

Jacques Tati's *Playtime* and the outcome of urban renewal and architectural modernism.

In order to analyse outcomes, it is necessary to return to the primary source which influenced the changes in Paris in the 1960s. In Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967), modernist features of the then new and evolving landscape of Paris has been condensed into a world constructed by the director, hence amplifying the consequences of change, both individually and as a whole (Hiliker 2002: 320). This essay will encompass a look through Tati's magnifying glass, and also examine the driving forces behind Le Corbusier's planning and how his beliefs and resultant works came to influence the outcome suggested in the film.

According to Richards, Le Corbusier's style of urban planning is 'antisocial', appearing contemptuous of socialising in the city and possibly attempting to avoid its occurrence (2007: 50-51). In 'The City of To-morrow', Le Corbusier proposed a plan for the contemporary city, in which skyscrapers 'designed purely for business purposes' occupied the very heart, while spaces of leisure ('restaurants and cafes...theatres, halls and so on') were designated their place in the surrounding areas (1971: 167). In *Playtime*, the high-rise office building is an integral part of the daytime scenes, whereas spaces of leisure are almost nowhere to be found. In addition, the triumph of 'uninviting concrete, glass, and steel' (Richards 2007: 53) denotes architecture that is purely utilitarian, devoid of decorative and ornamental elements which have been coded as feminine (Leslie & Raimer 2003: 298).

Support of this gendering of space was evident in French women's magazines of the 1950s and early 1960s; information on careers, politics, and economics was 'off-limits' to women and ignorance (although a vague awareness was advised) of them was encouraged (Ross 1995: 81-82). Women were discouraged from participation in the main thrust of working society due to their tendency to be 'easily shockable' (*ibid.*), the result of which is seen in *Playtime* where they form the body of occupations such as receptionists and telephone operators, jobs stereotypically associated with low levels of intellectual stimulation. According to Carranza, Le Corbusier had an aversion to women which was reflected in his art, photography, as well as his architecture (1994: 71). Tati's film suggests that the workplace has become a space which seeks to exclude women, reflecting Le Corbusier's aversion of them and, as Carranza states, his belief that modern architecture is 'the realm of men' (*ibid.*: 76).

The utilitarian style of architecture is not restricted to the workplace. In *Playtime*, it is seen

everywhere; a 'seamless architectural whole' that extends throughout all the spaces of work, leisure, and everyday life (Hiliker 2002: 323). This striving towards homogeneity was undertaken in the spirit of modernism as 'the official style of the city' (*ibid.*), resulting in a uniform look and consequently, uniform behaviour of the humans who dwell in them. Leslie and Reimer mention some general characteristics of modern design, stating that geometricity was prized, along with a mass-produced look and the shunning of colour and ornamentation (2003: 296). The apartment that Hulot's friend lives in is a geometric block, containing individual cells which resemble one another, with a colour palette that is dull and dominated by a monochromatic scheme. Homes in *Playtime* are furnished minimally and contain almost no decorative elements, showing that even the individual has conformed to the minimalist aesthetic, assimilating themselves into the 'architectural whole' (Hiliker 2002: 323).

Leslie and Raimier state: 'Modern design relies upon a series of oppositions which can be mapped onto a masculine/feminine distinction' (2003: 298). If so, *Playtime* reveals the dominance of the masculine. According to Carranza, Le Corbusier saw the house as 'a machine for living', thereby situating it in 'the realm of men' along with the workplace, as the machine in Freudian terms is representative of 'all that is male: activity and power' (1994: 75). When Hulot is invited into his friend's house, it is the man that undertakes the 'job' of showing him around while the women remain passive. The movement of productive activity is contrasted to the passive consumption of mass culture (the woman reading the magazine). This suggests that by remaining ignorant to the masculine world of careers and economics (Ross 1995: 81-82) (and by association, production), the women of 1960s France had become excluded from the narrative of their own homes.

