his interviewer, pursues him through a functional and modular architecture that takes connotations of an M.C. Escher painting. Confused by the aesthetic homogeneity of the interior and its grid like layout that offer no guides to orientation, Hulot engages in a mad-cap chase scene that culminates in him confusing the reflection of his interviewer on the interior of the building's glass façade with the real person; a mistake that leads him outside the building to the street where his confusion reaches delirium. Looking for conventional reference points, expecting walls to be solid and not recognising modern architectural elements such as doors and windows, Hulot is seen applying outmoded readings and actions to a new and unintelligible form of architecture.



Figures 6 and 7 Playtime. Jaques Tati.

Perhaps most famously seen in the film's penultimate scene this application of one set of readings and actions to a different type of space, leads to a half hour comic routine that also brings economic questions about contemporary building to the fore. Set on the upper floors of a hotel / office building the scene shows the final desperate attempts of the architect and the restaurant owner to get ready for the opening night. Floor tiles are laid and plans reworked as guests begin to enter the site of what is to become a perfect example of the *Détournement* of space and expected social convention.

As the scene develops the building breaks down into a series of comic tricks in which floor tiles stick to the feet of waiters, guests walk into glass doors they cannot see, people try to read the map of Paris that is actually just the texture and patterning of the walls, seats leave imprints on the backs of visitors and lights intended to illuminate stairs fail, thus leading to numerous accidents and mishaps. As the intended relationship between the architectural setting and the codes of conduct that reign in a high-class restaurant fall apart, some

infuriated guests leave. Others take advantage of the situation and impose new actions and behaviours on the space they temporarily re-appropriate to new ends.



Figure 8 Playtime. Jaques Tati.

A suspended ceiling that falls down becomes the walls that define an impromptu VIP zone in the dancing area, the stage for soothing background music becomes a site for Jazz improvisation and the eating areas become dance floors. In essence, people take over the space and use it as they wish. No longer confined to the norms pre-set by the codified event and the architectural layout designed for it, the restaurant becomes a site of *Détournement* or, to use the terminology of Lefebvre, a site of *appropriation*.

Situationism in *Playtime*

What is obvious from this scene is that Tati's tendency to juxtapose the actions, expectations and behaviours of people onto the new spaces of modern architecture can easily be read as a manifestation of *Détournement*, albeit, as mentioned various times already, unwittingly. However, it is not only in this context that one finds faint echoes of Situationist theory in *Playtime*. One can also identify scenes which remind us of their concept of Unitary Urbanism and, in particular, the strategy of the *derive* and its concomitant activity; psychogeographical mapping.



Figure 9 Playtime. Jaques Tati.

In their attempts to understand, explain and ultimately subvert the role of socially produced space on everyday life the *derivé* was used by the Situationists as a key concept. Their apparently aimless meanderings through the city were intended as a reaction against the controlling tendencies of modern architecture and urbanism which, particularly in new towns, defined pathways, routes, zones and areas in pre-ordained ways and thus attempted to control the experience of the city. The *derivé* was intended to open up this experience to uncontrolled and unplanned events, opportunities and coincidences.

Part and parcel of the *derivé* was the psychogeographical mapping of the urban experience; the documentation and recording of moods, atmospheres, uses, events and activities that took place in urban spaces, streets, squares, parks, pathways etc. It was an attempt to examine *the effects the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, had on the emotions and behaviour of individuals*.¹¹ Counteracting the pre-ordained uses of the city through the *derivé* was intended to open up new and unexpected *psychogeographical relationships*. In *Playtime* Tati deals with this through two sets of characters; his protagonist Hulot and a group of American tourists that spend a few days in Paris on holiday.

Throughout the film we follow Hulot walking through the various streets and neighbourhoods of the city as he meets friends, bumps into old colleagues and watches the multiple events, activities, moods and atmospheres of everyday life in the city evolve organically. Simultaneously, we also follow the group of American tourists who do something similar. However, they go on a tour bus with a guide and, as a result, have a much more controlled experience. As we follow Hulot, he seems not to have any objective other than to absorb different atmospheres, experiences and architectures of the city. However, the tourists are always on their way to a destination. Consequently, the film becomes a type of dual cinematic psycho-geographic map; a double filmic documentation of the city and the behaviour of those who populate it. For Hulot, this map is complex, mixed, nuanced and, at all times, unpredictable. For the tourists it is one dimensional, boring, consumerist and always controlled.

