Consumption and the Construction of Community in Jacques Tati’s Mon Oncle

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French director Jacques Tati's third feature film, *Mon Oncle* (1958), presents a nuanced analysis of consumption's impact on society through a juxtaposition of two worlds. The title character, Uncle Hulot, lives in a more "traditional," nineteenth-century *quartier*, in which buying, selling, and consumption are largely public and central to local society. By contrast, in the sleek modern suburb inhabited by his sister's family, the Arpels, consumption has retreated to the confines of the single-family home and society has all but disappeared. In its portrayal of the Arpels' suburban lifestyle, Tati's film shares the ambivalence toward modern consumer society characteristic of contemporary French intellectuals such as Roland Barthes or Henri Lefebvre, whose work has received greater scholarly attention. However, perhaps because Tati himself was not an intellectual, he differs from such contemporaries in arguing that the problem was not consumer capitalist society itself, so much as the choices and values that "modern" French consumers embraced, which consistently reinforced social distinctions and tended to destroy, rather than create, community. This emphasis on consumer choice not only set Tati apart from his contemporaries, but also offers a challenge to present-day proponents of "new urbanism" who seek to recreate the physical space of a traditional town center within the context of modern consumer capitalist society.

Tati's films were part of a wave of French cultural and intellectual interest in modernity, consumer society, and everyday life in the 1950s and 1960s, which Kristin Ross has attributed largely to the particularly rapid economic growth, modernization, and social change the French experienced in these decades. Reading the work of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, Ross notes that she was struck by the "almost cargo-cult-like sudden descent of large appliances into war-torn French households and streets in the wake of the Marshall Plan. Before the war, it seemed, no one had a refrigerator; after the war, it seemed, everyone did" (Ross 4). French intellectuals were similarly struck. In the 1960s, French sociologist Edgar Morin undertook a detailed empirical study of the effects that the advent of such consumer goods, along with attendant changes like mechanized farming and large-scale retailing, had on the economy and society of Plomérol, a rural town in Brittany. Other French intellectuals approached similar topics from a more analytical angle. In his *Critique of Everyday Life*, for example, Henri Lefebvre was one of the first to apply a Marxist critique to consumption and what he called "everyday life," as dimensions of capitalist society overlooked by previous generations of Marxists concerned primarily with capitalist production and its exploitation of workers. Barthes pioneered the semiotic analysis of consumer advertising and mass media in order to understand how myths and meanings were created in contemporary capitalist society. As Douglas Smith has noted in his analysis of French cultural critiques surrounding plastics — the quintessentially "modern" material of the 1950s — post-war intellectual analysis of this new material culture reflected a broader ambivalence about the socio-economic changes that produced and accompanied it (135-151).

Political and intellectual trends also played an important and sometimes underemphasized role in fostering French interest in contemporary consumer society. It is worth noting, for example, that Henri Lefebvre's work in this vein began before the massive post-war growth in marketing and consumer goods: the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* was published in 1947, when rationing, black markets, and housing shortages were still evident in France. Like many French intellectuals of this period, Lefebvre, Morin, and Barthes were Leftists, and their interest in consumption and everyday life was driven in part by the desire to reconcile developments in the industrial West with Marxist intellectual theory. On the political front, the crystallization of the Cold War, the revelation of Stalinist atrocities following Stalin's death in 1953, and the violent suppression of the Hungarian Revolution destabilized faith in the Soviet Union as a leader in Marxist interpretation. Meanwhile, in the 1960s, French intellectuals rediscovered, translated, and republished the works of György Lukács, a Hungarian literary scholar whose interwar interpretations of Marx had been previously disregarded as too radical. Lukács' work reintroduced Westerners to Marx's early manuscripts and to concepts like "alienation" and the "fetishization of commodities." These ideas proved useful for analyzing the mechanisms for manufacturing desire that existed within modern capitalist economy and, especially in the 1960s, resonated with scholars attempting to understand why social unrest and dissatisfaction remained in industrialized Western societies even as workers' material needs were increasingly met.

