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Mette HJORT

*Lingnan University, Hong Kong*

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## What's so funny? Reflections on jokes and short films

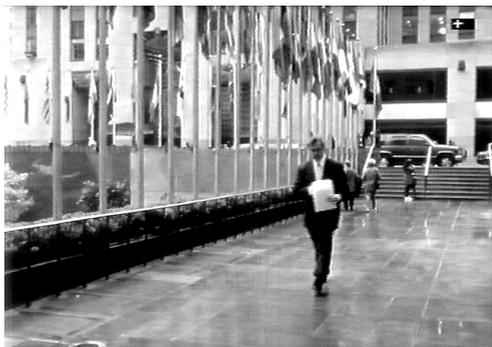
Mette Hjort

The short film is in many ways the neglected stepchild of cinema studies. And yet, much like the figure in the fairy tales, this type of film-making does, in fact, warrant critical attention. Indeed, a careful scrutiny of selected short films can contribute usefully to ongoing research programs having to do with the cognition and aesthetic appreciation of cinematic images. The annual Short Film Symposium held at Aarhus University and organized by Richard Raskin has helped in recent years to bring this kind of film into focus. At the same time articles in *p.o.v.* by, among others, Johannes Riis (1998), Bevin Yeatman (1998), and Richard Raskin (1998) have identified a number of key questions having to do with how the constraints characteristic of short-film production provide the conditions for creative practices that are guided, ideally, by certain narrative parameters.

I would like here to continue this promising line of work by looking briefly, not at a *type* of film-making – the short – but at a *genre* within that general type – the comic short film. Many short-film directors interested in prompting laughter gravitate toward forms of narration that bring to mind the organizing principles of verbal jokes. On closer reflection this is anything but surprising, for in jokes, much as in shorts, the act of telling typically unfolds within a highly restricted temporal framework. As a result the successful

joke teller tends to pursue the goal of laughter with a single-minded intent that is quite different, for example, from the multiple intentions that might guide the comic novelist. The latter, after all, has *time* to foster a far more differentiated set of cognitive and affective responses. Indeed, a more generous temporal framework for narration seems to dictate a variety of communicative intentions, otherwise the result would in all likelihood be overwhelmingly monotonous. Jokes, then, be they narratives or riddles, are highly streamlined, efficient instances of verbal communication. And this narrative economy, I want to argue, appeals naturally to directors interested in contributing to the genre of the comic short film.

The film I would like to explore in this context is *New York Encounter* (1998), directed by the French film-maker, Claude Saint Antoine (b. 1970). This two-and-a-half minute short begins with a series of brief establishing shots of New York street and subway life, edited in such a way as to suggest a generalized sense of frenzy. Two medium-long shots subsequently introduce us to the film's protagonists. The woman, Helen (Sarah Winkler), furiously studies her agenda while walking rapidly toward a flight of stairs. The man, Steve (Gordon Elliott), frenetically tears open an envelope while inadvertently pursuing a collision course with Helen. The two



collide, and Steve's response, after a quick apology, is to introduce himself as an eminently desirable partner: "Sorry. Hello. My name is Steve. I am a lawyer. I live on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue at Central Park. I earn 250,000 dollars a year." Helen is in no way taken aback by the nature of the introduction and responds as follows: "Nice to meet you. Helen. I'm a fashion designer. And I guess the windows of my apartment face yours from the West side of Central Park at a distance of approximately one mile. I earn 100,000 dollars a year." Steve goes on to pose a direct question about Helen's marital status. Having determined that she is neither married nor divorced and has no children, Steve requests to see her again soon. Helen proves willing, but the packed schedules of these two professionals quickly become a serious obstacle:

Helen: I'm sorry. But I've not a single hour available within the next two weeks.

Steve: That puts us into May. And I've got a trial, a big one, that starts and should go about 45 days. That takes us into July. What about July?

Helen: I'm sorry. I don't have a single day available the entire summer either. Let's see. Listen. What do you think about the 15<sup>th</sup> of September for a quick lunch?

Steve: Perfect. You got me.

After a brief pause for reflection, Steve utters another pointed question, thereby initiating further hectic attempts to coordinate schedules and desires:

Steve: Since it seems that we're not going to see each other until September 15<sup>th</sup>, six months from now, would it be in any way inconvenient if I kissed you today instead of waiting until then?

Helen: Not at all.

Helen: Listen. I just remember. I might have an occasion in July.

Steve: No.

