

Somatic geometry: Jacques Tati's anarchist aesthetics

Article (Unspecified)

Hester, Diarmuid (2011) Somatic geometry: Jacques Tati's anarchist aesthetics. *One+One Filmmakers Journal*, 7. pp. 4-8.

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/38042/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Somatic Geometry:

Jacques Tati's anarchist aesthetics

Diarmuid Hester

"I am not a Communist. I could have been if Communist history were not so sad. It makes me sound old-fashioned but I think I am an anarchist. Great things were done historically by anarchists."

(Jacques Tati)

Often misunderstood as a byword for chaos, social disorder and the violent destruction of civilisation, perhaps the least bad description of anarchism might rather be an insistent demand for the liberation of the individual from artificially-imposed forms of authority. Critiques advanced by William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Prudhon, Mikael Bakunin and other leading lights of the anarchist movement, while no doubt disparate in nuance, are all erected upon the fundamental sovereignty of individual will: anarchism thus traditionally perceives systems of authority (the most pernicious of which is the state) as just so many regimes of control, hampering at every turn the expression of this will. Though this vision of anarchy has often surfaced in various art forms (Leo Tolstoy's work, for instance, emphatically endorses the brand of anarchism espoused by Peter Kropotkin), few artists have proceeded beyond the mere thematic representation of anarchism and sought to introduce these principal currents of anarchistic thought into the very fundamentals of the art work itself. Few anarchist



Mon Oncle Poster

artists use the formal composition of their work to proffer a critique of contemporary systems of control and the condition of human life under such systems. It is our contention here, however, that French auteur and comedian Jacques Tati (1907 – 1982) is one such artist.¹ In what follows we will elucidate his anarchist's vision of the fate of man under authority.

Mon Oncle cet anarchiste

A descendant of Russian émigré aristocrats and a bored picture-framer by profession, Tati (born Jacques Tatischeff) would have seemed an unlikely candidate to become a lauded and much-loved director of France's septième art, much less one who, as we shall see, used his work to articulate a belief in the sovereign will of the individual. However, his gift for physical comedy quickly propelled him from performing mimes for his rugby team after matches to the Paris music-halls and finally to filmmaking, with the production of *Jour de Fête* in 1949. Following its success and that of the subsequent *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* (1953), Tati embarked upon the production of his third feature, *Mon Oncle* [*My Uncle*], which observes the daily life of a young boy (Gérard), his mother and father (the Arpels) and his uncle, M. Hulot (a character Tati had played to great acclaim in his previous film). Set in a curiously bifurcated French town which on one side houses the languid, provincial France of cafés and communal living, and on the other the cold Le Corbusier chic of suburban and industrial modernity, *Mon Oncle* is simultaneously a bittersweet tale of a boy's friendship with his eccentric uncle and an entertaining depiction of a modern family's hilarious attempts to get along at home and at work.

Yet the film also sketches a virulent anarchist critique of modernity's accelerated subtraction of personal agency and an emphatic indictment of the role played by increased technologisation in aggravating this subtraction. This critique manifests itself in the persistent organisation, circumscription and conduction of movement in suburban and industrial zones: in Tati's vision of the modern town, agency withdraws behind a veil of conscription

and free individual movement is confined to prescribed routes, pathways and lanes. Consequently, when the camera lingers over the modernised district, the film of *Mon Oncle* appears cross-hatched with the outlines of these channels. In one of the film's extended opening scenes, for instance, an orderly procession of cars diligently follows, with conveyor-belt consistency, the signs and road-markings which direct them to the school and then to the factory and then back home again. The grounds of M. Arpel's "Plastac" factory and its corridors are likewise replete with lines and arrows demanding uniform movement and delimiting all deviation.