Like contemporary intellectuals, Tati used his work to call attention to and comment on the profound material and socio-economic changes to French society in the 1950s and 1960s. *Mon Oncle* was the second film to feature Tati's signature character, Monsieur Hulot. Like Charlie Chaplin (to whom he is often compared), Monsieur Hulot is a guileless...
and congenial man who unwittingly wreaks havoc for those around him as he negotiates a complex and often baffling world. In his debut film, Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot (1953), a 1950s seaside resort provides the backdrop for Hulot’s misadventures. However, in the remaining Hulot films — Mon Oncle (1958), Playtime (1968), and Traffic (1972) — such misadventures stem from Hulot’s encounter with modern consumer society more generally.

However, Tati lacked the interest in structural analysis and political ideology common to contemporary intellectuals, and his critique of this modern consumer society stems more from the viewpoint of an observer of human behavior. Although provided with the educational opportunities typical for a male scion of a bourgeois family, Tati never performed well in school and was neither particularly well-read nor politically active as an adult. He made his way on stage and into film through a talent for pantomime and mimicry, both stemming from a keen eye for gesture and mannerisms as markers of social class, human aspirations, and human foible (Bellos 11–16, 28–77, both stemming from a keen eye for gesture and mannerisms as markers of social class, style of production in turn encourages viewers to identify with different vignettes are often fragmented, overlapping, or barely audible, as if it were accidentally overheard or films, Hulot’s response to the world around him is somewhat privileged over and he rarely speaks loudly enough for the viewer to Hulot’s perspective that would allow Townsend French suburban life, preferring to spend his time romping about in the old Town with his uncle or sense: clean, planned, orderly, and designed to facilitate the appliances, and gardening. His young nephew, Gerard, is similarly unimpressed with the film’s centre ville, where Hulot lives. In Tati’s portrayal, this centre ville is somewhat shabby, with impossibly crooked buildings, street-level shops, sidewalk cafés, street-sweepers, and ubiquitous stray dogs. By comparison, the suburbs are “modern” in a 1950s sense: clean, planned, orderly, and designed to facilitate the flow of automobile traffic. However, Hulot finds the suburbs baffling and uncomfortable, and much of the humor in the film stems from his inability to properly use or appreciate modernist furniture, appliances, and gardening. His young nephew, Gérard, is similarly unimpressed with normal suburban life, preferring to spend his time romping about in the old town with his uncle or his unruly school chums. Gérard’s suburban loneliness and his father’s dismay over the boy’s clear preference for Uncle Hulot add an element of pathos to Hulot’s perspective of the centre ville is somewhat privileged over those of other characters, but always in a detached way. For example, there are no camera shots from Hulot’s perspective that would allow the viewer to see the world from his point of view, and he rarely speaks loudly enough for the viewer to “overhear.”

In Mon Oncle, modern consumer society is represented by the suburban world of Hulot’s relatives, the Arpels, as contrasted with the more “traditional” society of a small-town French centre ville, where Hulot lives. In Tati’s portrayal, this centre ville is somewhat shabby, with impossibly crooked buildings, street-level shops, sidewalk cafés, street-sweepers, and ubiquitous stray dogs. By comparison, the suburbs are “modern” in a 1950s sense: clean, planned, orderly, and designed to facilitate the flow of automobile traffic. However, Hulot finds the suburbs baffling and uncomfortable, and much of the humor in the film stems from his inability to properly use or appreciate modernist furniture, appliances, and gardening. His young nephew, Gérard, is similarly unimpressed with normal suburban life, preferring to spend his time romping about in the old town with his uncle or his unruly school chums. Gérard’s suburban loneliness and his father’s dismay over the boy’s clear preference for Uncle Hulot add an element of pathos to the critique.

Given Tati/Hulot’s and Gérard’s response to suburbia, it is easy to dismiss Mon Oncle as simple nostalgia for the “traditional” France and a rejection of modern consumer society (Fawell 222). Moreover, Hulot visually suggests that traditional France is doomed by the relentless drive toward modernization. As the film’s opening credits roll a large crane is constructing a boxy new modernist building, and the closing scene begins with a car ride past crews demolishing older buildings on the periphery of the centre ville to make room for more. By Tati’s next film, Playtime (1968), modernization has triumphed, for the Parisian landscape that Hulot navigates has become a grid of fully automated glass and steel skyscrapers, among which one occasionally catches a glimpse of a familiar monument, like the Eiffel Tower.