The world of the film shows that it has become difficult for the woman to assert a strong presence via interior decorating, an occupation that has been coded as feminine (Leslie & Raimier 2003: 298). Items which are functional as well as decorative appear to show that a consensus has been come to, with excessive form striking a harmonious balance with basic function as seen in the ornamental lamp in the apartment of Hulot's friend. However, this balance is upset when the lamp is revealed to have a secondary function, which can be seen as not-so-subtle one-upmanship and the asserting of male dominance in the modern home. Furthermore, the secondary function is that of a cigarette-holder, turning the one-upmanship into an ironic joke in which a Freudian symbol for the phallus makes its appearance in a space that has succumbed to the aesthetics of the mechanical.

While the workplace and the home are shown to have become distinctly 'masculine', it is not to say that women had no place at all in the city in the daytime. The woman in *Playtime* may appear as a

foreign tourist, come to Paris to inadvertently be a consumer of an ubiquitous urbanized landscape, one which does not seem to differ from that of other countries' due to the geometric, anonymous building looms over all other images in each of the advertisements. One is only led to assume that French women are currently in a foreign land, simultaneously subjecting themselves to an identical experience where cultural markers bow to a new standardized style of modernist architecture. Speaking of the dispersal of urban centres such as malls, Debord claims that technical organization of consumption is a sign that a city has been brought 'to the point of consuming itself' (1984: 96). The implications of the statement are applicable to the portrayal of tourism in *Playtime*. It is suggested the 'seamless architectural whole' (Hiliker 2002: 323) extends not only throughout the city of Paris, but also throughout the globe. Vacations, these 'commodified moments' (Debord 1984: 89), 'time(s) and space(s) of pure consumption' (Furlough 1998: 274), have become a mechanical process in which tourists are shuttled from one place to another, bound to a tight schedule that has been pre-planned, engaged in the visual consumption of a repetitive image.

Consumption of leisure time is also seen in the Royal Garden sequence of the film. Here, the restaurant's interior still conforms to the geometric utilitarian style characteristic of modernist design (Leslie & Raimer 2003: 296), but there is evidence that 'feminine' tendencies have asserted their place, as wood (a traditional material) and decorative elements are present in it. The guests, male or female, do not neatly fall into overtly visible active/passive or masculine/feminine roles, suggesting that it is in such times and places of leisure that one is liberated from the influence of gendered spaces and is able to participate in an almost utopian performance of gender equality. *Playtime* suggests that pockets of resistance to the Le Corbusian methods of urban planning exist; shadows of the past that are evocative of what the new developments lacked: the bustle and activity of 'crucial features of French life such as cafes, markets and street life' (Nezar 2006: 200).

When part of the restaurant's decoration is accidentally pulled down by Hulot, a sense of dissonance and dislocation becomes apparent despite the festive mood it causes. As described by Hiliker, social boundaries are broken down and everyone starts to mingle as the atmosphere grows more exuberant (2002: 325). In the late sixties, Michel Foucault put forward the tentative and rather under-developed idea of the heterotopia, a space which exists in reality and consists of a set of inverted society, 'a simultaneously archaic and modern way of organizing space' (EAAE 2005: 1). An example of a heterotopia that was given was the fairground, a space that represents time at it's most 'fleeting, transitory, precarious' (Foucault 1986: 26). Hulot inadvertently causes the appearance of such a space in *Playtime*. For the remaining duration that the guests spend at the restaurant, it is transformed into a temporary space of time suspended, containing a number of juxtapositions, not

unlike Foucault's heterotopia. People transcend social expectations and class distinction to participate in chaotic festive activity while at the same time, there is an awareness that they have allowed their environment to dictate their behaviour.

In conclusion, what Tati's *Playtime* suggests is that the harsh, unforgiving rigidity of architectural modernism has left little room for deviation regardless of whether one is at work, home, or 'play'. However, it shows that there is hope in the way people are still adaptable, and that the human propensity to socializing has not been completely eradicated, only become a latent part of the individual that surfaces when an opportunity is found.

Filmography

Playtime, Jacques Tati, 1967

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