Inhuman Characteristics of Modern Architecture Represented in Jacques Tati's Films

Guen-Jong Moon*1

1 Assistant Professor, Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Keimyung University, Korea

Abstract

In 1940~60s France, there was massive housing construction with government-led postwar reconstruction and Haussmannization, and society was under the cultural wave of modernization and Americanization. Meanwhile, the film director Jacques Tati (1907-1982), also an actor, criticized the excessive pursuit of modernity and Americanization through his feature films. The purpose of this study is to analyze the 'Inhuman Characteristics of Modern Architecture' represented in Tati's films during the 1950-70s. It is assumed that films reflect the social and architectural backgrounds as well as the interests of the general public. For the analysis, a pool of artistically and publicly renowned Tati films was constructed. Through the scenes and their respective scripts, the characters, acts, and architectural spaces were analyzed. The contents of the main body of this research are the following: 1) The abuse of International Style buildings, the loss of local singularity and the lack of originality of modern architecture were criticized in the films. 2) The sterility and impersonality of modern architecture and rigid functional spaces were blamed. 3) The social infatuation with cutting-edge technology and ultramodern buildings were satirized. 4) Lastly, there was resistance to the overuse of 'glass', one of the valuable modern building materials.

Keywords: modern architecture; inhuman characteristics; Jacques Tati; films

1. Introduction

Following the Second World War, France experienced government-led postwar reconstruction and Haussmannization. Projects of innovative scales such as the Grands Ensembles1 of the 1950s and the housing projects of the ZUP (zones à urbaniser en priorité) of the 1960s are such examples. Meanwhile, postwar French society was adapting to the modernization and Americanization trends of the time.

While the spatial changes between the 1940s to the 1960s were initiated to serve the public, they accompanied significant side effects such as the destruction of the traditional urban fabric, appearance of large scale buildings of unknown nationality, ignorant pursuit of new lifestyles, and spatial segregation between social classes.

Jacques Tati (1907-1982), French film director and actor of the era, through his films, criticized the excessive pursuit of modernity and Americanization of French society. Known as "The greatest film analyst of postwar modern France," Tati used urban landscapes and architecture to visualize the outcomes of modern architecture and machine civilization.

This study analyzes Tati's films produced between the 1950s to the 1970s, to contemplate how modern cities and architecture were criticized and satirized. Considering that common public film can only reflect the social aspects, architectural culture and general interests of the public, the criticism and satire of Tati's films are not those of an individual, but of the general public of the time.3

This study is an investigation into the negativities of modern cities and architecture by means of analyzing visual scenes and their meanings, thus, an architectural study. However, it is an analysis of the inhuman characteristics of modern architecture not of architectural historians, but of the general public, therefore, providing a fresh view on the topic.

Contemplating Tati's films, three films known for the director's thoughts on modernization and Americanization of France in the 1950s to the 1960s are chosen. They are: <Mon Oncle> (My Uncle, 1958, 110 mins), <Playtime> (1967, 126 mins), <Traffic> (1971, 96 mins).

For each film, the urban spaces of Paris that appear in the films are analyzed.

Section 2 is a literature review on the social background of postwar France and an introduction to Tati's films. This is followed by section 3, an analysis of Tati's comedy films on his criticism and satire of the modernization and Americanization of French society.
2. Modernization of France and Jacques Tati

2.1 Urban and Architectural Modernization of Postwar France

Like other postwar societies, the biggest urban/architectural issue of France was 'reconstruction.' The first reconstruction (1940-1944) was not only a 'restoration of the destroyed,' but 'a new world order,' thus, a national reform, as well. Urban and architectural planning during the second reconstruction (1945-) displayed mass-production, temporary houses, prefabricated buildings, grands ensembles, and American lifestyles.

Like the rest of Europe, France had been invaded by American culture by way of World War II and the postwar Marshall Plan. Major events and declarations such as the 1946 event "Exposition on American Techniques on Housing and Urban Planning (Exposition des techniques américaines de l'habitation et de l'urbanisme), 1939–194X" held in the Grand Palais are not unrelated to the Marshall Plan. Such yearning resulted in the diffusion of automobiles and changes in consumer/leisure lifestyles. It is worth noting that in order to keep up with the latest architectural developments, traveling to America was the norm for those in the field. It can be said that Americanization was the price paid for liberation. Among the commodities exported by the United States were not just refrigerators and washing machines, televisions and Coca-Cola, but also corporate architecture (the International Style having at this point, mutatis mutandis, become and American product).

Architecture advocating the American lifestyle regularly appeared in the 1950s when French society began to settle. For example, American art, architecture, furniture, design, hotel chains were introduced through trade expos. This resulted in the destruction of the traditional culture of France, a side effect of the cultural/economic influences of America.

