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The Specifics of Editing Comedy

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<div align="center">The Specifics of Editing Comedy</div>

Editing comedy is challenging. Unlike other genres, which can be viewed in different contexts, eliciting different emotions, comedies have one clear goal: be funny. Laughter should flow naturally while watching a comedy, but the success of getting a laugh relies heavily on the editor's diverse and challenging tactics. Comedy falls under many categories, but commonalities exist for how an editor can best approach any project. Over the course of this last semester, I explored how an editor, given comedic material, can present it to create the largest laughs possible, specifically for comedy films. I have heard lectures on the subject, read books and articles, held seven meetings with my mentor Beth Dewey, and conducted interviews with both a comedian and a big-time comedy editor. Also, my mentor assigned independent projects, which lend insights into the dos and donts of the creative post-process. The discovery: editing can make or break a comedy. My paper presents and examines the three topics any comedy editor must understand: what defines comedy, the central importance of pacing, and how applying a variety of film theories and techniques can elicit laughter.

At the core of any successful comedy editing is telling a good story within that genre. That involves understanding comedy's principles, and what characteristics make it successful. In *The Hidden Tools of Comedy,* renowned comedy writer Steve Kaplan defines comedy as "the art of telling the truth about what it is like to be human" (14). The story of comedy is "an ordinary guy or gal struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required skills and tools with which to win yet never giving up hope" (27). Separating comedy from funny, he states that

"the question of what wins for the character is at the heart of getting past funny to arrive at comedy" (46). This principle applies to all characters and trying to win matters for them rather than winning. Kaplan uses *Groundhog Day* as an example, where Bill Murray's character honestly tries in many different ways to do whatever he considers winning, which at one point is simply ending his life. Comedy editors are gatekeepers of this honesty. No matter how ridiculous the situation, the laughter lies in the honest wants and behavior of a non-hero. Central to this protagonist is their lack of knowledge, for "the more he knows, the less comic he will be" (Kaplan 85). For example, Buddy, in *Elf*, is a quintessential non-hero. Hilarity ensues from the combined application of winning, honesty, and a non-hero's lack of knowledge. As Buddy wanders New York, his focused desire to connect with both his fathers and bring Christmas joy never changes. He does whatever he can to chase his goals despite a complete lack of knowledge on social cues and the modern world. These core concepts of what makes comedy work affect how an editor composes a scene. Choose shots that keep the character consistent and honest, developing time for character relationships. Show moments where they try to win, not simply "funny" moments. Focus on emphasizing the character's lack of skills or knowledge. When looking for an editor, comedian Melinda Hill wants someone "who understands the vision and doesn't assert their agenda but at the same time can contribute great ideas to make the piece stronger and flow better" (Interview 1). Like the writer, the editor is responsible for the story. According to Kaplan, a joke must accomplish four things: "Further the action, define character, deliver a unique view of the world, be compressed" (23). How an editor creates a scene controls how and if they accomplish these goals. Without at least a grasp of what drives comedy at the story level, one will fail.

Understanding what is at the heart of comedy is needed, but editors also require the skill of pacing or developing rhythm. There are universal concepts, such as making "allowances for

the length of the audience's laughter reaction", but it is simultaneously "better to have too many jokes than too few" (Reisz). Packing weaker jokes closer together can condition the audience for laughter. In her book on film rhythm, film scholar Karen Pearlman asserts, "The function of rhythm in film is to create cycles of tension and release". This concept applies to editing jokes. If there is a witty dialogue between characters, perhaps an editor should eliminate space between lines and cut quickly between them to build energy. In "Nacho Libre", there is a scene where Nacho and Senor Ramon clash verbally over the quality of the food. Without J or L cuts, the editor switches between them as they talk with POV shots from each character, building an uneasy tension until the release of the joke, "Do you not realize I have had diarrhea since Easters?" (Nacho). In a complete breakdown of this scene, I also noted that pacing occurs through music, releasing viewers from the tension as it swells in volume and pacing when Nacho slams his pot down and runs off (Nacho Libre Scene). Pacing for an editor is thus necessary for both the development of audio and visuals.

