

Lorenz Engell

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Ontogenetic machinery

Lorenz Engell

Media, as considered by media philosophy, are not what you expect them to be. In the first place, they have almost nothing to do with information, or transmission, or communication, or storage. They do not as such produce sense or distribute meanings. If they do so, it is as a side effect or a secondary function. In the first place, media are complex assemblies of material objects, and operations, and handlings, mostly technical apparatuses and gestures, but not exclusively. But not only do media base themselves on, or integrate, physical or biological matter in operations and actions. The sociology of the so-called ‘actor-network’ as developed by Bruno Latour, John Law, Michel Callon and others states that the inverse is as true: any physical practice, any relation to objects, and any making and producing of things is dependent on mediating processes, such as reference, or transformation, or translation. Since reference and translation are in their turn based on material media, we might say that *through media things cooperate in the production and reproduction of things*. Specific media then could be seen as specific sets of material operations by which the things involved in one medium produce things, reflect and represent things, and reproduce themselves as material collectives. Hence, media function as operators by which the material world which surrounds us is generated in the first place. Media are ontogenetic machines. To put it simply, they are operative things that produce and assemble and reproduce things, including themselves.

And what is most surprising about media, and what distinguishes them from pure tools, is that they themselves know all of this. This is what makes a medium a medium, and not only a technical device. So, if you want to find out what media are, or what they want, or what they in fact do, just ask them. They bear the answers. With the help of one tiny, most modest example, I would like to demonstrate this.

In his 1967 film *Playtime*, French genius film-maker Jacques Tati reaches for a further development of his cinematic reflection on the material world, which he had begun with his first film. In his previous comedies, Tati had already advanced a critique of things as

counterparts and instruments of human action and a critique of objects as submitted to designation, to sense and to meaning. Now, in *Playtime*, he pushes forward to a more general critique of materiality as such. And, moreover, he investigates the assembly of objects and operations that a medium is: in his case, film. By doing this, he gives us some very useful hints at what media are as ontogenetic machines.

Seats

Everything starts very simply. After some *Hin und Her*, Monsieur Hulot is led to a waiting room. Here he discovers the seats. Their upholstery can be transformed, as if made of a soft modelling material: they keep the mark of an impact for a little while and then very slowly get back to their former, regular shape and volume. Doing so, they produce softer or louder sounds; they breathe, hiss, sob, sigh and plop. Their seemingly autonomous regaining of the original shape bears the character of the delayed reaction with which we are familiar from slapstick movies, from Laurel and Hardy films, for instance. This leads us back to the tradition of the ‘will of things’ in the moving image. Monsieur Hulot’s being surprised corresponds to the more or less sudden appearance of the seat acting as if on its own accord. As solid and defined objects, and even instrumental devices, the seats nonetheless have dynamic and plastic qualities. Doubtless, the seats are residing in space and resistant to time. At the same time, they are more or less formless matter, prepared to being shaped and to bear marks, physical media. As objects, they are functional parts of the system, related to the world according to necessities and affordances. As media, they bear and offer an indefinite number of possible alternative forms and statuses they can themselves produce. They constantly oscillate between these two poles, and Hulot is fascinated by watching this movement.

Another example of Tati’s oscillating conception of things is the sound design. In classical Hollywood, sound as the language of things is clearly contrasted to human language. In *Playtime*, the contrast is wiped out. There is a fluent, continuous transformation from



the background humming of the building itself, via the more distinct traffic noise, via people mumbling, muttering and babbling, to overlapping fragments of verbal utterances in different languages. Moreover, it seems that some sounds are far more clearly defined, sharper and easier to grasp than all spoken language. So sound and language change place, the latter appearing less as defined form and more as a source of sound material, the former as clearly articulated. Together, again, they figure somewhere between mere raw material, on the one hand, and a well-defined acoustic object, on the other.

Next, we must mention the glass window. The window pane in *Tati* is marked by two boundaries. The first one separates (or bridges) the instrumental device and the object of perception. For any physical action, the pane is a solid and impenetrable counterpart, an object which cannot be transcended. The hand does not go through, for instance to pass a match to the smoker. For perception, though, at least for the gaze, the pane is not an object, but completely permeable and as such non-existent. It is not an object of perception. Nonetheless it is once again an instrument of perception. It makes something invisible visible – namely the outside. And here, the second boundary is articulated. It separates the view through the pane from the reflection on its surface, the mirror function. Assuming the mirror function, the window makes an object visible

at some place where it is not. The object seen in the mirror visually – and virtually – changes place.