They are taken to the hotel, to restaurants and theatres, often passing other tour groups on the same route. One of the most important stops on their trip around the city is a visit a trade fair where innovative domestic products are displayed. They marvel at such things as carpet sweepers with headlights, internal doors that close silently, bins that take the form of classical columns and lamps that emit different coloured light. As Debord put it; they live a life *which heralds itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles*.¹² They are presented as perfect examples of modern consumers lost in what *The Situationists* referred to as the *Society of the Spectacle*.

Conclusion

When we examine *Playtime* in the context of Situationist theory we find multiple references to their interpretation of modern architecture and the urban experience, our use and mis-use of space and also their later arguments regarding the nature of contemporary society. Despite the possibility of reading *Playtime* in the context of the Society of the Spectacle, or indeed, the possibility of reading it as a critique of the dehumanising effects of industrialisation however, what we have tried to highlight here is that related to all of this is Tati's narrative application of spatial *détournement* or the appropriation of space to many of the film's most important scenes.

Read in this light, Tati shows us examples of a light hearted and unintended occupation of space by users of the contemporary city and its buildings. The tourists represent a contemporary public fully prepared and happy to follow the rules laid out by a new post war consumerist society whose architectural manifestation takes the form of a mass produced dehumanised buildings; buildings conceived as suitable for both work and play – and everything in-between. By contrast, Tati's protagonist is blissfully ignorant of his refusal to conform. He continually tries to subvert the architect's intentions by simply applying the

expectations, codes of behaviour and actions that he is used to. Through his ignorance he re-appropriates the spaces he inhabits.

Clearly, there is one main difference between the actions of Hulot in *Playtime* and the calls for the appropriation of space by Lefebvre or the détournement of buildings by the Situationists. This difference resides in *intentionality*. It also resides in the fact that Tati's protagonist looks backwards – towards conventions and behaviours of a previous time. For Lefebvre, and in particular the Situations, such thinking would have been seen as retrograde. The détournement of space envisaged by the Situationists was far more direct in its political objectives and avant-garde in its conceptualisation; it was through art, by acting theatrically, by playing in the city, that its architecture and social conventions would be subverted. That said however, despite this lack of intentionality and his light hearted tone Hulot's inept misuse of architecture still offers us a glimpse of a type of spatial appropriation and détournement envisaged by these thinkers.

Endnotes

¹ Borden, Iain. (2000) *Jacques Tati and Modern Architecture*. Film and Architecture II. Vol 70. No.1. January. Wiley-Academy Editions. London. p28.

² Lefebvre, Henri. (1995) *Introduction to Modernity*. Verso. London. p117

³ Lefebvre, Henri. (1995) *Introduction to Modernity*. Ibid. p118

⁴ Lefebvre, Henri. (1974) *The Production of Space*. Blackwell. London. p8

⁵ CIAM. *La carta de Atenas*. (1957) Editorial Contémpera. Buenos Aires. p123.

⁶ Mumford, Eric. (2000) *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*. MIT Press, Cambridge. p59.

⁷ Lefebvre, Henri. (1974) *The Production of Space*. Ibid. p49

⁸ Lefebvre, Henri. (2002) *The Critique of Everyday Life*. Verso. London. p3

⁹ Lefebvre, Henri. (1974) *The Production of Space*. Ibid. p34

¹⁰ Andreotti, Libero. (1996) *Situationists; art politics, urbanism*. Museum of Contemporary Art. Barcelona. p28

¹¹ McDonough, Thomas. (1996) *Situationists; art politics, urbanism*. Museum of Contemporary Art. Barcelona. p55

¹² Debord, Guy. (1992) *Society of the Spectacle and other films*. Rebel Press. London. p61

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Images 1 and 3-9. Playtime. Jaques Tati. Specta Films

Image 2. The City of the Future. Le Corbusier Foundation