The type of comedy edited also affects pacing. In a character or physical comedy like *Nacho Libre,* the editor should highlight the actors' vocal and physical performances. In *Spy,* pacing revolves around fast-cuts to align with the physically fast-paced action scene. The editor chooses shots that often show both Melissa McCarthy's character in the front of the plane and action through the doorway behind her to let the audience see two comedic performances at one time. The pacing and comedic success of this scene relies on the repetition of jokes, distributing them fairly evenly amongst shots. The cuts in-between build tension, with the joke as the release, and warn the audience before subsequent incidences that the moment is about to happen again (Spy Scene). Repeating jokes does not always work but done successfully, the audience laughs more each time because the joke is funny and because they know that joke is about to happen again. One of the repeated moments is when Byrne's character is crushed by two dead men. Each

time the plane falls, they all float, and when McCarthy's character levels it out, they thump back down. Pearlman emphasizes "the power of rhythm over information". In comedy, how an editor paces physical movement can convey just as much hilarity as the movement itself. Others refer to this more physically focused comedy as "visual comedy", and one scholar notes, "there is, after all, only a very limited number of visual jokes… only through shooting and editing the scene accordingly, does a slapstick situation become really effective" (Reisz). There is no simplistic rule for how a comedy editor should develop pacing. Ultimately, it comes down to the type of comedy, the editor's creativity, and what elements such as physical motion or music best highlight the non-hero's want and attempts to win.

Besides pacing, there are additional techniques and concepts editors can use to draw out more laughs. For instance, Pearlman describes displaying physical comedy as manipulation of "kinesthetic empathy". The idea is that audiences react to what a character goes through, so speeding up occurrences of physical pain for characters makes it seem like they do not feel the event as "bodies on-screen slip through time with very little contact, too little to have an impact" (Pearlman). An example is in the Spy scene, where the shots in which Frederick slams the non-hero into the floor are only a few frames long, demonstrating that one can convey speed through the shot length. Except for instances of extreme perceived pain, editors often attempt to "inspire the gravest and funniest kinesthetic empathy", placing the spectator in the character's action, almost feeling them (Pearlman). Her example is from *Broadcast News,* where a young reporter dramatically dodges a filing cabinet to get a tape to air in 15 seconds. Here, Pearlman explains the empathetic phenomenon as, "although it feels as though it is happening to us, it isn't; it is happening to her and is therefore madly funny". Besides affecting laughter, fast motion when showing pain affects a comedy's morality, suggesting audiences are laughing at movement's exaggeration, rather than at a character's pain. The use of speed can create laughs, but so can

discarding continuity. Instead of smooth action, cuts must "each make a separate humorous point in that each shows a new — and funnier — aspect of the same situation." (Reisz). Historically, the overuse of particular transitions in comedy makes them now suggestively avoidable. These include the fade, the iris, and the wipe (Frierson). However, comedies can successfully incorporate these elements if the point is to poke fun at them, such as in *Wayne's World*, when in the final scene, Wayne remarks that they will have to sit and wait for a fade out. Frierson notes of this example how it "is part of a tradition that uses fades, irises, etc. in classic Hollywood comedy." Similarly, the movie *Thicker than Water* mocks the wipe by having a character physically drag one across the screen.

