

# ely film society

# the notes

June 2016

to launch our FIFTH season

# Playtime

Jacques Tati, France 1967

*Screenplay by Jacques Tati, Jacques Lagrange and Art Buchwald (additional English dialogue)*

Jacques Tati ..... Monsieur Hulot  
 Barbara Dennek ..... Young Tourist  
 Valérie Camille ... Mr. Lacs's Secretary  
 Erika Dentzler ..... Mme. Giffard  
 Nicole Ray ..... Singer  
 Billy Kearns ..... Mr. Schultz  
 Yves Barsacq ..... Hulot's Friend  
 André Fouché

... Restaurant Manager

Georges Montant ..... Mr. Giffard  
 Georges Faye ..... Architect  
 John Abbey ..... Mr. Lacs  
 Reinhard Kolldehoff

... German Businessman

Michel Francini ..... 1st Maitre D'  
 Jack Gauthier ..... The Guide  
 Léon Doyen ..... Doorman

Music ..... Francis Lemarque

Cinematography

... Jean Badal and Andréas Winding

Film Editing ..... Gérard Pollicand

Production Design .... Eugène Roman

Costume Design ..... Jacques Cottin

*Playtime* is the fourth of the five (if one excludes the early short *L'École des Facteurs* which was remade as the feature-length *Jour de Fête*) films starring the cheerfully hapless Monsieur Hulot. It is also the most ambitious and complex, and much critical debate has ensued over the years as to whether it was Tati's masterpiece or a step over the cliff from farce into mannerism.

We have negotiated a deal with the King's School to continue using our lovely room at the Old Palace next year. However owing to a clash of bookings with Cathedral functions, four showings in the autumn have had to move to the next WEDNESDAY. Full details are in the new season's membership card.

We hope you like the new selection of films, including from countries so far unrepresented, and will continue to join EFS.

Certainly it was his most obsessive project, taking three years to film (though you would scarcely know that, so skilful is the stylistic continuity) and eventually bankrupting him as it spiralled over budget. At 17m francs and shot in 70mm it was the most expensive film yet made in France, but it failed at the box office and became a classic only years later. At this remove, its reputation as a "lost modernist masterpiece" is clearer: the world it observes and mocks is itself superseded but it shines out as a satire of everything the 1960s thought it was doing right while it trampled on the world – or at least the France – that clung to older and more humane truths.



Tati's style evolved radically between his films. Always shooting his own material with himself as star, he started with *Jour de Fête* [1947], a knockabout comedy of French village life starring Hulot as a postman dogged by baroque bicycle problems. In 1953 came *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* which was more tightly episodic and a closer attention to (black and white) cinematographic elegance. Its success allowed Tati to afford colour in 1960 for *Mon Oncle* which swerved radically in theme: urban rather than provincial life, visual gags that played on the sleek heartlessness of modern architecture and technology, and a considerable ramping-up of Tati's disdain for imported American attitudes and behaviour. *Playtime* took on the maelstrom of Paris sophistication at full-strength and with a cast seemingly of hundreds. His late spasm was *Trafic* [1972] which seemed to give up on people altogether in favour of cars, and knocked his career on the head: even today it remains, perhaps unfairly, by far the least-shown of his films. A last effort, *Parade* [1974], made for television, saw Tati return – perhaps retreat – to his 1930s origins as a vaudeville clown and impressionist. There is little juvenilia or side projects: for him it was the *grand projet* or nothing.

