



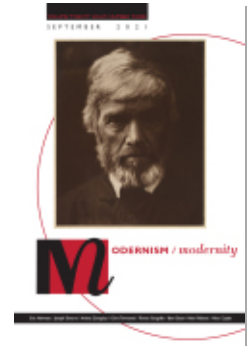
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Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism by Malcom
Turvey (review)

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Book Reviews

***PlayTime: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism.* Malcom Turvey. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. 282. \$90.00 (cloth); \$30.00 (paper); \$29.99 (eBook).**

Reviewed by Pardis Dabashi, University of Nevada, Reno

Midcentury French filmmaker and comedic actor Jacques Tati wanted us to avoid getting consumed by the distracting exigencies of modernity and instead take the time to notice, enjoy, and get involved in the fleeting moments of subtle comedy that permeate our everyday situations. This is the basic premise of Malcom Turvey's excellent new book *Play Time*, the first monograph on Tati "in English in almost twenty years" (9). To those unfamiliar with Tati, Turvey's book is essential reading for an in-depth understanding of the comedic style of this cinematic auteur. Tati is most famous for creating and playing the character Monsieur Hulot, a bumbling gentleman who often finds himself confused and making mistakes when trying to navigate technological and urban modernity. To those familiar with Tati, *Play Time* offers an expertly executed contextualization of Tati's oeuvre within the ongoing scholarly conversation about the role of humor in modernist aesthetics and its response to the emergence and development of capitalist modernity. Turvey argues that Tati developed a "modernist form of comedy" born out of the hilarity of our encounters with the particular form of everyday life engendered by modern technology and capitalist production (10). That modernist sensibility, according to Turvey, can be found in the ways that Tati both distributes and directs attention across his densely packed shots, often hiding, rather than showcasing, gags. This "comic opacity," in Turvey's account, instills in Tati's viewers a "playful, participatory attitude toward the modern world" that would help them counteract the acquiescent detachment Tati saw as constitutive of modern experience (103, 9).

Chapter one places Tati's work within the context of a long history of modernist engagements with the comedic. This chapter demonstrates that comedy was an essential element of the cinematic surrealism of Fernand Léger and René Clair as well as the circus worlds of Pablo Picasso. Intrinsic to the surrealism and nascent modernist comedy of Léger and Clair was a preoccupation with the body as an object rather

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586 than a vessel of mind—and vice versa: objects in their work often take on human, or at least animate, qualities. We might find versions of Turvey's work in this chapter also in Michael North's *Machine-Age Comedy* (2009); engagement with Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai's recent theoretical work on humor and Maggie Hennefeld's on silent-film comedienues might have helped to further differentiate Turvey's argument as well as widen its male-dominated conceptualization of pre-Tati comedic modernism.¹ But Turvey's take is nevertheless fresh, informative, and essential for understanding how Tati's cinema extends and revises much of this earlier art. Turvey's reading of Clair's "situational comedy," the comedy Clair thought was afforded by "groups," and his attendant "lack of interest in the individual or psychology" is especially excellent, setting up well the more direct discussion of Tati beginning in the following chapter (49).

Chapters two and three constitute the engine room of the book, elaborating the "democracy" thesis regarding Tati's films. Critics have indeed long characterized Tati's comedy as democratic, since his tendency toward long takes, long shots, a static camera, and staging multiple simultaneous actions within one frame "allows viewers the freedom to choose what to look at in the image" (6). However, Turvey puts a finer point on this undertheorized observation, bringing masterful technical virtuosity and analytical rigor to his close readings of the structure and style of Tati's gags. A key term for Turvey is *participation*. He argues that whereas the European avant-garde of the 1920s found in American popular culture a source of modern vitality—e.g., Léger's fascination with Charlie Chaplin's "Charlot" character—"postwar European intellectuals and artists of Tati's generation were more inclined to perceive American mass culture as hegemonic and totalitarian, engendering passivity and annihilating individuality" (54). Tati's response to the sense that the midcentury was marked by Americanized passivity was to create a cinema of participation—both at the level of performance and spectatorship. First, Tati's cinema "devolve[s] comedy away from himself and Hulot to other characters and their settings," creating a more diffuse and "depersonalized" comedic structure than that found in the expertise-centered classical comedian style of his predecessors like Chaplin and Buster Keaton (5, 49). And second, Tati's films tend to obfuscate their comedy, delaying it, diffusing it, or even foreclosing it altogether, thereby offering viewers the opportunity to look for—and potentially not find—the source of humor. Viewers are thus called on by Tati's films to be a part of their fun rather than to remain passive observers. Turvey shows that the aesthetics of cinematic realism (such as crowded long shots and elliptical narration) are thus central to Tati's films, because in this cinematographic and editorial mode, sensationalized drama and narrative clarity take a backseat to an everyday reality that is allowed to play out in all its lyricism—and hilarity.

