Multimedia and Websites

Guy Debord, director
Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes

Jean-Luc Godard, director
2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle

Jacques Tati, director
Playtime
New York: The Criterion Collection, 2006, 2 DVDs, 124 min., $39.95, www.criterion.com

Sometime around the middle of the 1970s, the idea that a fundamental and irreparable transformation of Paris, of both its physical and social fabrics, had taken place is expressed with increasing frequency. We hear it in the despairing tone of conservative historian Louis Chevalier in The Assassination of Paris, written in 1977: “Vanishing, this is the theme of my book, the certainty that in a few years, easy enough to calculate, no one will have any idea what Paris was.” At something like the opposite end of the ideological spectrum we can hear the same idea expressed the following year by former Situationist Guy Debord in his largely autobiographical film, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni (a Latin palindrome meaning “we turn in the night, consumed by fire”): “whatever others may say about it, Paris no longer exists.” The sentiments expressed by Chevalier and Debord in the mid-1970s were hardly unique; one could in fact claim that they differ little in substance from laments dating back a century earlier when residents of the city decried Haussmann’s depredations. But it would be a mistake to collapse these two moments or to dismiss the seemingly hyperbolic claims of Debord and Chevalier, for what concerned them was not simply the eradication of a physical site (much of Paris—at least in its historic center—remains, of course) but the end of a certain relation between the city and its inhabitants. What concerned them was, we might say, the death of the modern myth of Paris, a particular representation of the city that had held sway for over a century, from Balzac to the Surrealists, and that was composed in equal parts of a “poeticization of urban civilization” and “a truly emotional attachment to the modern city.”

Although we know much about the city’s planning and even what could be called, after Chevalier, its “assassination,” with rare exceptions architectural historians have not considered the formidably mythical character of the object under study. To do so requires expanding the range of materials normally deemed part of the architectural historian’s archive and delving into literature, the visual arts, and, perhaps above all for the twentieth century, cinema. The death of the modern myth of Paris and what sort of architectural and urban imaginings succeeded it is, at some fundamental level, the subject of the films under review, all of which constitute essential resources for the urban historian of postwar Paris and are available on superb new DVD releases: Debord’s Society of the Spectacle (1973) and In girum. . . . (1978), included in his Complete Cinematic Works; Jean-Luc Godard’s 2 or 3 Things I Know About Her (1967); and Jacques Tati’s Playtime (1967). While these films cannot be said to constitute an organic sequence, they logically cohere around a shared concern with the radical reshaping of the city and its environs, particularly under the impact of the successive planning directives through the early 1960s. Whether urging that Paris’s rapid postwar growth be radically curtailed, as in the 1960 Plan d’Aménagement et d’Organization Générale de la Région Parisienne (PAOOG), or that it be encouraged but controlled, as in the 1965 Schéma directeur (directive outline), the effects were largely identical: to subjugate this often contentious city to the will of the Gaullist state and to complete that uneven process of modernization that had been progressing fitfully since the mid-nineteenth century. These measures provided the necessary sociodemographic substratum for the waning of Paris’s modern myth, and they feature prominently in each of the films under consideration.

In fact, Godard’s 2 or 3 Things. . . . opens with the director’s off-screen voice, speaking in a barely audible whisper, reading from an official announcement concerning Paul Delouvrier, the functionary responsible for the Schéma directeur, and accompanied by shots of the vast construction site of a grande ensemble outside Paris. We then meet the main subject of the film, Juliette Jeanson (played by the actress Marina Vlady), standing on the balcony of her apartment in the midst of another housing estate, the so-called Cité des 4000 at La Courneuve in Seine-Saint-Denis, just north of Paris. Designed only three years earlier by Clément Tambuté and Delacroix for the Office Public des Habitations à Loyer Modéré, it was upon completion already acknowledged as an
architectural and social failure in its sheer gigantism; the Cité des 4000, emblematic of the transformation of the Paris region in these years, forms the primary setting of Godard’s narrative, and he returns again and again to images of its long slabs, the highways ringing it, and the people who live there.7 Jeanson, a married housewife with two children, supplements her husband’s income through occasional prostitution; this was both a sociological fact, one aspect of the widely diagnosed “malaise” of France’s new towns (Godard had been inspired by reading an investigation of this phenomenon in a Parisian weekly), and an allegory for the new consumer society developing in France in these years, which forced all its members to prostitute themselves in one form or another.6 The “her” of the film’s title refers both to Jeanson and, as the credits sequence reveals, the Paris region itself, but this is a far cry from the “emotional attachment to the modern city” found in an earlier literature that had romanticized prostitution, from Nana to Nadja (or even to Godard’s own films of the early 1960s). Jeanson’s prostitution is a simple economic reflex, a response to the financial difficulties resulting from sharp changes in spending habits and living standards, what the contemporary press referred to as the reflexé petit-bourgeois, resulting from the move to the new towns.7

