

Tati's Chaos: Play, Game, and Perception

The word play refers specifically to the senses in regards to certain activities, usually associated with a game. Arbitrary and chaotic, Jacques Tati's *Playtime* defines the term "game" in its very own distinctive way. A logical question does, however, surface from the depths of convolution, as to whether the intent becomes to play with the disoriented perceptions of the audience, or create within his world an intellectual stimulant with the sole purpose of making aware the importance of social reform in an increasingly alienated society. Play is voluntary, restricted to an area, and governed by rules, and these three concepts resonate clearly throughout the film. With its concentration of chance, Tati sought to restrain himself with the imprisoning yet paradoxically liberating nature of constraint. The exhibition of its comedic attributes distinctively guides the audience to the core of Tati's message, indicating the profound purpose behind its striking narrative. Undeniably, the genre of the film rests in the realm of playful comedy, yet within this realm lies the ethical basis for its stylistic direction, the push for social reforms of an estranged and isolated modern civilization through the use of humor. In this essay, it is argued that the categorization of the film is absolutely grounded within the definitions of a game, as dictated by the meticulous analysis of Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games*. Bound by parameters, *Playtime* delivers the very essence of game to those who wish to define it, a feat that drives its viewers to confusion yet at the same time makes it abundantly clear that the spontaneous interactions of an anarchical gathering guarantee the destruction of the flawed modern world.

First and foremost, as delineated by Caillois, a game must be free, "in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion."¹ In terms of audience participation, this concept holds true. The game proposed by Tati is indeed

¹ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 9.

voluntary. In fact, the utilization of several long shots that revealed the chaotic scenes in their entirety added to the liberty of the viewers. With such convoluted interactions involved, with comic gags and actions occurring simultaneously in the background and the foreground, the viewers are given the freedom of choice. Tati challenges the viewers to broaden their horizons, to hone their observational skills and detect all that is happening within the scene. As such, this allows those who feel up for the challenge to perceptibly scan the long shot for any deviations from standard behavior, usually indicating the presence of gags. Of course, as intended, this is not meant to be an involuntary act. Spectators can simply choose the path of unawareness, in which the foreground dominates their field of vision and the distinct details in the background become nonexistent, since “one plays only if and when one wishes to.”²

According to Caillois, a game must also be separate, “circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance,” as well as contain a degree of uncertainty “which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand.”³ At first glance, it might seem that the former refers to the cinematic world in which Tati placed the pieces of his game, the buildings and the people. But upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the rule applies specifically to the audience. Whether it is a theater or a device that displays an image upon a surface, the periphery is already defined for the external players of this game, the audience members. With the exception of those who have already experienced Tati’s vision, the rule of uncertainty does not apply. However, when witnessing the extraordinary sight of *Playtime* for the first time, the uncertainty of the end is clear, and the game retains its definition.

Playing a game yields no apparent gains; it is unproductive, “creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind” except for the “exchange of property among players,” followed by the expression of awareness attributable to the presence of “a second reality or of a

² Ibid., 9

³ Ibid., 9

free unreality, as against real life.”⁴ Now, speaking in terms of the protagonists (there is a discernible lack of antagonists), wealth was certainly not created. Despite the increasing flow of patrons into the newly opened Royal Gardens, the damages incurred within the next 20 minutes of the film imply the negation of any funds received by the institution. Understandably, the onlookers do not gain any materialistic wealth either from this involvement, and in the duration of the film, they are within the confines of a second reality, that which transports them to Tati’s realm of a modernistic society.

Given the categorization of games as designated by Caillois, it is evident that *alea* (chance) appears to be the most consistent throughout the film. Chance, on the other hand, offers a deeper insight into the relationship between the director and his intended way of intriguing his audience. Hulot’s many duplicates serve as excellent examples in underscoring this notion. Monsieur Giffard searches desperately for the missing Hulot, but each time failing to do so as he encounters the wrong person. Then suddenly, through sheer chance, he runs into the person he least expected to meet while strolling through the darkened streets. The significant aspect to consider is the purpose of this chance encounter, to accentuate the presence of “chance” within this game. When attempting to seek out Hulot, Girard falls short of his goal multiple times. Yet when he does not exert even the slightest dependence on his own ability, his objective is reached when he least expects it. In other words, the distinctive rule of chance is thusly revealed as the dependence on everything except himself.⁵ The Royal Garden sequence further cements the effectiveness of chance as the dominant style of play. Essentially all the miniscule details within the sequence lie within the domain of *alea*. From the people colliding with the pillar and the ironic evasion of the customer as he bends down and avoids the waiter’s tray, to the various

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10

⁵ *Ibid.*, Caillois denotes *alea* as a game in which the player “counts on everything, even the vaguest sign, the slightest outside occurrence, which he immediately takes to be an omen or token-in short, he depends on everything except himself.” (pp.17-18).

events that eventually lead to the destruction of the establishment, chance is prevalent throughout the dinner. The meeting between Barbara and Hulot as they get along cordially; the mishaps of the various waiters; the fish that is mistakenly seasoned three times; the failure of nearly all the lights; all of these events have a certain degree of coincidental, fate-oriented purpose as they unfold. They each contribute to the overarching theme, pieces of a puzzle that reveal the complexity of chance, the dice that Tati throws onto the table for the amusement and confusion of the audience; a game in its own right.