Recent critics have argued that Tati does not reject modernity in the Hulot films, so much as try to “defang” or mediate it through humor. John Fawell argues that Tati undermines the power of modernity and modern technology through humor, by exaggerating or repeating certain elements, such as the hum of a factory or the click-clack of a busy secretary’s high heels on a concrete floor, until they become ridiculous rather than dehumanizing (Fawell 223). Similarly, Lee Hilliker has noted the role that Hulot plays in “mediating” technology. One of the more disturbing aspects of the modern world as Tati envisions it is its tendency to subordinate human needs to the needs of technology. Hilliker argues that Hulot does not reject technology so much as creatively redeploy it so that it serves his needs — for example, by turning the Arpels’ stylish, but completely uncomfortable “modern” sofa on its side, in order to make it a more comfortable spot for a nap. In such scenes, Tati/Hulot “refashions and rescales the technoworld, making it into a source of humor and bringing about an implicit reevaluation of its functions and effects” (Hilliker 60).

Similarly, I would argue that Tati does not reject consumer society or capitalism altogether, for both neighborhoods depicted in Mon Oncle are quite clearly consumer societies. Although he certainly pokes fun at contemporary consumer pursuits, such as electric kitchen gadgets and chrome-bumpered cars, they alone do not cause the alienation characteristic of suburbia. Likewise, the liveliness of the centre ville is not due to the lack of consumer goods, so much as to consumption habits and choices that foster social connections. In other words, whereas contemporary intellectuals saw structural elements at the root of the problems in modern capitalist societies, Tati saw and depicted consumers as agents, who shaped their physical, social and economic environments through their consumption choices and values.

Buying and selling are literally central to life in the centre ville as Tati portrays it. Physically speaking, a charcuterie, a newsstand, and a café occupy the ground floor of three of the buildings on the square where Hulot lives, and produce vendors set up their carts and trucks in the street. Moreover, shopping and consumption are part of broader rituals of perambulation and neighborly human exchange, and thus integral to the social fabric of life on the square. Sales are always negotiated and are part of a routine of greeting and chatting that transcends class and occupational differences — the street sweeper stops to talk to the painter, who stops to talk to a neighbor, and so forth. Residents run their errands and do their work on foot, on bicycles, or in horse-drawn wagons, and the more leisurely pace of these technologies accommodates such interaction. Commercial exchanges often involve and attract comment from passers-by. For example, when we first meet Hulot, he is pulled into a lengthy conversation with a produce vendor, after the latter mistakenly chides him for knocking a tomato to the ground. (The daughter of Hulot’s landlady, who is hovering about in the hopes of flirting with Hulot, is the actual culprit.) In another humorous vignette, a shopper’s protests at the cost of a grapefruit draws the attention of two bystanders, who discover that the tins created by a flat tire on the fruit seller’s beat-up old truck was causing the grapefruit to seem heavier and thus more expensive than they actually were.

By contrast, Tati never shows the modern, suburban Arpels venturing out to do a little shopping. In fact, with the exception of an evening out on her anniversary, Madame

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Arpel does not appear to leave home at all; she spends all of her time fixing meals, cleaning the already immaculate house, or showing guests its high-tech housekeeping appliances, state-of-the-art floor plan, and hyper-modernist furnishings. When she needs oranges for a party, she has them delivered, and although this provides an opportunity for Monsieur Arpel to interact with the produce vendor, their exchange is marked by class distinctions notably absent from the mercantile exchanges on the town square. M. Arpel tips the vendor, who in turn doffs his cap and looks about incredulously at the Arpels' garden, clearly ill at ease. Meanwhile, although Monsieur Arpel and their son Gérard leave the house every morning, they drive through streets devoid of any retail shops, produce stands, or sidewalk cafés. The only activity on these neatly striped, multi-laned suburban streets is the continuous flow of shiny, chrome-bumpered cars, which Tati visually underscores the role this fence plays in separating the house from the outside world.