Meanwhile, the decade between the making of <Mon Oncle> (1958) and <Playtime> (1967) was decisive in transforming France from an insular, agrarian, and empire-oriented society into an urban, industrial, and decolonized nation. The face of Paris, 'capital of the nineteenth century,' was permanently reshaped during these years by a sweeping new wave of Haussmannization. Between 1954 and 1974, 24 percent of the buildable surface of the city was subjected to demolition and redevelopment, and entire districts were razed and reconfigured in the name of 'urban renewal.' The transformation of postwar Paris into "neobourgeois space" entailed a whole new geography of inside and outside, city and suburb, social modernization and ethnic segregation. Subjected to successive rent increases, more than two-thirds of the population of Paris moved out of the urban center.

2.2 Tendencies of Jacques Tati's Films

Throughout his career, Tati created six feature films. His works express repeatedly a common subject that is the criticism of modernization and Americanization of French society. They are contextually based on the radical changes between the late 1940s to the early 1970s such as urban reform and transition into leisure and automobile society.

Specifically, <Mon Oncle> (1958) is a criticism of the inhumane environment led by technology, through visualizing the dryness of modern architecture. <Playtime> (1967), 'starring building materials and architectural situations' is also a film containing Tati's thoughts on the negative influences of modern architecture and technology.

Analyzing the three films selected for this study, Tati's criticism of modernity could be categorized into four aspects: a) criticism of the uniformness of mass produced buildings and the lack of identity in urban landscape b) satire on sterility and inhumaness of modern architecture, suppressing human activities c) resistance to machine civilization, technology and d) resistance to modern building materials.

3. The Inhuman Characteristics of Modern Architecture Found in Jacques Tati's Films

3.1 Uniformness of Modern Architecture without Regional Uniqueness

Tati condemned the uniformness of modern architecture and the resulting urban landscape. This is well expressed in <Playtime> (1967). In this film, the Paris of the near future is imagined as a city of "International Style" buildings lacking any identity. To express the ill-designed high-rise buildings and houses in the film, Tati built Tatitville in a suburban area of Paris.

Fig.1. <Playtime> Claudia Visiting a Travel Agency in Paris

Early in the film, visitors from foreign countries arrive at Orly international airport, which looks just like the airports in London, Munich and Chicago, where the visitors are from. Claudia, the heroine also
visiting Paris, is greeted with identically looking buildings. (Fig.1., upper image) She visits a travel agency only to see posters of Hawaii, Mexico, and Stockholm with the same image of a featureless modernistic skyscraper. This is Tati’s direct response to the development projects being built in Paris, such as the glass office towers of Montparnasse Station (The Gare Montparnasse, 1958-64) or the notorious Sarcelles (1959-66) suburban development.

In the same context, such cinematic expressions visualize Tati’s argument that modern architecture lacks regional uniqueness. During the 2 hour running time, the only hints that the film is taking place in Paris are given through the images of the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and Sacré Cœur reflected in glass windows.\(^\text{16}\)

Though Tati claims that "Tativille was built to be so beautiful that no architect could criticize his buildings."\(^\text{17}\) the nondescript modern architecture that Tati humorously presents lacks poetry and originality, and is also profoundly confusing and intimidating.\(^\text{18}\)

Such criticism of modern architecture has its roots in an earlier film, <Mon Oncle> (1958). Architectural spaces in Tati’s films can be divided into two. One is the friendly traditional town of suburban Paris, and the other is the world of modern buildings. In <Mon Oncle>, the former is where the past generation, represented by M. Hulot, lives, while the latter is where the new generation, represented by M. Arpel (Hulot’s brother-in-law), lives.

Arpel's white-stuccoed house is on a street with other white stuccoed cubic houses. This is a reference to the architecture that was praised until the 1950s, and still remains as utopian and futuristic among the public.

As shown in the upper right in Fig.4., Arpel's surreal modern house represents the 'Cubic White Houses' of French modernists, and relates to Le Corbusier's architectural style of the 1920s. The desolated streets are filled with nearly identical houses (lower right), which is a reference to "Rue Mallet-Stevens" (1926-27, Paris)\(^\text{19}\) by Parisian architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886-1945).\(^\text{20}\)

### 3.2 Sterility and Inhumaness of Modern Architecture and Lifestyle

Throughout his works, Tati criticized the sterility of modern architecture and environments that suppress human activities. In <Mon Oncle>, as shown in Fig.5., Arpel's house features a lawn that is precisely defined, with colored gravel paths and a geometric pond. The viewers are reminded of the short-lived contemporary gardens of the 1920s. Though visually pleasing, this garden is portrayed as suppressing any possible activities. As in Fig.5., the Arpels and the guests can only follow a predefined route, and step only where they are allowed. As the water fountain changes orientation, so do the people.

