Humour Meets Heart

Aesthetic-Driven Transformation in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the use of media aesthetics and humour theory in John Hughes's *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (1987) to illustrate how production techniques can create comedy with an emotional impact. During one of the film's pivotal scenes at the Braidwood Inn, unwilling travel companions Neil Page (Steve Martin) and Del Griffith (John Candy) clash in an argument that transforms both characters for the better. Using a mise-en-scène examination, this essay explains how Hughes's comedic scene construction skillfully executed framing, depth of field, and editing to express key humour approaches such as Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, and comedic juxtaposition. Such aesthetic practices paired with classic humour theories effectively combine in this 1980s comedy classic, its well-rounded characters made both funny and relatable through humour with heart.

Driven by its mise-en-scène, one critical scene adds emotion and humour while transforming advertiser Neil Page (Martin) and shower curtain ring salesman Del Griffith (Candy). It takes place at the Braidwood Inn, a typical interstate motel, where both characters are forced to share a room. Building to the characters' first altercation, Neil soon realizes that he must sleep in the same bed as Del. From a point of view shot, Neil's eyes dart around the room and focus on the bed, followed by a whip pan that reveals Del making the best of the situation with a smile (Fig. 1). Not only is this effective storytelling without dialogue, as sharing a bed with Del is perhaps Neil's worst nightmare, but it also leads to a potential laugh as information is presented in an unexpected way. According to Vandaele, using the element of surprise in film corresponds with a leading theory of humour, Incongruity Theory; this theory states that humour is created when events violate the perceived normalcy in media with a playful twist (221-224).

Neil then finds temporary respite in the shower, in a white bathroom in sharp contrast to the dimly lit sleeping area. As steam fills the bathroom, Neil's eyes glance up at the shower curtain rings that were likely sold by Del—another hint that both travelers may be spending more time together than desired (Fig. 2). Yes, a simple insert shot of the otherwise banal object becomes funny as Martin reacts with an incredulous smile while realizing he may never escape Del. One delayed flight has created two polar opposite roommates.

The film begins cross-cutting between the characters, cementing their differences, as Del now smokes a cigarette while enjoying the vibrating bed. However, it is at this point that the film takes a poignant turn when Del longingly gazes at his wife's picture. Though the film does not yet reveal that she is deceased, there are implications that something is awry as Del's expression conveys sadness. The aesthetics of this shot continue the melancholic implication, now from Del's perspective, creating

Fig. 1 | Neil's panicked eyes whip to a smiling Del, 00:17:57. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.
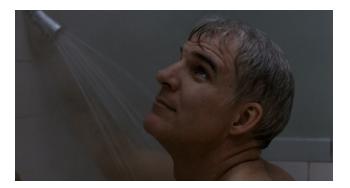

Fig. 2 | Neil spots the hotel's shower curtain rings, Del's specialty, 00:18:35. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 3 | Del gazes at his wife's picture as if heartbroken, 00:19:03. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

index vectors at the picture's edge that lead down to Del's cigarette. Smoke billows upward beside the photo, providing more clues that she may be in the afterlife above him (Fig. 3). This tender moment also serves as a contrasting joke setup to the punchline about to pay off in the bathroom.

When Neil hesitantly steps out of the shower, we see a close-up of his feet. The once-safe zone for Neil is now revealed to be a disgusting mess, the floors soaked and littered with Del's newspapers. With no spoken words, this scene displays Neil's escalating rage (Fig. 4). Cross-cutting also enables humourous juxtaposition, a comedic production technique wherein vastly different visuals or scenarios are edited back-to-back; while Del relaxes, unaware of the disarray he has caused, Neil tiptoes through filth.

The next three frames feature both characters in bed. Masterfully composing this shot to reveal humour through Z-axis depth, Hughes places Neil in the foreground with Del in the background. There is also a shallow depth of field to focus attention on Neil's disturbed reaction, as Del conducts the first of three pre-slumber rituals—reading a book lit by his lighter's flame (Fig. 5). This moment effectively establishes the start of the comedic technique known as the Rule of Three or Comic Triple—what Levine defines as a specific joke structure wherein three separate but similar elements culminate in an unexpected event (n.p.).