Tati clearly thinks that architectural limitations and choices help to shape society in both quarters. Hulot lives in a garret apartment of an old, crooked building that appears to have been constructed in stages and according to no particular plan. We chuckle each time he wends his way through the impossibly twisted maze of stairs, hallways, and galleries that winds through the building to his apartment, but the close quarters and irregularity of the building almost guarantee that its inhabitants interact. Indeed, when descending one day Hulot runs into a young woman clad in only a slip and curlers in the impossibly twisted maze of stairs, hallway, and slippers. By contrast, while the Arpels' house also has prominent windows, they are designed with windows, moving in tandem like the silhouettes of monsieur and madame appear inside the windows, moving in tandem like the pupils in a pair of eyes, as they peer out to investigate a noise below. While residents of the centre ville use windows to communicate, the Arpels use the same technology to separate themselves from and control the outside world.

The problem with contemporary consumer society, Tati suggests, is that in pursuing "modern" values like cleanliness, privacy, and order, consumers like the Arpels consistently make choices that break down community. They alienate themselves from community not only by erecting physical barriers, but also by incorporating miniature, privatized versions of traditional public leisure spaces into the private world thus created. Their minutely planned garden, with its neat little lawns, geometrically shaped hedges, beds of pastel gravel, and central fountain, resembles a French public garden — albeit in hyperbolically modernized forms. Similarly, the umbrella-shaded table where Mme. Arpel serves lunch is a smaller version of the centre ville's sidewalk cafés. The resemblance is only superficial. The cafés in the centre ville are the crossroads of the neighborhood, drawing residents of all classes and occupations like a magnet. On a Sunday afternoon, we see the butcher, still dressed in his white apron, heading there with friends, while a man in a suit beckons to one of the produce-mongers from the doorway. On another occasion, Hulot's neighbor gets pulled in while still in his pajamas, distracted from his morning chores of watering the plants and taking the dog out. By contrast, M. Arpel sips his coffee silently and alone in his manicured garden "café." The pathos of the scene is heightened by a wide-angle shot that renders him a small figure in this landscape, and by its context, for we have just seen Gérard reject his father's overtures and leave with Uncle Hulot to play in the centre ville. Although M. Arpel does not seem to realize it, his sense of abandonment is a self-imposed isolation and a product of his consumer choices. By choosing to take his afternoon coffee in the peace and privacy of his back patio, M. Arpel has abandoned a simple, everyday ritual of public consumption that would allow him to forge ties with his fellow men.

In contrast to the socio-economically mixed world of the centre ville, there are elements of class distinction and class snobbery in the isolated suburban world that the Arpels create for themselves. M. Arpel manages a plastics factory for a company operating...
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on a multinational scale, to judge by the large map of the world with lines radiating out from France displayed prominently behind its president’s desk. Such a company would have been at the forefront of French economic modernization in the 1950s, and its managers part of a growing number of middle-class employees who could afford a bourgeois lifestyle, even though they depended on a salary, rather than capital investments, for a living. Nonetheless, the suburban lifestyle that Tati imagines in Mon Oncle would have been out of reach for all but the very upper echelons of this group in 1958. Car ownership was uncommon in France, with only 1 car for every 25 people in 1950, rising to only 1 for every 10 people by 1960. By comparison, in the United States the ratios were 1 car to 4 people in 1950, and 1 car to 3 people ten years later (Hiliker 63). Similarly, home ownership was relatively rare: in 1954 it applied only to 35% of French households (Bonvalet and Lelièvre 532). Given the housing shortage that plagued France and other European societies after World War II, the large multi-family apartment building under construction at the beginning of Mon Oncle was far more typical of postwar construction than the Arpels’ spacious single-family house, particularly in the suburbs of France’s largest cities.

