

Monsieur Hulot

Marta Malinverni and Alex Turner

In 1958, French mime, actor and filmmaker Jacques Tati, directed the movie “Mon Oncle”. He cast himself as the protagonist of the film: Monsieur Hulot, a dreamy figure politely out of fashion, who rejects modernity in favour of the traditionally warm and picturesque neighbourhood in which he lives. However, Hulot is inextricably linked to the modern world through his sister, who resides with her husband and son in the stylish, super-modern Villa Arpel, a strange and alien, all too neat-and-tidy place for Hulot. The villa, which represents the modern post-war life of the French elite, in the same year as Le Corbusier’s proclamation of the house as a ‘machine for living’, was conceived by Tati and interior designer collaborator Jacques Lagrange by sifting clippings of the latest trends in design and architecture from period magazines, resulting in a set of modern architecture portraying stylish but superficial living.

In the movie, the full shallowness of the Arpels’ trappings are often revealed to us by the youngest character, Gérard, who, still unburdened by the notion of inter-neighbourhood socio-economic or cultural inferiority, agonises over his bleak upbringing, seeking his uncle’s affection at every opportunity; and it’s the nascent, unblemished perspective of this character, which the filmmaker entices us to consider in critique of mo-

dern living.

Tati is quoted as saying, ‘geometric lines do not produce likeable people’, the architectural expression of Villa Arpel having been created by him to embody modernity as a manifesto of basic geometrical forms, which in themselves represent socio-cultural ‘progress’ in the lives of its inhabitants. Through irony, Tati emphasizes how despite all that which the modern movement purports to improve, human lifestyle can inevitably rebel against its idealistic surroundings, to render said humans no more than humorous caricatures of themselves. Indeed, budding Gérard is seen to be perilously bored growing up in the villa, much preferring the outdoors, while his parents struggle desperately to maintain the (frequently malfunctioning) perfect home and thus their social status.

If architecture truly is about experiencing visceral emotion for the spaces which we occupy, spaces which shape us in ways which we do not even realise; and if Zumthor’s assertion that, ‘a good building must be capable of absorbing the traces of human life and thus of taking on a specific richness’,¹ holds true, then the prospect of living in such a sterile and autonomous, technological home as the Villa Arpel, should be no more an

¹ Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, Birkhauser Verlag GmbH, Basel, 2017, Third edition, p.24

enticing proposition to us than to poor Gérard. Yet, it would seem, in our eagerness to ‘keep up with the Joneses’, the simplified notion of progress as identified by our rapid adoption of the latest trends and technologies, trumps our better judgment and too often prevails. In “Mon Oncle”, this argument is provided visually by Tati and Lagrange, depicting the ‘progressive’ bourgeois fascination with minimal, ultra-functional design; and intimating through frequent humour its perceived limitations as a new standard for living. ‘I am not all against modern architecture, but I believe it should come with not only a building but also a living permit’, Tati is recorded as saying.

At the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale “Fundamentals”(curated by Rem Koolhaas), the central exhibition “Elements of Architecture”, collected architectural components which are not always valued, but represent the fundamental instruments of building: walls, floors, ceilings, windows, stairs etc. The exhibition space in its entirety was a mix of ancient and contemporary, artistic and technological, common and obsolete: an exhaustive taxonomy of tradition and innovation. It was intended to expose architecture as a profession trained to put things together, things defined by a limited number of ancient categories, some unchanged for over 5,000 years and others that were (re)-invented yesterday². In doing so, the exhibition highlighted the constantly evolving, but essentially never changing, character of architecture, where traditional, pre-existing knowledge and techniques are of equal relevance to their new counterparts.

Ironically, at the same biennale, the French Pavilion curated by Jean-Louis Cohen presented four galleries demonstrating the contradictions that tell the story of modernity and architecture in France. One of which - Jacques Tati and Villa Arpel: object of desire or of ridicule? - displayed a model of the villa, distilling from Tati’s film the great dream of modernity and its progressive ideals based on the obliteration of tradition.

In the thesis provided to us by Koolhaas, tradition, pre-existing knowledge and technique form a logical framework, a lineage that, even when purposefully broken with, has been and still is, intrinsic to cumulative progression. One which is more a delicate balancing of parts, incorporating innovation incrementally.

Today, as then, it is fair to question why we so desire the idea of a technological home. However, in both eras it is perhaps fair to assume the influence of rapid socio-technical evolution. Our homes may not be movie sets, where each component is carefully chosen for its scenic effect over functionality and comfort, but if we challenged ourselves to rifle through contemporary publications in an effort to collage a visionary ‘techno-home’ today, we could start to imagine a sequel to Mon Oncle displaying an even more outlandish conceit of ‘progression’.

What Tati created in Mon Oncle was a grossly exaggerated and unrealistic amalgam of technical innovations from the catalogue of architecture elements. One which looked solely to the future, with the explicit intention of highlighting the frivolity of contemporary bourgeois fascinations, and by extension the shallow belief that the adoption of such fascinations denotes social-cultural progression and brings about happiness. Considering this moving forward, perhaps ‘progress’ can be thought of as simply as: a more masterful mediation between tradition and innovation in the creation of our collage.

Indeed, it is the architect’s responsibility to decide, in line with his own tastes, restraints, ambitions and morals, his conformity to the generalised notion of progress. That which is inextricably linked with the future, with the new, innovative, radical and untested; and inevitably from a position originating in the past, one of adherence to rules, tradition, style and embedded knowledge.

2. Rem Koolhaas, Elements of Architecture: Taschen, 2018, pp. XLV

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Originally from Nottingham, Alex Turner grew up adventuring in the forests once belonging to Robin Hood. Since then he has studied architecture at Northumbria University in the north of England, where he was a regional representative for the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). After travelling widely, he is currently on an extended stop in Basel, where he has worked for a number of practices. He plans on making it back to the woods soon.

Together they founded PLEO Architecture in 2018.