In addition (recalling Tolstoy's contention that authority corrupts and induces man to "commit acts contrary to [his] conscience"),² constraints placed upon individual agency in the public sphere seem to have become internalised such that modern man compulsively etches impressions of outside routes upon even his private space. Thus, the Arpel's so-called garden is itself composed of numerous, mutually exclusive, artificial paths: one exclusively connects the gate to the front door; another leads only from the front door to the terrace; a circuitous one connects just the back door and the patio. "It's practical!" "It's modern!" Mme Arpel exclaims, "It all communicates," but these paths neither connect nor communicate, their function is entirely impractical, and Tati is quick to capitalise upon the irony of Mme Arpel's exclamation. In one scene, the family and their unfortunate guests hilariously pick their way through the labyrinth of pathways, grotesquely contorting as they try to adhere to arbitrarily designated routes. In another M. Arpel takes Hulot aside and, while pacing up and down an absurdly complicated route of stepping stones,

condemns Hulot's lack of direction and offers him a job in the rubber factory as a solution. The impressive gymnastics demanded of Hulot as he attempts to follow Arpel's path will, we are led to infer, also be demanded of him once his life is directed into the home – school – work conduit so familiar to the modern labourer.

Exacerbating the withdrawal of agency from human subjects is modernity's growing fascination with every new form of technology. The Arpels' house, for instance, is a perfect example of the modern technological obsession made manifest: pull a lever and the garden gate opens; approach the cupboard and its door opens automatically; press a button and a steak flips over on the frying pan... Yet while these devices make domestic chores easier, they are ultimately just so many instances of the progressive erosion of individual autonomy: the Arpels never

“The submission of one's sovereign agency to a multitude of technological devices such as these is, to an anarchist like Tati, an insidious development indeed”

do anything. In a world which demands that individual will be routinely sacrificed to a universal trajectory and where that sacrifice is so normalised that, even in their private lives, individuals strive for self-control and self-regulation, the submission of one's sovereign agency to a multitude of technological devices such as these is, to an anarchist like Tati, an insidious development indeed.

No exit!

This, then, is the outline of modern life's

somatic geometry – the absurd gymnastics demanded of the human body as it struggles to survive in spaces scored with abstract, artificial regimes of control. Yet the modern world's constrictions are frequently thrown into relief by the distinct lack of organisation which persists in the older part of town, where markings upon the road direct only children's games of hopscotch. The openness of the town square allows bodies to meander, encouraging them to follow no strict orientation save their own, to deviate, cross each other's paths, stop altogether to converse... The haphazard arrangement of Hulot's apartment building, meanwhile, offers a compelling antithesis to houses in the suburbs. Its organic construction facilitates the needs of the individual, while still allowing for shared space, and its rooms, foyers, and stairwells appear cobbled together as endogenous expressions of human will (and necessity) rather than abstract forms, applied from without to which human will must bend.

Hulot himself is also injured to modernity's insistence upon proper order and strict teleology, sliding mutely between and around its forms of prescription and control in a kind of improvised ballet of his own design. For instance, he and the female interviewer at the “Coal By-Products” company circle a spectral (and voyeuristic) third party, inadvertently ushered into the room when Hulot steps in a pile of lime, removes his shoe, then accidentally leaves a trail of white shoeprints on the chair and desk.³ A vector of chaos (read: anarchy), Hulot draws transverse loci across the drab, desiccated passages of modern life and its forms: charged with producing endless,



Les films de mon oncle

Still from *Mon Oncle*

uniform lengths of red rubber pipe at the “Plastac” plant, his intercession immediately introduces variety and variation, producing fat piping, thin piping, piping like strings of sausages... In an interview in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* with André Bazin and François Truffaut, Tati may have said that, in contrast to Chaplin's tramp, “Hulot doesn't invent anything,”⁴ but his actions, nonetheless, enact a kind of creative destruction, releasing people and objects from their prescribed purposes. Before Hulot arrives at M. and Mme Arpel's garden party, for example, the atmosphere is inhibited, staid and painfully boring (guests infrequently emit the dullest of expressions like “we produced 40,000 metres of piping: a considerable achievement!”). But Hulot arrives and, while looking for a place to plant an oddly-shaped glassholder, stabs a hole right through the

plumbing to the Arpel's fountain, flooding the garden. His small interruption not only quickly renders proper pathways of the garden superfluous (while trying to catch the wayward dogs, guests sprint across the garden with abandon), but prompts the guests' behaviour itself to deviate from previously prescribed patterns and conduits – they chat with one another, they laugh, they clap and cheer each other on.⁵ Their transgression is our delight: just as the boy Gérard and his mates derive unadulterated joy from seeing passers-by diverted from their decided course (a whistle in their direction is enough to send them careering into a lamppost), we can't help but laugh to see the normative constraints of home and work in tattered ruins.