However, Tati mocks the Arpels not so much for being wealthy, but for consistently and deliberately using their wealth, and the consumer goods and technologies it buys, to mark class distinctions and distance themselves from the hoi polloi. The most humorous example of his mockery involves a fish-shaped fountain in the center of the Arpels’ garden. This fountain dominates the garden. It is large, made of shiny metal, and stands on its tail in a small pool pointing vertically to the sky. Even more notably, however, the plumbing makes loud sucking and gurgling sounds every time it is turned on as the water begins to flow, which calls attention to the way the Arpels use it to mark the status of their guests. Every time someone buzzes at the gate, Mme. Arpel runs to switch on the fountain from a panel inside the house. As the fountain gurgles to life, she presses another button on the same panel to admit the visitor. Yet not every visitor qualifies as a “guest,” and the fountain is for guests only. For visitors within the Arpels’ social set, such as the female friend who drops by in her shiny car or the haute-couture-clad neighbor, the fountain remains on and becomes the backdrop for an elaborate ritual in which Madame and her guest exchange and rebuff compliments as they clink toward one another along the garden walk in their high heels. On the other hand, family members like Hulot or tradesmen like the produce-monger who comes to deliver oranges do not rate such treatment, and Madame quickly and equally noisily switches off the fountain the moment she sees them. Indeed, so consistently is the fountain used that it becomes a signal to other family members of the presence of important guests: M. Arpel straightens his clothing in preparation for greeting them if he sees it on when he arrives home, while Hulot attempts to run the other way.

In the Arpels’ world, the ability to appreciate, use, and afford modern technologies becomes a marker of class distinction. While upper-class visitors, such as the Arpels’ next-door neighbor, express the appropriate appreciation for the hyper-modern appliances, furnishing, and architecture, lower-class visitors are completely bemused. On his way in and out, the produce-monger stares incredulously at the Arpels’ electric fence, geometric garden, and in particular the giant fish-shaped fountain, showing just how alien he finds this environment. And although Mme. Arpel’s well-dressed neighbor and friend murmur admiringly at the openness of le living room, the wife of M. Arpel’s plant foreman looks around the bare room with its hard tiled floor and metal furniture, and exclaims “but it’s so empty!” She clearly lacks the sophistication and class of the other female guests, for she wears a fur jacket to a daytime garden party and dark shoes with a pastel dress, and she laughs much too loud and much too often. Yet she says what we have all been thinking, and what Tati suggests is characteristic of modern consumption as a whole — it may be private, clean, and orderly, but it is also empty.

Similarly, while Madame Arpel’s kitchen is clearly a parody of the contemporary craze for electric household appliances, Tati is mocking the way that she uses these consumer goods as much as the goods themselves. The kitchen itself exaggerates appliances to their logical, yet absurd ends, with a remote control for flipping steaks or cabinets that automatically open via an electric eye. Hulot’s interaction with the gadgets only highlights their absurdity: his initial surprise when a cabinet door automatically opens leads to experimental arm-waving before he can figure out how to keep the door open long enough to retrieve a glass. Madame Arpel, on the other hand, takes obvious pride in the gadgets and in her skill at using them. We are introduced to them as she shows them off to her guests, who murmur admirably. In one such scene she comments “you see, my dear little friends, here I am really at home,” before she proceeds to the litany of different switches and buttons: “for the dishes ... for the linen ... push here for the vegetables ... sterilization ... ventilation.” The loud grinding and whirring noises that ensue with each name call into question her definition of “home.”

Tati illustrates the role that consumption plays in constructing and impeding community by juxtaposing scenes of consumption in the centre ville with their counterparts in suburbia. As we have already seen, part of the problem with the Arpels’ suburban lifestyle is that in removing traditional leisure experiences from public space, the Arpels segregate themselves socially. This is on one level a deliberate act of social distinction, or the desire to set themselves off from the rest of society by their wealth, their appreciation of technology, and their pursuit of modernity. However, it is also the fruit of their pursuit of related values such as cleanliness and order. The Arpels seek to control their world and order it to their liking, but in doing so miss out on the pleasure inherent in a disorderly life lived in community with others.

