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Malcolm Turvey, *Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. vii + 282 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0231193030; \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0231193023; \$29.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0231550116.

Review by Mackenzie Leadston, The Ohio State University.

Although there have been a number of book-length studies of the director Jacques Tati,<sup>[1]</sup> Malcolm Turvey's *Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism* distinguishes itself through its focus on how the auteur fused modernist practices and approaches into comedian comedy while also creating innovative comic structures, exemplified by Turvey's meticulous breakdown of the comic moments of Tati's feature films. Turvey begins his exploration of the modernist techniques of the director's oeuvre with a close analysis of the different gags present in the opening airport sequence of *Play Time*, the film from which the book's title is borrowed. This compelling and detailed introduction anticipates the book's analysis of Tati's comedic modernist style in the chapters that follow—one that builds from Tati's films, and specifically his gags, to explore how the director incited viewer participation in his rich satire of modern life.

The first chapter lays the groundwork for Turvey's concept of comedic modernism and its long tradition beginning primarily in the nineteenth century. By comedic modernism, he refers to the way in which comedy employs the comedian in modernist ways, using the avant-garde approach of participation and a focus on social alienation and critique in a popular comedic form, of which he considers Tati to be the master par excellence. Turvey describes the evolution of comedic modernism as beginning in the commedia dell'arte and continuing to an appreciation of circus and the role of the clown in Romantic literature and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theater (such as Jarry's *Ubu Roi*). Turvey notes early modernist appreciation for cinematic clowns such as Chaplin, as well as an affinity for the popular medium of film comedy. Turvey uses the space to describe how the comic conventions that were developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries influenced modernism itself. Using the examples of Ferdinand Léger, Charlie Chaplin, and others, Turvey demonstrates that comedic modernism is, in fact, a longstanding tradition in film comedy. He astutely delineates common tropes that exist in early comedy cinema and productively constructs a definition surrounding the practices of treating the central comic figure both as an object and alienated social outcast that fits well within a modernist framework and as linked to other contemporary movements such as surrealism. Turvey ends the chapter with a longer reflection on René Clair and how his work also participates in a sort of comedic modernism that will later appear in Tati's films, establishing Tati as both a part of a longer tradition and as a unique voice in comedic modernism.

In the chapters that follow, Turvey primarily uses close reading to dissect examples of different stylistic approaches by Tati that embody the central concept. There is very little in terms of theoretical considerations, though there are a few allusions to Debord or the surrealists and, at times, the references feel a bit lacking. In describing the object-quality of the comedian as a sort of mechanization of life, it is strange to see no mention of Henri Bergson, particularly when the text draws so heavily on the French tradition. Likewise, long considerations of object and sound situations and environments in Tati and Clair offer no citation of Deleuze, who makes very similar claims to the ones that Turvey is proposing. That is not to say the study lacks such a theoretical intervention, as it is explicitly the author's stated purpose to consider, rather, the comic structures of the films themselves. However, most scholarship on Tati focuses primarily on a close reading of his films, though not necessarily on his comic style, while larger theorization of his work is missing. In this way, it is primarily in his introduction of comedic modernism and a discussion of the uniqueness of Tati's comic structures that Turvey adds to the scholarship on Tati.

The second chapter examines Tati's style from the point of view of comedic modernism. Central to Turvey's use of the term is the "democratization" of comedy that demands viewer participation (p. 62). This is exemplified partly in Tati's shift away from a central comic figure to a more democratic comedy that de-emphasizes the principle figure of Hulot to focus on the larger scope of background characters and a comedy of the everyday from everyday people. It is also present in Tati's desire to elicit audience participation by enabling viewers to choose the focus of their gaze, in turn selecting which comic aspect to enjoy. Turvey argues that Tati's focus on participation arose from a desire to counter what he viewed as the passivity of postwar France. To guide the viewer in participating in his humor, Turvey describes how Tati concentrated on the comedy of the everyday in order to implore the French public to find humor in the quotidian outside of the cinema. Turvey combines anecdotes and interviews by Tati to underscore the larger, somewhat socially revolutionary, project of the director, akin to the Situationists, that dismantles the distinction between art and life and creates practices—in this case finding comedy—in the everyday. In this way, Tati activates the viewer to overcome the passivity rampant in postwar France and become an active observer, trained by the comic strategies of his films. In this chapter, as well as the two that follow, Turvey outlines the different types of gags in Tati's films, such as the mutual interference gag (where there is an incongruity of interpretation by the character or spectator) and the enlightenment image (where the film reveals information to elucidate a previously misunderstood image).