Both examples are also demos of breaking the fourth wall, which "has been a staple of comic performance since 5th century B.C. Athens and is emblematic of the permission comic characters enjoy in comedy" (Kaplan 50). Modern comedies like the two Deadpool films have taken this trope to new heights. One cinematic technique, which both the camera and those in the editing suite can do, is the zoom. Unlike other, more retired comedy traditions, this one lives on and is uniquely common within comedy film and television. Zooms can quickly push in on a facial reaction, a movement, or an object of importance. Zoom outs can also suddenly reveal a character's larger predicament within an environment. In comedy, they can take the place of a cut to an insert, extreme close-up, or extreme wide, instead simply zooming in or out, and often, the reverse within the same shot. Typically, the faster the zoom, the more comedic it is. Although just because zooms are associated currently with comedy, they are not a saving grace. What an editor zooms in on better be comedic by itself, with the zoom only emphasizing what is funny. The "permission" granted within comedy to characters is also granted to editors. They can take risks, address the audience through editing, and highlight the weirdness of characters. It is OK and recommended that things get weird.

Even understanding comedy and trying techniques discussed above, editors still hit roadblocks, where things are simply not funny. When this happens, Hollywood comedy editor Jamie Gross says that she returns first to her three basics: music, jump cuts, and intercuts (Interview 2). Intercuts are especially important in comedy, not just between scenes, but editing back and forth between characters within a scene. Intercuts between characters tie directly with Kaplan's concept of Straight Line/Wavy Line, which is "the idea that comedy isn't us watching somebody do something funny, but rather us watching someone watch someone do something funny" (172). The straight-line character is the one creating and likely unaware of the problem and the wavy line is having to observe and deal with that problem. Each role must "shift from character to character as they take center stage in the emotional story." (Kaplan 188). For editors, this concept means that while shots can switch quickly between characters for comedic effect, the emotional focus should be always on a single character, with one person or scene reacting to the other. If focusing emotionally on someone else, there must be not only comedic motivation but story motivation. A great demonstration of Straight Line/Wavy Line is from *Land of the Lost,* in the wasteland chase scene when the scientist played by Will Ferrell is chased by two T-Rex. He desperately yells out different recommendations (none of them working for himself) on how his friends can evade the creatures, while they calmly watch from afar. The intercuts are between Will and the friends, each observing his misery and sometimes yelling at him to mock him. In one sequence, they react to his apparent death, only to spot him sprinting off in the distance. These observers provided through intercuts are needed for the comedic effect, serving as the audience's perspective while also delivering their lines to emphasize Will's predicament. At a minimum, they give the protagonist someone to yell laugh-inducing lines towards. A large portion of the comedy originates from watching them watch Will.

Every editor will have their tricks, but Jamie's go tos reemphasize how editors can bring

in elements like music and use their cutting to take material from funny to hilarious. If an editor

does have time, however, some other scene-solving suggestions are to experiment with "shot

lengths, expressions, and reactions", "create versions of scenes, varying the position of the shot",

and trying different combinations of visual versus verbal action and reaction (Morante). Editing

different versions of the same scene is usually standard within comedy, as comedy editor

Meagan Costello points out (Interview 3). She calls the process for comedy "editorial boot

camp", which takes "extreme diligence and patience and a real love of editing". Meagan has also

observed how due to the demand for cuts, "there are a minimum of two lead editors and

sometimes up to five editors cutting concurrently to keep pace" (Interview 3). A more technical

standard for comedy editing is "the mandatory inclusion of Script Sync due to the frequent

improvisation". Oftentimes, editors like Jamie and Meagan ultimately "run out of time and

cannot go any further" (Interview 2).

  Outside of all the theoretical and technical jargon of comedy, my research has reminded

me that it still is a job with a deadline, and so nothing can be perfect. One must quickly "go

inward and trust your gut" (Interview 1). Deadlines necessitate knowledge of comedy history,

types, and editing techniques, as this body of information is crucial for editing, acting as a wealth

of resources. In the end, "The freedom and curse of comedy is that a joke is so subjective"

(Interview 2). What is funny to one person will not be to someone else. Editing comedy takes

special knowledge and talent in timing, but it will never work for everyone. Since "the editor is

the film's first audience" (Pearlman), the least an editor can do is use what they know to make

themselves laugh.   By understanding the definition of comedy, pacing, and a multitude of other

editing techniques and theories, one should have a stable foundation from which to start.

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