Helen: No?

Steve: No. I mean yes. I mean I realize I could have a day off toward the end of trial.

Helen: I am still available for lunch a week from Friday.

Steve: What about Tuesday?

Helen: What are doing right now?

Steve: What do you mean 'right now'?

The film's final image is of Steve's puzzled face as he ponders the implications of Helen's suggestion that the present moment might be free of work-related obligations. The dialogue, acting style, and camera angles combine to make Helen and Steve the object of gentle mockery and encourage the viewer to laugh at the workaholic attitudes that define the self-understandings of these two New Yorkers. Helen and Steve are presented throughout as members of an alien tribe and their laughable foibles become apparent through the mobilization of background beliefs capable of generating broadly cross-cultural comparisons.

*New York Encounter*, I contend, is, and is meant to be, funny. The question, then, is what makes this short film humorous. In order to respond to this question I propose to make use of Noël Carroll's (1991) insightful account of jokes. Carroll's starting assumption in "On Jokes" is that jokes have "underlying structural principles" (285) that set them apart from other forms of verbally mediated humor. His analysis focuses on verbal riddles and narratives that conclude with punch lines, although he does mention briefly the sight gags that might appear at first blush to be the visual correlates of jokes. Carroll's references to Buster Keaton are, however, meant only to contest the idea that jokes and sight gags share defining features. As a result, the interesting concept of visual and audio-visual jokes is left entirely unexplored. That joking behavior may include audio-visual expression is, I believe, amply illustrated, not

only by Saint Antoine's *New York Encounter* but by many other shorts, such as Ariel Gordon's *Goodbye Mom* (Mexico, 1997), which figured centrally in an earlier issue of this journal (March 1999). The task, then, is to understand, among other things, what verbal and audio-visual jokes have in common and how they diverge as a result, perhaps, of media-related properties. In the present context my aim is merely to point, very generally, in the direction of some possible responses to these kinds of questions.

What, then, according to Carroll are the salient features of jokes? His claim is that,

*x* is a joke if and only if (1) *x* is integrally structured, verbal discourse, generally of the form of a riddle or a narrative (often a fantastical narrative), (2) concluding with a punch line, whose *abruptly* puzzling nature, (3) elicits, usually quite quickly, a determinate interpretation (or determinate range of interpretations) from listeners, (4) which interpretation solves the puzzle and fits the prominent features of the riddle or narrative, but (5) involves the attribution of at least one gross error, but possibly more, to the characters and/or implied tellers of the riddle or narrative, and/or involves the assumption of at least one such error by the implied or actual listener, (6) which error is supposed to be recognized by the listener as an error (293).

On the whole, the emphasis here on determinate meanings and uptake within a broadly conversational model seems quite promising. Unlike many other forms of communicative expression in the spheres of art or play, the very concept of a joke is predicated on the idea of the listener grasping a precise solution to a given conundrum. Jokes imply the possibility of "getting it," that is, understanding how a particular utterance solves some puzzle. As Carroll points out, it is possible to "get" a joke without finding it particularly funny. "Getting it," then, presupposes comprehension,

but not necessarily appreciation. Ideally, however, jokes elicit both comprehension and appreciation.

Although Carroll's general approach seems correct, some of the points specified above generate an overly restrictive definition of jokes. The first claim is that jokes necessarily are a matter only of "integrally structured, verbal discourse." And the very point of discussing *New York Encounter* in the present context is, of course, to suggest that we would do well to think of jokes as finding audio-visual as well as verbal expression. The second clause specifies not only that jokes conclude with punch lines, but that these punch lines themselves are puzzles to be solved by identifying fairly quickly some determinate answer. Yet, is it really the case that *all* punch lines are puzzling in the specified sense? It seems, rather, that jokes divide into at least two categories, one of which includes jokes that satisfy the second clause in Carroll's definition, the other jokes ending with punch lines that, rather than generating new puzzles, merely provide immediately graspable solutions to the conundra initially posed by the riddles or narratives in question. An example of a joke belonging to the first category would be the following:

Question: What do you get when you cross a penis with a potato?  
Answer: A dicktater.

'Dicktater,' which when pronounced is indistinguishable from 'dictator,' is a puzzling punch line inasmuch as it makes sense only once the listener remembers that 'dick' is slang for penis and 'tater' for potato. The punch line serves a quite different function,

however, in the following example, which is said to have been one of Ronald Reagan's favorite jokes.