Regarding this scene, Dietrich Neumann comments that "Arpel and his wife try earnestly to conform to the
specifications of their architect and submit to the strict formalism of their building." and scoffs the position of the architect as an unchallengeable dictator of taste in the lives of his clients.

The Arpels live a lifestyle strictly defined by technology. Fig.6. is an example. Hulot, who came home late didn't have a place to sleep, so slept on a piece of decorative furniture. For this incident, he was scolded by his older sister because "the furniture isn't meant for sleeping."

Unnatural architectural environment and its restriction are highlighted and, at the same time, satirized in <Playtime>. As shown in Fig.7., the 'glass-and-steel towers' are so functional and uniform that visitors constantly lose their way while the workers only care about their own tasks, lacking any communication. Ultimately, this decreases work efficiency.

In the latter half of <Playtime> appears a Royal Garden restaurant, Tati's answer to the evils of modern society and the sterility of modern architecture. Rushed to open operations with unfinished interior works, the restaurant looks contemporary but seems too formal and uncomfortable. (Fig.8., upper image) There is only a lack of conversation and boring atmosphere. Suddenly, a facility fails and people including an architect, manager, waiter get together. Hulot accidently causes the ceiling panels and partition walls to collapse. Everyone cheers and a party begins. A new space of friendly festivity is created. This scene catches Tati's ideal on what communities should be like, and can be found in his other films, such as the community market scene in <Mon Oncle>, small party scenes in <Mr. Hulot's Holiday> (1953) and <Trafic> (1971).

Such poetic anarchy which Tati offers as a response to the rigid patterns of commercial modernism foreshadows the best moments of creativity during the May 1968 revolution.

3.3 Infatuation for Machine Civilization
Tati's films reflect his views on the excesses of modernity, mostly in the form of mammonism. In <Mon Oncle>, two contrasting architectural places are used to express this matter. Those places are, as aforementioned, Hulot's house in suburban Paris and Arpel's house in the city center redevelopment area. Arpel's place represents machine civilization where Hulot and his nephew (son of Arpel) Gerard pay frequent visits.

As shown in Fig.9. lower left, Hulot's place is a friendly town, visualised with warm colors. There are coffee shops and groceries, coaches pass in the streets and a marketplace is formed. People care for each other and chat while children play in the open areas. On the other hand, the clean but cold colored place of Arpel lacks any human interaction since most people commute riding in cars.

The upper left of Fig.9. shows the route Hulot takes to get to his place at the top floor. Though uncomfortable for he must climb a number of flights of stairs, he encounters neighbors, thus making the journey a pleasing one. Once home, he has the peace of mind to reflect sunlight into a birdcage hanging
from the outer wall. However, Arpel's place is fully equipped with technology that eases physical effort. It has heating and air conditioning, automatic windows, interphones and automatic vacuum cleaners. Mrs. Arpel's kitchen opens through automatic sensors and has sterilization facilities and even a steak turner.

The Arpels are proud of their house and show off the facilities to their visitors. For those that believe they are happy, wealth, material, culture and happiness are synonyms. In the film, Tati's scoff at mammonism is highlighted in how the Arpels think of cars. The most important space in the house is left for cars, and they celebrate their wedding anniversaries with an automatic garage and a new car.

Tati criticizes the infatuation of technicism and pursuit of the highest technology. Labor-saving devices do not save labor, and the Arpels end up getting locked in the automatic garage because of their pet dog. Hulot, unfamiliar with the devices, mishandles them, causing them to break. When a device breaks people panic, not knowing what to do. Rejection of machine civilization can be seen from a child's point of view as well. As in the lower right image in Fig.9., the kitchen resembles a laboratory or a hospital ward, and the Arpel's son Gerard refuses to eat. Life at Arpel's house consists of either an inability to adapt to new technology (Hulot), false sense of superiority while living a suppressed life (Arpels), or passive rejection of machines (Gerard).

Technicism and its discomfort is a main theme in <Playtime>, the compilation of Tati's films. As in Fig.10., Hulot is at a modern building to visit his partner. However, the building attendant is not familiar with the call system and all Hulot can do is wait in a chair. Meanwhile, Hulot's partner is walking down a very long corridor to greet Hulot, comically showing just how false technology can be.