A perceptive film critic once remarked that “Playtime is Tati’s Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle,” and indeed the films share much more than the coincidence of a release date.5 The great comic director was also attempting to explore the new, thinned-out texture of everyday life in contemporary Paris, focusing however not on the grandes ensembles as Godard did, but on the skyscraper city that was coming to replace romantic vieux Paris in sites like La Défense or Maine-Montparnasse. Unable to film in these active business zones, Tati built his own modern city on a wasteland to the east of Paris, aptly nicknamed “Tativille” and designed by Eugène Roman. This would be the set for Playtime’s brilliant parody of corporate modern architecture and its unfortunate users; Tati emphasized the inhumane disproportion of the contemporary cityscape (towering buildings, interminable corridors, inscrutable technology) and its uniformity of appearance (airport lounge, exhibition hall, office space), both of which operate to imprison its inhabitants. As in 2 or 3 Things, . . . , tourism (and the ubiquitous travel poster) loom large as signifiers for the homogenization of space; as Tati described the slim plot, “a group of foreign tourists arrive to visit Paris. . . . They get into the same bus they’d used in Rome or Hamburg and drive on a road bordered with street lamps and buildings identical to those in their own capital.”9 Old Paris is only glimpsed in the film as fleeting reflections (of the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe) of the glass façades of anonymous postwar towers. This “International Style” architecture is paralleled by the omnipresent use of français on the soundtrack (and in the film’s title, of course), a linguistic homogenization and desemanticization similar to that of the built environment. But unlike Godard, Tati remains optimistic as his Monsieur Hulot, a kind of bumbling everyman, manages to sow some chaos even in this clinical city; as the director said not long after the film’s release, “if one cannot humanize the world, at least one can make poetry of the city.”11 The melancholy of Playtime is, however, unmistakable: the poetry that can be wrested from Tativille is a rather meager one, and in the end the possibility of any meaningful human contact in this setting (emblematized by Hulot’s pursuit of one the American tourists) is left in serious doubt.

The year 1967 saw the release of Playtime and 2 or 3 Things, . . . , and was also the year Debord published his key text of Situationist theory, The Society of the Spectacle, a book that could be said to provide the necessary theoretical exploration for the new urban forms depicted in Tati and Godard. In particular, the book’s seventh chapter, “Environmental Planning” (the French title, “L’aménagement du territoire,” better captures its object), addressed many of the themes found in their films—urban planning as class strategy, the homogenization of space, the colonization of everyday life by the commodity—as well as their contestation.10 Six years later Debord released a cinematic version of the book, composed largely of appropriated clips from other films, advertisements, promotional movies, and the like, accompanied by a voice-over derived from the earlier text. Key points from the seventh chapter are reiterated, joined to images of spatial segregation (the foreign concessions of Shanghai), the banal landscape of tourism (bateaux-mouches on the Seine), and capitalist planning (various skyscrapers, including those of La Défense, along with vacation resorts) and also to images of cities of the past (Pieter Breughel the Elder’s Tower of Babel, an Italian city from an Ambrogio Lorenzetti painting) that prefigure the urbanism of a postrevolutionary future. In the wake of May 1968, Debord here offered one of the most lucid critiques of French postwar planning in which Paris—no less than in Tati or Godard—is represented only by the ultramodern cityscape being designed by the Gaulist state and its adjuncts. If the resolutely retrospective quality of In girum . . . , its melancholic look back on what no longer existed, can be understood as Debord’s mournful reminiscence of the last moments when Paris’s modern myth still held sway, The Society of the Spectacle was a sober account, couched in the densest Hegelian prose, of that myth’s demise amid the modernization process of the previous half century. Together with Playtime and 2 or 3 Things, . . . , it is a crucial document for architectural historians of contemporary Paris and a vital tool for those interested in analyzing that city’s tragic “assassination.”