In chapter three, Turvey continues his description of the different approaches found in Tati's gags that implicate the viewer, while also further delineating Tati's unique comic style. Turvey notes a certain comic "opacity" (p. 103) in tropes such as elision (where spectators are not given all of the information and must guess what has happened in the gag), Tati's affinity for making the viewer wait long periods for the pay-off of a gag, and the use of fragmented or potential gags (ones that are either interrupted or never completed, disrupting viewer expectations from an initial setup and leading them to search for something yet to be or never to be completed). Turvey calls Tati's use of hidden gags the "most radical" of his opaque comedy (p. 145). This relates to Tati's almost exclusive use of long shots, lack of mobile framing, and the fullness and life in his images in which several gags are occurring simultaneously, asking the viewer to choose for themselves where to direct their attention, in turn missing some of the comedy that unfolds. Turvey also notes the innovative use of sound by Tati to direct attention to particular gags or muddy the perspective because of the amplified or reduced soundtrack.

Chapter four tackles a popular subject in the scholarship of Tati, namely his satire of modern society. As Turvey points out, this is the prevailing thread in studies on Tati's films, and many focus on Tati's critical view of postwar France.<sup>[2]</sup> Though all of the chapters consider in some way the historical context of Tati's films, this chapter is the most centered on how Tati engaged with his milieu, though Turvey argues that his engagement is more ambivalent than others have claimed. However, because there is, indeed, so much conversation surrounding the critique of modern society in Tati's films—including those who argue, as does Gerald Mast, that Tati is, in fact, ambivalent in his presentation<sup>[3]</sup>—it is hard to determine what this chapter is adding to the conversation beyond a further breakdown and illustration of how such satire is presented in gags that may have been missed. Turvey offers an afterword to solidify his argument for considering Tati as a singular author and as a comedic modernist by examining his final feature *Parade* (having only considered his first five feature films up to this point). *Parade* is perhaps the most participatory—and least coherent—of all Tati's films, though Turvey makes a persuasive point for its inclusions as existing within the continuity of Tati's democratic comedy.

Because *Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism* focuses primarily on the comic aesthetics of Tati's films, it is accessible to a non-specialist audience, and would be enjoyable for both casual and fervent fans of Tati's films, particularly those interested in the gag structure of his work. Turvey also makes a unique and generative contribution to discussions on film comedy with the introduction of comedic modernism, which is both a compelling and necessary addition to the scholarship.

## NOTES

[1] See Penelope Gilliatt, *Jacques Tati* (London: Woburn Press, 1976); Brent Maddock, *The Films of Jacques Tati* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1977); James Harding, *Jacques Tati* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984); David Bellos, *Jacques Tati* (London: The Harvill Press, 1999).

[2] To name but a few, see Brent Maddock, *The Films of Jacques Tati* (Metuchen, N. J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1977); Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993); Robert Cardullo, "The Sound of Silence, The Space of Time: Monsieur Hulot, Comedy, and the Aural-Visual Cinema of Jacques Tati," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 17.3 (2013): 357-69; Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, *French Comedy on Screen: A Cinematic History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Darragh O'Donoghue, "Monsieur Hulot's History: Jacques Tati Pictures Modern France," *Cinéaste* 40.2 (Spring 2015): 12-17.

[3] Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973).

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