

WHAT IS CINEMA?

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*Monsieur Hulot and Time*

More than its images, however, what gives the film its temporal density is its soundtrack. This is Tati's great discovery and, technically speaking, his most original. It has sometimes been mistakenly said that the film's soundtrack is made up of a kind of magma of sound on which snatches of sentences float, some of whose words are distinct while just as many others are nonsensical. This is nothing more than the impression of an inattentive ear. In fact, the film's soundtrack is rarely indistinct, except for the loudspeakers on the train platform—but then this gag is realistic. On the contrary, all of Tati's artfulness consists in destroying clarity with clarity. The dialogues are not at all incomprehensible; rather, they are insignificant, and their insignificance is revealed by this very clarity. Tati achieves this by deforming the intensity of the various levels of sound, sometimes going so far as to maintain the sound of an off-screen action over a scene shot silent. For the most part, his sound decor is made up of realistic elements: bits of conversations, cries, various kinds of remarks. None, however, is strictly located in a dramatic situation. In relation to this background noise, sudden noises take on an entirely false prominence. The evening scene at the hotel, for example, when the guests are engaged in reading, talking or playing cards, has Hulot playing ping-pong. The exaggerated sound of

his celluloid ball breaks the near-silence like a billiard ball. With each volley, we think we can hear it louder than before.

The film is built around authentic sounds, actually recorded at a seaside resort, onto which are superimposed artificial but no less precise sounds. These, however, are constantly out of phase with the action. The combination of this realism and these deformations is what produces the irrefutable inanity of this all-too-human world's sounds. Never has the physical aspect of speaking, its anatomy, been so mercilessly explored. Accustomed as we are to conferring meaning on speech even when it has none, we don't employ the same ironic distance towards it that we do with images. Here, words gambol about completely naked, with grotesque indecency, stripped of the social complicity which clothes them with an illusory dignity.