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Notes
3. These terms are borrowed from Roger Gaillot,


5. See, for example, the dismissive remarks of fellow architect Izenour: “Economic gigantism of the buildings, functional de-gregation, poor handling of supports, undistinguished coloring of façades, rectilinear and symmetrical layout of the ensemble are representative of contemporary French housing schemes.” Izenour, Paris construit, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1970), 244.


Jeffrey Levy, Steven DePaul, Bryan Spicer, and David Straiton, directors Las Vegas: Then & Now

The imprint of Las Vegas upon the built environment of the United States is thoroughly explored in the three-hour PBS documentary Las Vegas: An Unconventional History. Coinciding with the hundredth anniversary of the city’s founding, the film and an accompanying book and website avoid measuring Las Vegas by the standards with which urban scholars traditionally have defined the metropolis (a concentration of urban form consisting of historic layers of infrastructure that is easily accessible by mass transportation). Instead, they focus on Las Vegas as a crucial turning point in American urbanism. Rejecting the popular view that Las Vegas is an “assault” on conventional urban forms, director Steven Ives methodically analyzes the city and considers not merely its impact on residents but its influence on the country and world at large.

This follows the lead of the most recognized examination of the city’s iconic architecture developed in the book Learning from Las Vegas by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and the late Steven Izenour over thirty years ago.1 Its authors made the case for the importance of vernacular architecture, the iconography of mimetic architecture, and exaggerated kitsch styling. Coaxing readers to look beyond urban cohesiveness and restrained modernism, they defended pop culture styling and argued that such structures actually succeed on a functional level. While many of the buildings Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour analyzed have disappeared from the Vegas landscape, their analysis remains the benchmark for understanding the scenographic architecture and urban landscape of Las Vegas as an alternative to conventional urbanism.

The documentary commences with a restrained introduction, panning across the infamous Las Vegas strip, showing the built environment both on and off the strip, including the abundant suburban homes that border it. We next meet a casino cleaning woman, who waxes poetic about her successful acquisition of the American dream—a house, a car, and a sense of ownership that had eluded her in other cities. Cultural and historic analyses follow from Brian Greenspun, editor and president of the Las Vegas Sun newspaper, and Dave Hickey, professor of art at the University of Las Vegas, among others.

The legalization of gambling in 1931 solidified the reputation of Nevada as a rogue state. Ives presents an extensive discussion of organized crime and effectice-ly articulates mobster Bugsy Siegel’s urban vision. His relocation from California to Nevada by syndicate boss Meyer Lansky led to birth of the landmark Flamingo Hotel, designed by architect Richard R. Stadelman, that opened in 1946. Siegel built the Flamingo on land where the modest El Cortez Hotel once stood, beyond the existing city limits and the coffers of tax collectors. After Siegel’s demise at the hands of his former colleagues, the Flamingo, now run by the syndicate, established itself as the first urban Miami Beach–themed casino, offering a new air-cooling system that effectively shielded guests from the summer heat. It quickly became a favorite hotspot for the Hollywood crowd, in stark iconographic contrast to the cowboy-themed hotels of the past.

By the end of the 1950s, in order to compete with neighboring casino developments, the strip became a swath of neon signs seeking to outdo each other. By the mid-1960s, Las Vegas was defined as two cities: “Glitter Gulch,” also known as Fremont Street, where the landmark Binion Casino established “no frills” wall-to-wall gambling; and Las Vegas Boulevard, the “strip” of flamboyant and increasingly excessive architecture. Once the center of the city, Fremont Street soon found itself an architectural and cultural appendage to the newer and arguably more modern strip.

After several failed attempts by the federal government beginning in the