Tati uses two sequential scenes of food production and consumption to illustrate the emotional poverty of the clean and efficient world of the 1950s kitchen. In the first, during their Saturday romp through the old town, Gérard begs his uncle for money to join some of the local boys in buying crullers from a cart in a junk-filled meadow by some railroad tracks. The vendor cooks his pastries over a smoky charcoal grill, handling the dough and condiments with blackened hands, which no amount of wiping on his smudged apron seems to clean. While cooking, he directs a constant cant toward the boys — “There you go boys, look how good that is, there you go ...” — and honors their requests for extra jam and sugar with a liberal smear of the first and a whole handful of the latter. While the boys devour their sticky treats, they sit together on a dusty hill and make a game of distracting passers-by with a loud whistle in an attempt to make them run into a lamp pole. The preparation may be dirty, Tati suggests, but the food is good (the boys go back for a second helping), the meal convivial, and the entertainment top-notch.

We see the counter-example in the very next scene, when Gérard and his uncle return chez Arpel. After vigorously vacuuming the dirty boy, Mme. Arpel escorts him to the
kitchen for supper. Her kitchen is as clean as the charcoal grill was dirty, and her metal tongs, blue rubber gloves, and spotless white coat-dress suggest cooking is a medical, rather than a culinary, procedure. She “soft-boils” an egg by holding it in front of an electric light controlled by several of the kitchen’s innumerable dials, and the bread she serves is wrapped in plastic film. Before serving Gérard, she wheels a set of metal canisters light controlled by several of the kitchen’s innumerous dials, and the bread she serves with it comes wrapped in plastic film. She does not speak to Gérard once she has him seated at the table, much less ask him how he wants his egg and toast or even if he wants his egg and toast. And he makes no requests. After Mme. Arpel leaves the room, we hear the sound of children’s laughter coming in through the window. Gérard turns to listen, sighs, and turns back, and the scene closes on him alone with his sterile, yet uneaten meal.

Tati calls the value of modern kitchen gadgets into question, for they add nothing to the quality of a meal and in fact seem to detract from it. Since Gérard has no appetite for his egg and toast, despite its innovative preparation, in using these gadgets to pursue a perfection defined by order and cleanliness, Mme. Arpel and suburbanites like her completely overlook things that make a meal enjoyable, such as flavor or camaraderie.

Tati further underscores the relationship between consumption and community in a series of interlaced scenes comparing the Arpels’ evening out in celebration of their anniversary with Gérard’s simultaneous adventures with his baby-sitter, Uncle Hulot. Even when the Arpels go out, they remain enconced in their own private world. We first see them in the car discussing restaurant options, then we see a distant shot of the exterior of the restaurant they have chosen, where a small, pitiful looking doorman stands alone beneath a neon sign amid a sea of parked cars, watching an automatic door open and close. There is scarcely more interaction in the interior of the restaurant, for the Arpels, like the other couples in the restaurant, sit at isolated tables drinking champagne and talking to one another while musicians play. The only moment of social connection that we see occurs when the violinist approaches the Arpels’ table, prompting monsieur to hold up a bank note, which the violinist deftly palms. For a few moments the sounds of paper being crushed competes with the violin music, as he stashes the tip away. Even though this evening out takes the Arpels outside their suburban fortress, it still expresses and is shaped by all of the values that mark their domestic life — it is planned, private and built around elements of class distinction and displays of wealth.

By contrast, the intermixed scenes of Hulot’s evening out with Gérard highlight the spontaneity and sociability characteristic of consumption in the centre ville. While Hulot also takes Gérard “out to eat” (or at least to drink), they go to neighborhood café, where they mingle with other patrons; rather than discrete dining, is the order of the day. Such interaction apparently has its risks, for at one point Hulot and a young chap come to blows in the courtyard over a misunderstanding. Yet Tati suggests that one should not take these risks too seriously. Hulot paragraph 8:

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Notes
3 Mon Oncle was also Tati's most commercially successful and critically acclaimed film, winning the Special Jury Prize at Cannes (equivalent to today's Grand Prize, or second place after the Palme d'Or) and an Oscar for Best Foreign Film.
5 For an analytical description of the scenes, characters, and locales see Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot, Mon Oncle [(Paris]: Editions Nathan, 1993).
6 On cars, see Hilliker, 67-70.
7 For the entire cant, see Chion, 62.

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