Tati arranges the two windows in the office building in such a way that the two men, Hulot and the clerk, can see each other as an object of perception in one place and at the same time as an object of reflection in another. On top of this, each man watches the other watching him, and tries to attract his attention by making gestures. Thus it is no longer clear who sees whom, and where in space. Each is the effect of the double presence of the other, which itself is an effect of the transparent pane at the same time serving as a reflecting mirror. Two visual spaces, or topologies, as John Law puts it, interfere and generate objects of vision. This comic interplay, with all its inner relations and effects, is made visible not for the characters but for us, with the help of the moving image. So, after the transparent pane and the reflecting mirror, there is a third object, which is the moving image itself, the film.

Being an instrument of perception and reflection, as well as their object and their material cause, the moving image is presented here as the main object of the whole sequence. The construction of pane and mirror could be read as an allegory of the cinematic situation. The clerk and Hulot cannot interact physically, but only look, such as we can only look at them without being able to reach them. This has been studied at length by theories of cinema. But here we



have not only to deal with allegory and significance, but with physical presence and operation. As object of physical involvement, the moving image is integrated in this sequence through geometry of space. The camera does not stay outside the space made visible by the camera itself, but takes a precise place within this space. The camera, too, although invisible, is mirrored; to be more exact, it assigns a place to itself and hence to our imaginary viewpoint. Doing so, the camera articulates itself as a three-dimensional object in a three-dimensional space of the action it depicts. The image itself is present as condition for the presence of the objects to be seen in the image.

So, to summarize, Tati points at the thingness of things: first, at their tactile quality, in the upholstery sequence; second, at their acoustic quality in the relation of sound and speech; and, finally, in their visual givenness by playing with the window pane and its complicated spatial structure. He explores the relation of these three, especially the relation of the visible and the audible. In this very difference of sight, light and sound, Tati finds the difference of space and time, and he defines the overlapping of both differences as what makes film possible.

Let us examine another shot. Hulot, waiting in the corner, can only hear, not see, the clerk coming closer, in contrast to us and the camera. The perspective shortens the depth of the image space, so the clerk seems almost to stay in his place while walking. His steps, audible and easily visible by his arm gesture, give a precise time measurement. But measured time here does not fit the action, with the effect that the clerk seems to approach and not to approach at the same time. For a certain amount of time, he seems not to be able to leave his place in space, and time seems not to be able to leave him. Our gaze is paralleled

within the picture by the gaze of the concierge. Hulot's not being able to see is the source of the comic effect, when he is getting more and more impatient and standing up a couple of times because he thinks the clerk is arriving.

So, in this sequence, the object constituted is the constitution of the object. The constitution of the object – the approaching clerk – owes itself to the non-homogeneity, to the difference and even disturbance between different modes of constitution, the visual, the acoustic, time and space. They overlap and interact here, but stay incongruent;

and the effect of this incongruity is... the approaching clerk. So, since cinema can easily be defined as a specific form of organization of these four physical media – sound, light, time and space – the object here is a mediatic effect. For theorist John Law, objects appear at intersections and interferences of different topologies. In Tati, not only different topologies, but different media such as space and time, light and sound, intersect and interfere to make things possible.

With Tati, and extending Law, we can get an idea of how complicated this process can be. To create an object, we need not only one medium, but two or more media, which interfere with each other. In the course of such an interference, two or more ways of organizing matter – in space and time, in vision and sound – get into conflict. What we call a 'thing' or an 'object' derives, according to Tati, from such a conflict. And we shall never forget that Tati, the film-maker and author, is of course no one else but Monsieur Hulot himself, the very effect created by this interplay of media. Cinema, again according to Tati, is nothing else but a special place, where the crossing and intersecting of different media are systematically organized, and observed and explored as if it were a laboratory. The emergence and appearance of things – and of authors – on film could be seen as by-product or side effect of these experiments. As a medium, film is a continuous processing and experimenting with the intersection and mutual disturbances of light, sound, time and space. Media other than film may, and will, operate differently, but, following Tati's approach, the hypothesis goes that what we call media in general are nothing less than a complex reified operator which creates and generates what we might look upon as perceptible or physically given reality.