Anarchy is kids' stuff

Hyper-technologised modernity, accord-

ing to Tati's vision, yields only coldness and cruelty, stripping individuals of their free will and channelling natural productivity into industrialised production. The form of life that this artificiality supplants exudes vitality and warmth, its maintenance of social bonds between individuals arising out of camaraderie and a voluntary commitment to social cohesion rather than a desire for exploitation or social mobility. Yet, as the final scenes of *Mon Oncle* appear to indicate, the process by which modern man is divested of his will is by no means irreversible and here the figure of the child becomes important.

If the character of Hulot intervenes at certain junctures in order to introduce alteration into modernity's strictures (anarchy made flesh, as it were), the figure of the child evokes an anarchistic pre-lapsarian purity, largely serving as *Mon Oncle's* transcendent externality. Throughout the film the director regards them with a kind of awe and their assured expression of individual will irrespective of social context is brandished as exemplary: re-awakening a shadow of this childlike willfulness, Tati appears to suggest, might be a crucial step towards recovering man's lost autonomy. For M. Arpel, for instance, simply finding himself part of an unintentional, childish prank (whistling to Hulot, he sends another hapless gent careering into another unseen lamppost) is enough to stir in him an appetite for dissent and, in defiance of yet more road markings, he leaves the ferry car park by the entrance. A small rebellion, perhaps, but significant.

Indeed, one could argue that the entirety of Tati's oeuvre is designed to awaken in the audience members themselves a childlike sense of glee which might, perhaps, be mobilised towards this end. The majority of his visual gags function simply

by manipulating the banal, adult world into appearing as objects or situations drawn from the child's world. Inanimate objects, for example, are infused with life and take on unexpected forms: at the "Plastac" factory the red rubber hose appears to carefully snake by a sleeping Hulot and similarly, as Hulot clumsily sneaks into their garden, windows of the Arpel's house appear as a pair of giant, watchful eyes. If this is the case, however, one has to wonder if Tati's programme might still be an effective means of achieving anarchist redemption in a 21st century world. When lo-fi advertising systematically infantilises the viewing public and persistently attempts to induce generalised regression to sell the kind of products which caused Tati concern, it may now be impossible for us to comprehend the radical transformative potential he envisaged.

Diamuid Hester⁶

1. This is a pretty unorthodox interpretation of Tati. With the notable exception of Laurent Marie's "Jacques Tati's Playtime as New Babylon" (in *Cinema and the City*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) which reads Tati's vision of Paris in *Playtime* (1967) with spatial theories from the Situationist International, to my knowledge, no other work explicitly aligns Tati with an anarchist tradition.

2. Tolstoy, L. "The End of the Age (On the Approaching Revolution)," available at: http://www.nonresistance.org/docs_pdf/Tolstoy/End_of_Age.pdf

3. Like most of Tati's visual gags, a textual description doesn't capture a modicum of the humour and originality of this scene. Nevertheless, I hope this may be adequately evocative that those unfamiliar with *Mon Oncle* might be more inclined, when they watch it, to pay particular attention to this finely crafted scene.

4. Bazin, A. with François Truffaut. "Entretien avec Jacques Tati," *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Mai 1958), pp. 2-20.

5. A similar situation presents itself in Tati's subsequent film, *Playtime*: with the introduction of Hulot, the elegant and chic restaurant, "The Royal Garden," quickly morphs into a raucous nightclub reminiscent of the village café in *Jour de Fête*.

6. Diamuid Hester is a graduate of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy and a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Sussex. He lives in Brighton and blogs at schoolboyerrors.wordpress.com.

The New Epic Theater of Brent Green

Donna K



Bertolt Brecht

In the middle of 2008 I fielded a lot of e-mailed concerns and phone calls when I moved out to the middle of rural Pennsylvania abandoning my city life as a Brooklyn New York cubicle dweller. I moved to Pennsylvucky to be exact, the Republican

mid-section of the huge American state which, in retrospect, does seem like a pretty drastic change! When I moved to New York I was looking for some kind of feeling, some overwhelming city-centric zeitgeist that I had read about.