

Lessons from dogs – a walk through the city with Jacques Tati

A critic once defined Jacques Tati's work *Playtime* (1967) as "a film that comes from another planet, where they make films differently,"¹ at the same time the film as a commercial flop, compounded by the long perfectionist work on it, contributed to the financial bankruptcy of the director. This is a truly different way of making films – cinema that is not only for the eyes. Let us say that what makes his films strange and actual even from today's point of view are the sound environment, the absurdity and humor whose potential is concentrated in the "ambient sound," and the architecture of the film. The sound arises from the humor and vice versa. Humor introduces every sound, while the sounds and movements are a method of film-making, both comedic and cinematic.

Tati does not deconstruct or deterritorialize modernity, does not show funny scenes of the "fall of modernity." One could rather say that his methods are inscribed in the principles of modernity. Lending form to the patterns of modernity and progress not only by basing his films on technological innovations such as "a new color process" or shooting on 70mm film, he creates his futurist urban transgressions in a "futuristic glass-and-steel Paris" with its "high-tech vagaries." Tati explores the aesthetic character of modern capitalism and notions of stylishness and fashion and architecture, which he turns into "ingenious set-designs" for his films. He concentrates with an amazingly keen sense on the absurdity of the relations and "ludicrous synchronization" between human and machine, between subjectivity and dispositif, between day-to-day life and visual imagery in an artificial environment, as he follows the transformation of a society of discipline to one of control and self-control after the Second World War. He reflects on an irreversible process that started then under the command of machines, whose effect carried over into the recent socio-economic transformations of the modern city, what we call today gentrification and associate with post-Fordism and with the restructuring processes in the big global cities.

Like Samuel Beckett or the French *nouveau roman* with authors like Claude Simon he gives priority to the description of objects. As the objects become characters the plot and narrative break down, while the character of the subjects are devoided of substance. With his social compositions and urban choreography Tati achieves a performative exchange in a dance for objects, inverting the subject-object relation and their relation to the socio-spatial process, which is inevitably today associated with enclosure and control, revealing visible and invisible structures and surfaces and an urban soundscape. Tati derives the idea of an acceleration of time and technologies of space, embracing post-Fordist repetition in order to present the obsessions of a dehumanizing society of self-control, aestheticized functionality, alienation, both in the public and the personal space. In this description objects and things have more character and are in a mode of subjectivization than the subjects and people in a process of commodification. The machines are more human than the automated gestures of people, while people are more machinic. The linguistic field and language (he barely makes use of dialogues and utterances) are maximized so that the dialogs fall apart into sudden phrases and fragmentary sentences against the acoustic background of mashed verbal sounds, signals, and the structures and surface of the urban environment.

Tati focuses primarily on the outskirts, those territories under the pressure of urban planning, a process in which the concept of center and periphery is displaced, in which the decentralized modern city is the main character – what we call today a modern city, with television,

¹ François Truffaut in a letter to Tati, 1968.

communication, traffic, consumerism, fashion, business, technologies and tourism. At the same time the main character is additionally diminished by Tati's futurist transgressions. His screen alter ego, between order and disorder, silly and "socially inadequate," is not self-destructive. He is not paranoid; in his schizophrenic performance and desire to participate in society he does not call into question. He is rather what Deleuze calls a "cinematic persona." In his film "School for Postmen" (1947) Jacques Tati develops a displaced and inadequate character, technologies of subjectivization that he does not deterritorialize, but rather maintains in a constant mode of productive territorialization as he "becomes-other-in-time," thus producing a "schizophrenic narrative," that particle which cracks the tightly-knit working social machine and breaks it to pieces. As Gerald Raunig writes: "Jacques Tati proposes an offensive strategy of accelerated singularization."²

In an interview "lessons from dogs" from 1977 Tati points out how in the process of becoming of his cinematic alter ego he was inspired for his movements in the space by dogs, which finds to be "marvelous comedians." Researching and imitating city dogs moving, he underlines how behind what might look at first glance like a chaotic behavior on their daily walks, in which they keep stopping in order to communicate or pee, there are productive machines in endless territorialization, which do not need any lessons from the new engineers. An important aspect for Tati is that dogs do not call themselves into question, just like the amateur painter will never call into question his own paintings and passion. For Tati this is a lesson and an approach to a truly persevering creative self-inspiration in which he discovers how he himself loves cinema and his own films.

Text: Dimitrina Sevova

Program:

Introduction and commentary by Dimitrina Sevova

Excerpts from the following films by Jacques Tati will be screened:

- *L'École des facteurs* (1947) (short film)
- *Jour de fête* (1949)
- *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953)
- *Mon Oncle* (1958)
- *Play Time* (1967)
- *Trafic* (1971)
- *Parade* (1974)

Along with excerpts from two documentary films about Jacques Tati:

- *Jacques Tati, le rire démocratique*, by Philippe Pierre (2002)
- *The Magnificent Tati*, by Michael House (2009)

Discussion

² Gerald Raunig. *A Thousand Machines: A Concise Philosophy of the Machine as a Social Movement*. Trans. Aileen Derieg. Semiotext(e), 2010, p. 98.