3.4 Deceptive Materials of Modern Buildings

In Tati's films, it is the mise-en-scene, specifically architectural space, not a particular character, that takes the starring role. This is especially true in <Playtime>.
In line with the cinematic expressions, Tati claims in an interview that, "Enormous buildings are constructed in our time. Of glass, nothing but glass: we belong to a civilization that needs to encase itself in glass! But if at first the inhabitants of the new city feel lost, little by little they habituate themselves to it. They gradually efface its ultramodern stage effects, ultimately rendering it human."

Hulot, who in <Playtime> is unable to adapt to the glass surroundings, in his own surroundings, is confident and unself-conscious. Fig.13. shows Hulot picking up a brick from a collapsed fence and putting it back. This scene simultaneously and representatively portrays destroyed tradition and modern architecture. By picking up a brick, Tati is expressing his desire to restore order and regional identity.

Though Tati's films begin with placing modernity and tradition in polarity, they finish with a message of harmony. This is because the criticism is not of modern architecture or modern technology themselves. Tati says, "The satire is not on the places but on their utilization. People believe they are 'crushed' by the grands ensembles. But if they knew how to observe, they would perceive that life is the same as everywhere else. If <Playtime> has a didactic message to impart, it is about adaptation, the way human beings habituate themselves to their environments, find a bit of happiness."

4. Conclusion

Beginning in the 1940s France experienced unprecedented land development and urban reform, mass production of houses during the changes of modernization and Americanization. This study analyzed three films by Jacques Tati whose works are known for satirizing the excesses of modernity by manipulating the urban landscapes of Paris. After considering Tati's criticism of modernity, the inhuman characteristics of modern architecture were analyzed in section 3 which can be summarized as:

1) Reflecting upon mass produced modern architecture and the uniform cities those buildings create, Tati condemned the abuse of the International Style, loss of regional identity, lack of uniqueness in buildings. 2) Tati also criticized the sterility and inhumaness of modern architecture as they suppress human activities with their rigid functionalist spaces. 3) Tati also criticized the unconditional pursuit of technology and machines when in reality they are not necessarily convenient. 4) Finally, Tati strongly rejected glass as a building material, portraying the negative effects of glass, longing for the restoration of tradition and human activities.

Though Tati did not present any new values or solutions to what he saw as problematic since his works candidly portray the social situation and his views on society, his works sufficiently archive the architectural culture of his era, just as architecture both reflects and affects human life. Through his films, one can track the general social values and public sub-consciousness of his era, and how they relate to architectural and urban elements.

This study has its limits in that the analysis was restricted to visual media. However, by analyzing films, a socially produced form of art, the topic of modernity was able to be approached from a common person's point of view. Finally, through architectural contemplation of film, this study contributes to broadening the field of architectural studies.

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Notes

1. Massive high-rise social housing projects located at the outskirts of Paris. Though they were built to provide homes for the low-income class and working class people, they resulted in the social and spatial segregation between classes.
3. "Films have a cultural role. They are the cultural standards that reflect the sub-consciousness of the general public. This means that films affect the identity and daily lives of ordinary people. Also, films reflect the social norm, values, ideology of the era, while providing an outlet for suppressed desires." Yasin et al. (2005) Image Culture. Seoul: Sodo. p.56.
The Marshall Plan (officially the European Recovery Program, ERP) was an American initiative to aid Western Europe, in which the U.S. gave over $12 billion (approx. $120 billion in current dollar value as of 2016) in economic support to help rebuild Western European economies after the end of World War 2. The goals of the U.S. were to rebuild war-devastated regions, remove trade barriers, modernize industry, make Europe prosperous again, etc. The largest recipient of Marshall Plan money was the U.K. (receiving about 26% of the total), followed by France (18%) and West Germany (11%).


<jour de fete>(Holiday, 1949), <Mr. Hulot's Holiday>(1953), the three films covered in this study, and <parade>(1974).


As if he were an architect, Tati builds a megalopolis 'Tativille' out of glass and steel. Tati had originally intended to rent Orly airport or a large supermarket or bank building for the shooting of the film. When none of these proved available for the lengthy project, he decided to construct his own 'grand ensemble' from scratch. Full-scale building envelopes and miniature skyscrapers were built. He built a temporary city using 50,000m$^3$ of concrete, 3,200m$^2$ of carpentry, and 1,200m$^2$ of glass.


In this film, foreign visitors hardly ever visit the historic/iconic sites of France.


Located in area 16e of Paris, many works of modernist architects remain, including five pieces of work by Mallet-Stevens.


In the film, Mrs Arpel is always busy cleaning, controlling and repairing the machines.

For example, <Mon Oncle> ends with Arpel and his son Gerard holding hands and smiling at each other for the first time.

References