Indeed, crucial to Turvey's argument is the idea that while the comedic style of the silent period often predicated its humor on the aberrant behavior of uniquely talented individuals (Chaplin's "Tramp" persona being a quintessential example), in Tati, no one—not even Hulot himself—is special. Through a series of dazzling analyses of Tati's gags across a number of his films—most notably *Jour de fête* (1949), *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953), *Mon Oncle* (1958), *Play Time* (1967), and *Trafic* (1971)—Turvey shows that in Tati's world, everyday situations can be funny and not necessarily because we intend them to be. "In the restaurant scene in *Play Time*," for instance, "Hulot attempts to procure a piece of plastic fruit decorating the restaurant's rafters for [an] American businessman's companion, only to cause part of the ceiling to collapse" (62). Or in *Les Vacances*, Hulot gets a flat tire in a cemetery and, through a series of accidents, winds up having his spare tire tube that's been covered by dead leaves mistaken for a memorial wreath. The tube "loudly deflates as mourners walk past" (61). The point here, for Turvey, is that whereas in the classical comedian style of icons like Chaplin and Keaton, in which gags "emphasize" these characters' "superior comic skill," in Tati, hilarity can accidentally befall anyone and under any circumstances (62). And the "deskilling" of comedy makes it such that not just anyone, but *anything*, can be funny. An especially ebullient example is Tati's use of the "aleatory object analog," whereby quotidian, unrelated objects are thrown into combination with one another, creating "marvelous, surreal" resemblances that surprise and delight us (the

deep history of Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* pays off enormously at this point in the book) (65). An especially ludic example is the moment in *Mon Oncle* where the silhouettes of Monsieur and Madame Arpel looking out the two circular windows of their home at night make the windows look like enormous "eyes with moving pupils" (66).

The final chapter turns toward modern architecture and class critique, deepening the historicizing work achieved in chapter one. Here, Turvey shows that Tati's cinema, which often lampoons postwar modernist architecture, is not resistant to modernity (as is often assumed) but satirical of how the bourgeoisie adopt and impoverish the formal élan of experimental aesthetics. The Arpels' home in *Mon Oncle*, for instance, is bad Le Corbusier, and the comedy that ensues from it (e.g., the two enormous windows mentioned above make the house look like a face, the water from the garden fountain sounds like urination) are Tati's critique of midcentury French bourgeois suburbanization and how the obsession with status makes the middle class, well, ridiculous.

It is because Turvey has so effectively gotten us to appreciate the diffuseness of Tati's comedy—the fact that anyone and anything can be funny if we simply take the time to notice it—that his afterword shines so brightly. Here, Turvey performs an extended reading of the under-studied documentary *Parade* (1974), which Tati made for Swedish television in Stockholm. *Parade* is essentially a filmed circus performance, but the distinction between actors and nonactors remains persistently unclear. Turvey shows how *Parade*'s generic instability extends from Tati's interest in how humor can permeate any and all situations and people. Under Turvey's analytic lens, *Parade* suddenly makes complete sense without losing its inherent (and productive) strangeness.

Play Time is a subtle, intelligent—and wonderfully funny—book. It has much to offer both Tati novices and his connoisseurs.

Notes

1. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues: An Introduction," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 233–49; Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

***Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange.* Nan Z. Da. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. Pp. 304. \$75.00 (cloth); \$74.99 (eBook).**

Reviewed by Hsuan L. Hsu, UC Davis

A Chinese translation of "Rip Van Winkle." A speech by Ralph Waldo Emerson honoring the Burlingame-Seward treaty. A translation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life" inscribed on a Mandarin fan. The autobiography and poetry of Yale's first Chinese graduate, who founded a school for Chinese exchange students in Hartford. Judging by the stature of the figures and institutions involved, we might expect that the archive of nineteenth-century literary encounters between China and the United States would have generated lasting networks of influence. However, as Nan Z. Da demonstrates in *Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange*, these transnational, cross-cultural events were characterized not by cross-pollination but by intransitivity: they were "simultaneously momentous and superficial," exchanges in which nothing is exchanged (2).

Although this quality of intransitivity, wherein the content of communication "slides like water off a duck's back," might appear to minimize the value of these Sino-U.S. encounters, Da makes