Del then proceeds to crack his neck as Neil grows more agitated (Fig 6). Depth of field again enhances the humour as background blur on the Z-axis can exaggerate a character's actions; by not displaying all detail and allowing viewers to fill in information, John Hughes has used media aesthetics to make Del's routine even more irritating, fitting with Zettl's suggestions for effective visual storytelling (249-253). Furthermore,

Fig. 4 | Neil's feet touch as little tile as possible to reach his towel, 00:19:52. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 5 | Neil tries to sleep while Del flicks his lighter to read, 00:21:42. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.
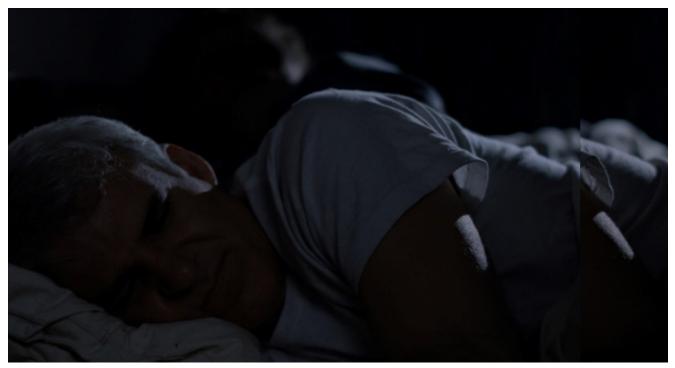

Fig. 6 | Neil still can't sleep as Del cracks his neck, 22:07. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

this neck-cracking is the reinforcing step of the Comic Triple technique, setting a pattern for the developing joke with similar aesthetics and theme.

As Neil's face contorts, the camera briefly returns to the same composition before Del performs his final ritual—aggressively clearing his sinuses. The loudest snort then becomes the third and final component of the Comic Triple, as the camera unexpectedly cuts to a close-up of Del in bed, no longer blurred by the narrow depth of field (Fig. 7). Because the angle and loudness break the pattern of Del's reading and neck cracking, the blaring snort becomes funnier as the third escalating item of the Comic Triple, fitting with McKeague's model of the Comic Triple (174-178). Creating laughter by depicting Neil's torture, Hughes has also executed another leading approach to humour, Superiority Theory—as Hobbes writes, watching

characters go through pain can create cathartic laughter opportunities for audiences (54-55).

Now at his breaking point, Neil jumps up and turns on the light. As he unleashes his litany of annoyances, a series of high-angle shots are used when displaying Del's reaction, a production technique used to convey that the subject is weak or inferior. The camera remains at Neil's eye level momentarily, conveying his anger and dominance; this scenario becomes humourous as Neil hikes up his pants as if in a lovers' quarrel, again displaying comedic juxtaposition (Fig. 8). As the attacks grow and the audience may laugh at Neil's verbal assault, reaction shots of a dejected Del are inserted. Such a shift in tone, through the mise-en-scène, forces viewers to reevaluate both characters.

In the final portion of this scene, Del shockingly stands up for himself and matches Neil's eye level. With his calming

Fig. 7 | Del forcefully snorts, making Neil snap, 00:22:27. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 8 | Having enough of Del, Neil rants, 00:23:16. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 9 | Del delivers a powerful monologue, matching Neil's candor, 00:26:08. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

blue pajamas now contrasting Neil's cold white shirt, Del holds back tears in his retort:

> You wanna hurt me? Go right ahead if it makes you feel any better. I'm an easy target ... I could be a cold-hearted cynic like you, but I don't like to hurt people's feelings ... I like me. My wife likes me. My customers like me. 'Cause I'm the real article. What you see is what you get. (00:25:49-00:26:27)

Here, the characters' relationship shifts, both cutting through their previous small talk. Del's vulnerability is now clear, bolstered by his close-up's shallow depth of field and the blur surrounding him, as compared to Neil's clear and detailed medium full shot (Fig 9). Del transforms from a jovial pest to a gentle giant with feelings, full of humanity. John Candy's acting contains no humour in

this moment; however, it serves as vital character-development, connecting to the film's crushing reveal that Del has been a widow for years.

After their heated confrontation, the two return to bed and finally get some sleep. In one last comedic kicker to the scene, morning sunshine beams inside as the camera pans across the bed. Continuing the squabbling lovers comparison, the two strangers are now revealed to be sound asleep in a spooning position (Fig 10).

Here, the Incongruity Theory of humour is used once more, as Neil embraces Del's hand and Del responds with a gentle kiss in an unexpected twist. Lonely travelers now physically interlocked, they realize their error, spring out of bed, and banter about football to deflect as patriotic, non-diegetic music plays. Not only have the characters changed, but also they are now creating humour through Superiority Theory, where

Fig. 10 | The rested travel companions wake up cuddling, 00:28:37. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

audiences can find temporary relief from the tense moments and laugh at the characters' mistake.

Though the film's tone drastically shifts during this scene, the emotion and humour continue to build until the credits roll. In an interview, John Hughes discusses striking this delicate balance in his work: "I think any good comedy has to have a variety of styles. You don't want to keep hitting the same note" ("Writing and Directing" 01:30-01:36). I suggest that Hughes and his crew succeeded with *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, creating a comedy that can make viewers cry in two ways—both from the laughter rooted in classic humour theories and also the emotional visual storytelling enhanced by the film's mise-en-scène. ▪

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