Rules define the limitations of play. Similarly, Tati imposed constraints upon himself in the form of parameters in order to abide by the regulations of game. The existence of a parametric form is apparent when observing the fact that *Playtime* contains no discernible plot. It rejects the classical notion of establishing a narrative. Perceptual uncertainty, as Kristin Thompson describes, is the ultimate aim of enacting parameters; the deviation from the standard Hollywood system of central narrative is achieved through establishing stylistic devices independent from the storyline.⁶ Therefore, the rules that govern Tati's game revolve around the idea of integrating a sense of perceptual overload while at the same time not detracting from the narrative itself, as sparse as it already is. But one must examine the concept of comedy as a reflection of the narrative. Although it is by choice that the narrative appears to be sparsely developed, it would be inaccurate to express a lack of one in the film's entirety. In fact, the "narrative" exists as the extrinsic functioning of Tati's game. The genre of the film as a playful comedy ensures that the narrative is established through the audience's laughter. With humor, the audience's perception of hilarity becomes integral to Tati's ultimate point. Tati allows the audience to observe the comedic world, and in turn, the spectators then relate this to their own reality, that the

⁶ Kristin Thompson, *Play Time: Comedy on the Edge of Perception*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 251.

unstructured merriment of social interactions is the solution a monotonous and tediously structured society.

In successfully balancing chaos and a degree of control over the narrative, Tati gains the liberty to transform the film into the game that it was intended to be. He challenges the audience by bombarding the senses with idiosyncratic interactions in many of the frames. Despite the seemingly arbitrary mess that results from such a constraint, the fundamental use of sounds functions as a bastion of order, to prevent the chaos from collapsing in on itself, much like the Royal Garden. It is observed that most of the sounds from the film are nondiegetic, as voices overlap one another in a great number of scenes, as music played by musical instruments saturates the conversations as well. At first glance, it might seem that sound does not present any sort of order among the overload, but Tati uses sound as a method of “orienting the speaker,” so “It might seem as though the spectator is free to roam the frame and focus on any detail that catches the eye.”⁷ The sounds that seem to protrude from multiple directions within the shot serve as hints in a game, to guide the spectator in observing the elusive details. As one noise stacks on top of another, the view of the audience shifts from one part to another, steered by the misleading sound clues. Lacking any sort of depth cues, the sound not only beckons for the audience to keep up but also injects humor within the film. More often than not, the sound cues defy common sense, such as the silent door slams and the chairs that seem to exude gas. The reason for these distinguishing sounds derives from parameters themselves. If they were perceived to be logical in any way, the experimental aspect of the film would adhere to the “commonly held expectation that sound should supportively accompany the image,” something

⁷ Dan North, “Jacques Tati’s Playtime: Modern Life is Noisy,” *Spectacular Attractions: film in all its forms*, September 17, 2012 (12:43pm), <http://drnorth.wordpress.com/2008/11/12/jacques-tati-playtime-modern-life-is-noisy/>.

from which Tati strayed, as then the stylistic device would intrude upon the narrative and violate the rules of the game.⁸

The construction of a bland and alienated society with the creation of congruent buildings with the same pattern of design and color, along with the indistinguishable mobs of people all sporting nearly identical articles of clothing, presents an attack on the increasingly narrow-mindedness of modern society. With this setup, the Royal Garden's ultimate destruction at the hands of raucous and joyous merriment underscores Tati's message that the alienation of civilization can be eradicated by spontaneity and openness in societal interactions. Yet that simple message is not sufficiently shown if the audience simply views the film. Instead, Tati chose to make the audience participate in the film, thus indirectly proving his point. As the spectators engage in the director's game, as they laugh and point out significant details to one another, they are fulfilling the prophecy set forth by Tati, that chaotic and random jollity is the key to striking down human boundaries. In establishing a playful game in his cinematic world, Jacques Tati simultaneously brought his creation into our reality, giving rise to an awareness of the importance of playtime in the modern society, the need for a second reality.

⁸ Ibid.