

Mon Oncle

Jacques Tati's irrepressible Mr. Hulot, along with Charlie Chaplin's Tramp character, is one of the greatest examples of the everyman. He walks through life with a whimsy that becomes his trademark. Although dialogue is sparse, he exposes the curious intricacies of life from behind his trenchcoat and pipe. In *Mon Oncle*, Hulot goes on outings with his nephew while Tati elucidates the rather arduous issues of modernity. Hulot goes back and forth between the bourgeois neighborhood and what can only be described as the "modern sector" with a carelessness shared only by the mischievous children and lackadaisical canines that roam the streets.

Hulot has no job, but his days remain filled with admiring children, the talkative street-folk and vendors, and his meddling sister in the modern sector. Altogether, the film has one of the most meager, yet clever uses of sound. Tati can do more with periodic buzzers and whistles than the average film could achieve with all of its modern technology, which is concomitant with the issues within the film. The only two exceptions to the slight soundtrack are the clamorous and deafening sounds of construction during the opening sequence and the technological mishaps at the plastic factory, both being examples of the entropy of modern life. While Hulot's sister and her husband stammer around figuring out whether their awkward fountain is spouting or the phone is ringing, the altruistic Hulot contorts his window so the reflection prompts a caged bird to sing with delight.

Tati parodies the sterile efficiency of the modern sector. First there is a montage of cars, each traveling at a uniform distance from the next, never an arrow unfollowed. In

comparison, the Arpels (the sister's family) step clumsily along the circuitous stone paths in their garden. The ineffable Hulot chooses either to walk freely, incongruous with the paths that have been laid out, or to navigate them deftly as if he were engaged in a game of hopscotch like the little children outside of his house. At times, Hulot can maneuver the cobblestones with obliviousness shared only by the family's dachshund. The people's movements in deference to the courtyard's gravel squares are reminiscent of the characters moving around the checkerboard floors of a country estate in Renoir's *Rules of the Game* (1939).

The silly characters of *Mon Oncle* play around in a modern world that makes little sense to Hulot. He finds himself uncomfortable with the strange angles of the art-deco chair and grimaces humorously. His bout with the futuristic kitchen brings to memory a similar scene in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) in which an unsuspecting factory worker is fed clumsily by a machine. The efficiency of modern life comes at the cost of humanity. In a highly significant allegory, the Arpels' heads become the pupils of the circular, eye-like house windows. They are later swallowed by a newly installed garage, epitomizing the conflict of humanity versus modernity. These scenes are on par with those Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which deals with the enigma of man's reliance on tools (coincidentally using very little dialogue) ten years after this film was made.

The unspoken commentary is thick in a world that employs the advances of technology and ignores the human mind that used to take its place. A grapefruit vendor attempts to sell his merchandise for 150 francs, and persists that the scale's indication must be correct even after being notified that the truck holding the scale has a flat tire.

Hulot's sister manages to get him a job at her husband's plastic factory, a suggestion that is laughable to audiences when made to the wayward Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate* (1967). Hulot has taken Benjamin's advice, and the company suffers for his boredom in a hilarious scene. There is just no real place for a basic and curiously simple man in a modern world. Tati has made this commentary to his audience, but more importantly he has made them laugh. He has showed that there is more joy in an aimless pack of dogs wandering the streets playfully and eating leftovers from street vendors than there is in the modern, dignified conglomerate. When the plastic company calls Hulot, there is party noise in the background, while the Arpels have nothing more than an annoying fountain sputter and a buzzing kitchen. Even the street sweeper, a perpetually talkative and colorful character, keeps the street trash in tidy little piles. They are a reminder of how Hulot, and therefore Tati, assembles the debris of narrative events into palatable, humorous fragments.