A man's car breaks down in the vicinity of a farm where he seeks help. Upon arrival he notices a pig with a wooden leg in the yard and queries the farmer about this unusual animal. The farmer responds: "Oh, that's an amazing pig. There was a fire in the barn one evening and the pig found its way into the house and up the stairs, so that it could wake us up. I swear that pig saved our lives. It's an amazing pig." The visitor, still puzzled, asks: "But what about the wooden leg?" To which the farmer responds: "Hell, you can't eat a pig like that all at once."

In this case the puzzle has to do, not with the punch line, but with the existence of a pig with a wooden leg. The punch line merely gives the listener access to a set of unusual, but immediately comprehensible, attitudes and beliefs that make sense of the animal's condition.

What the above examples suggest is that Carroll is wrong to claim that the two components identified by rival accounts of jokes can be fused in a single model:

A joke, on my view, is a two-stage structure, involving a puzzle and its solution. One advantage of the two-stage model is that it can dissolve the apparent debate between what are called surprise theorists (Hobbes, Hartley, Gerard, Kant) – who maintain that laughter is a function of suddenness or unexpectedness--and configurational theorists (Quintilian, Hegel, Maier) – who see humor as a function of things "falling into place." On the two-stage account, each camp has identified an essential ingredient of the joke: sudden puzzlement, on the one hand, versus a reconfiguring interpretation, on the other. The mistake each camp makes is to regard its ingredient as *the* (one and only) essential feature. The two-stage model incorporates both of their insights into a more encompassing theory (288).

That there may be a problem with Carroll's two-stage model, which presupposes punch lines that themselves are puzzling, is suggested by the phrasing of point (3). The puzzling nature of the punch line,

we are told, “elicits, *usually quite quickly* [emphasis added], a determinate interpretation (or determinate range of interpretations) from listeners” (293). In the case of the penis-and-potato joke, the response generates surprise and, if not bewilderment, then at least an amused acknowledgment of the fact that the punch line is designed to be puzzling. In the case of the wooden-legged pig joke, on the other hand, the determinate interpretation provided by the punch line is a matter of understanding how insight into the farmer’s attitudes and world view “reconfigures”– to use the terminology associated with Quintilian, Hegel, and Maier – the significance of the situation initially described. It seems, then, that the elements of surprise and reconfiguration are best thought of, not as defining features of rival accounts, nor as central elements in an all-encompassing model, but as traits that define the distinctiveness of two categories of jokes. It is my suspicion, although I cannot argue the point here, that audio-visually mediated jokes typically involve punch lines that reconfigure rather than puzzle.

At this point it is time to determine whether, or to what extent, *New York Encounter* draws on the basic structural principles of jokes. It is helpful in this respect to begin by examining some of our most basic classificatory intuitions about the narrative in question. The story told in *New York Encounter*, I want to contend, resembles jokes targeting ethnic, regional or professional groups and appeals to our expectations about how such narratives or riddles work. *New York Encounter* makes sense as a narrative designed to provoke laughter precisely because of the viewer’s familiarity, for example,

with jokes about lawyers, doctors, Belgians, and other target groups. Indeed, the viewer quickly understands that *New York Encounter* gently mocks the mores of a particular social group that is defined by profession and location, namely, upwardly mobile, New York workaholics.

The story told in *New York Encounter* does not, of course, unfold in the manner of classic jokes targeting ethnic or social groups, for we are not dealing here with an instance of face-to-face communication involving the possibility of a direct question and response, as is the case in riddles. Nor are we dealing with a medium that can readily accommodate the kinds of narrators that are presupposed by verbal narrative jokes and figure centrally in short stories or novels. Questions having to do with whether cinematic narration presupposes narrators in much the way that narration in the novel and related genres does have been the object of intense debate in recent times (Wilson 1986, 1997; Levinson 1996) and cannot be seriously explored here. Suffice it to say that the absence of a straightforward riddle or narrative structure involving a clear-cut punch line does not in and of itself disqualify *New York Encounter* from inclusion in the category of jokes. Instead, I would want to suggest, the relevant absence points to some of those features of cinematic narration that have a direct bearing on the specific nature of audio-visual jokes. At the same time, it is important to note that the viewer senses throughout that a gifted comedian would have no trouble paraphrasing the story told in *New York Encounter* in ways that make use of the classic riddle form ("How do you know when a New York workaholic is experiencing love at first sight?")

Or, "What's the difference between a hooker and a New York workaholic?" and so on).

