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Jacques Tati's *TRAFFIC*: Being one of the few moviegoers in the Western Hemisphere who considers Tati's *PLAYTIME* (1967) a masterpiece—a truly innovative film whose continued absence in America creates a serious cultural gap—I approached his newest movie with fervid hopes and a fair amount of trepidation. Would the commercial disaster of the previous film goad Tati into a stylistic retreat, an attempt to regain the audience who flocked to *MON ONCLE* (1958)? Would the more modest budget of *TRAFFIC*—only his fifth film in 24 years—result in a safer, more conventional vehicle for M. Hulot, the quaint middleclass bumbler? I'm afraid it did.

Obviously Tati is too accomplished and intransigent a filmmaker to be capable of selling himself down the river, and there is much in *TRAFFIC* to be grateful for: a rigorously composed soundtrack of remarkable density, some wonderfully sustained and developed gags, and a grasp of contemporary French manners and moods that few directors could equal. Following the frustrated progress of a car designer (Hulot) with his cohorts and display model from Paris to an auto exposition in Amsterdam, Tati shapes his plot around all the irritations of motorized travel—breakdowns, smash-ups, traffic jams, customs inspectors—as well as the rituals and gimmicks inherent in promoting cars. Despite a predictable amount of hackneyed material, there is an agreeable freshness in much of the execution, and certainly no one could accuse Tati of stretching a *Pete Smith Specialty* out to feature length. But after the extraordinary ambitiousness of his last film, the horizons of *TRAFFIC* seem pretty low, and one suspects that Tati is mainly biding his time.

*PLAYTIME* tended to alienate audiences by eschewing sex and violence, plodding along at a lifelike and undramatic pace, and cramming the 70mm screen with so many different things to watch at once that the average shot resembled a multiple choice question (where is the next gag likeliest to erupt?). The off-center timing of several gags compounded this alienation, particularly for those expecting the Pavlovian disciplines and guidelines of the Sennett-Keaton-Chaplin school. Much in *TRAFFIC* seems to work consciously against

these tendencies: there is "sex" (a simpering glamor doll in charge of public relations, played by Maria Kimberly, who becomes more of a "star" in the traveling group than the car itself); there is "violence" (a multiple freak accident as extravagant as anything in *WEEKEND*); the pace is relatively clipped; and most of the gags are preselected and framed for immediate consumption. If *TRAFFIC* works more successfully with audiences—and it seemed to, judging from the laughter, both times I saw it—this is probably because it does most of the work for them. There is still enough of Tati's quirky habits of selection to create some discomfort—how can one respond to a director who finds virtually *everything* funny, except to embrace this notion uncritically or run away from it in disgust?—but not enough to support a radical vision. All the Kafkaesque ordeals of the spectators in *PLAYTIME* were precisely the same as those of the characters—tourists wandering aimlessly through interchangeable buildings of glass and steel—but when Tati brought all his characters together and made them friends, he infused the same landscapes with beauty and awe, making them rich with possibilities. By turning Hulot into another lost wanderer, exempted from his role of "leading" the audience, Tati compelled anyone willing to play his game to discover a new way of looking. *TRAFFIC*—like *MON ONCLE*, minus its unconvincing upbeat ending—begins and concludes as a catalog of gripes, and teaches us essentially nothing that we don't already know. Only a few stray moments (lunch with an easygoing Dutch mechanic near a peaceful canal, brief images of Apollo II glimpsed on TV) suggest any way out of the terrors the complaints imply, and little force is felt behind them. Most of the film is concerned with hurry, impatience and indifference—a lot of angry vibes about very little—and even Hulot himself occasionally contributes to the bad feeling. The irony is how easily a bemused public will choose this simple pessimism—a prosaic string of bead-like gags—over the complex and poetic optimism that preceded it.

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