Born in 1907, Tati was formed by his era and his origins. The family name was Tatischeff, descended from rackets Russian nobility and comfortably-off from a thriving picture-framing business. The lanky Jacques was sporty rather than academic, graduating from tennis and horse-riding to semi-pro rugby (a minority interest in France: a French friend tells me it is firmly seen as “the Protestant sport”) and did military service in the dragoons before quitting the family business (to their annoyance) and the rugby club in 1932 to go on the stage as a mime, mostly sport-themed. He was of an age to have seen the last of old *belle époque* France that was wrecked by WW1, and young enough to serve in the cavalry in France's brief combat of WW2, seeing action at the battle of the Meuse in 1940. The rest of the war he spent back on the stage. Such a career seems to have informed his outlook: grumpily suspicious of abrupt change

and foreign habits while acutely aware of how the French guard their self-regard with impossible displays of bureaucracy and posturing at all levels of society (*Playtime* develops from *Les Vacances* Tati's particular obsession with the sulking glory that is the French restaurant waiter).

In particular *Playtime* is a paean of mockery to material sophistication and the need to keep up appearances in workplace and home. *Mon Oncle* made sight and sound gags from consumer gadgets (electric garage doors, lawn sprinklers, a factory making miles of purposeless plastic tubing), and rarely strays far from home and family. *Playtime's* 1960s Paris is an immersive hell of roaring bus engines, acres of plate glass (Hulot repeatedly suffers from doors that won't open and windows that look out or in on soundproof chaos), offices like ant-hills and wage slaves in black hats, black briefcases and blacker identikit cars. Everyone is going somewhere without knowing why, or standing doing nothing that seems to achieve a result (another French staple, this time looked on more kindly, is the office *concierge*, a uniform without authority).

Modern architecture looms in great grey geometric blanks, hiding its heartlessness in plain sight. Apartments are indistinguishable from shops or hotels or exhibition halls or airport lounges. The soundtrack is a masterpiece of *musique concrète* to match, made up of hums and squawks, possibly a tribute to Godard's *Alphaville*[1965] that made a similar cityscape into a baleful midnight sci-fi set, while another nod to fellow directors is Tati's planting of false Hulots around town that reminds us of Hitchcock's po-faced selfies: the first, at the airport, guys the opening minutes of *North by North West*. Perhaps the non-Hulots are a repeated sighting of 'McGuffin'; everybody seems to spot Hulot from behind except it's never him. In fact one turns out to be black.

Hulot's trying to find - someone - about - something. Apparently. His life has dogged purpose even though we never know what it is, and marks him out from the flocks of American sightseers and squeaky-shoed functionaries who have no idea what they're looking at (Debord's “society

of the spectacle” is in full effect here though no-one has quite invented the word post-modernism). As a pointless day shades into night, this pantomime begins to crumble by slow degrees. An achingly chic nightclub, the Royal Garden, is about to open its doors for the first time with the paint barely dry, and the tourists descend on it. Overwhelmed by numbers, the club collapses – literally, in places – into chaos, the service getting more haphazard. And then the jazz band strikes up... and with dancing comes the free humanist spirit that lives in the moment, unplanned and accepting. In wanders Hulot, observing the life of the night just as he has stared baffled at the slow death of the soul in the daytime. As the band gives up, a lone pianist takes over and a singer reprises a sentimental ballad. Old France blossoms in the wreckage of would-be America.

Everyone staggers out into the dawn to find the true Paris in full swing. Not drones in black but workmen in *les bleus*, digging holes, swilling coffee, reading the sports pages. For a moment the city is human and then the streets cram ever tighter with traffic and the offices glint in the sunlight.

Men cause this misery. Hulot (and Tati) finds salvation in women who eventually know when to let go. He had an awkward relationship with an illegitimate daughter from the 1930s whom he abandoned: women appear as objects of simple sweetness in all his films - there are no bitches to match the turkeycocks and sulks that abound. The message is conservative, but the situation is radical. Tati possibly couldn't have taken his line of enquiry much further: indeed a 1970s film project called *Confusion* that came to nothing, started with the premise that Hulot is accidentally killed on-air in a Paris completely taken over by television and advertising. Tati certainly knew who his enemies were. He died in 1982.

**NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS  
PERSEPOLIS**  
(Vincent Paronnaud/Marjane  
Satrapi, Iran 2007)  
**Monday 18 July**  
**+ members' AGM**

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