*New York Encounter* does not conclude with a punch line, but instead encourages certain determinate inferences and interpretations by means of a series of punch-line-like utterances: Steve's "Since it seems that we're not going to see each other until September 15<sup>th</sup>, six months from now, would it be in any way inconvenient if I kissed you today instead of waiting until then?"; Helen's "What are you doing right now?"; and Steve's "What do you mean 'right now'?" Helen and Steve are, of course, amusing from the outset on account of their urgency and self-seriousness, but these three utterances play a special role within the unfolding story. In *New York Encounter*, then, distributed humor is punctuated at key moments by questions that resemble punch lines inasmuch as they prompt interpretive reconfiguration. Up until the moment when Steve asks for a kiss, the exchange has ostensibly been governed by a desire simply to meet again and by obstacles engendered by the packed schedules that both produce and are a sign of professional success. Steve's question is a turning point, for whereas earlier remarks outlined a distant temporal horizon, the final part of the exchange emphasizes a radical shrinking of time. Having previously contemplated the prospect of some luncheon at an absurdly distant time in the future, the viewer is made privy in a subsequent moment to talk that ultimately identifies the punctual *now* as the most desirable time for a *future* encounter. The three questions shed a sudden, reconfiguring light on the workaholic's inner space. What is being pursued, it turns out, is not simply an

exploratory meeting, but the positive conclusion to such a meeting. So eager is Steve for this positive conclusion that he is willing to skip all the traditional exploratory moments. And Helen, it turns out, not only shares Steve's desires but his unusual way of thinking. Beneath the workaholic's smooth and monied exterior, we discover personal desperation. And this desperation, the viewer is encouraged smugly to reason, is self-inflicted by the workaholic's questionable values and priorities.

The punch-line-like utterances have the effect of allowing the viewer to identify the gross errors that govern the workaholic's thinking. This is crucial, for in Carroll's mind, jokes involve either the attribution of at least one "gross error" (293) to the narrative's characters and/or the "assumption" (293) of such an error by the listener (and by extension, viewer). Helen and Steve, the viewer notes, err in multiple ways: their values are confused; they systematically conflate distinct spheres of human interaction, engage in self-deception, and commit basic errors in logic. The workaholic's blind and personally debilitating commitment to work leads, it would appear, to an inability to recognize that the kind of means-end rationality that is appropriate within contexts of work and exchange cannot provide adequate guidance within other spheres. Here we have a vivid illustration of what Jürgen Habermas has called the "colonization" of life-worlds by systems involving abstract steering mechanisms. The workaholic, it is clear, has lost sight of the fact that, at least within modern, western contexts committed to notions of romantic love, the choice of a life partner is not meant to be determined primarily by profession, address, and

income. The workaholic's willingness to allow the norms of work to become all-encompassing has the effect of undermining all significant differences between romantic courtship behavior and any crass pick-up subjected to the laws of exchange. The workaholic emerges as a creature of self-deception whose self-understandings privilege money and success at the expense of a series of more basic desires that fail to receive appropriate attention. The extent to which the workaholic's thinking is impaired is deliciously underscored by the temporal confusions that equate 'soon' with the 'distant future' and finally with the 'punctual now.'

*New York Encounter*, it seems, explicitly *thematizes* what Carroll considers to be one of the central traits of jokes and their uptake: the conflict between "optimality" and "rationality" (292). Carroll's point is that the listener is encouraged to resolve the punch line's puzzle by producing an interpretation that is optimal in its ability to make sense of the joke's various elements but in some way opposes rationality. Interestingly, in *New York Encounter* this tension between optimizing behavior and rationality is explicitly explored at the level of the narrative's theme. After all, the upwardly mobile workaholic is the very incarnation of the self-centered optimizer. And yet, as the couple's laughable antics make clear, optimizing under the wrong circumstances leads only to the most absurd of results.

*New York Encounter*, I have been arguing, suggests that joking behavior may find audio-visual as well as purely verbal expression. In my mind Carroll's definition of verbal jokes provides a useful starting point for reflections on the nature of the audio-visual jokes

that figure centrally in many comic short films. At the same time, his account requires modification, for there are key differences, it turns out, between verbal and audio-visual jokes; and some of these differences are best explained in terms of the specific possibilities and limitations, or standard utilizations, of the media in question. The aim here has not been to provide the required revisions, but to gesture toward some of the interesting issues that might repay extensive, in-depth analysis at some future point.

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