Groucho, Harpo, and Narrative Theory

Lisa Zunshine

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

In the famous “mirror scene” of the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* (1933), Pinky (Harpo), dressed and made up as Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho), pretends to be Firefly’s reflection, imitating his gestures across the frame of a missing mirror. Pinky is a foreign spy (as is Chicolini, played by Chico), sent in to

steal Freedonia's war plans. By unmasking him, Firefly, Freedonia's new leader, would protect his country's interests. Pinky, however, is uncannily good at matching Firefly's every move, including those moves that originate behind the frame of the mirror and thus ought to be impossible to match (Figures 1 and 2). So Pinky keeps foiling Firefly's plans to catch him, until Chicolini, also dressed as Firefly, rushes into the frame, and the spies' game is up. Pinky escapes, and Chicolini is put on trial.

Figure 1 · Firefly and Pinky I

Figure 2 · Firefly and Pinky II

Pinky's flawless imitation of Firefly's moves that originate beyond Pinky's field of vision seems to be a good example of what James Phelan describes in his target essay for this special issue as "probable impossibility or implausibility." In a film that does not otherwise feature any magical events, Pinky suddenly seems to possess telepathic powers. How do viewers explain to themselves this "deviation from probability"?

In his study of the Marx Brothers, Maurice Charney has observed that the mirror scene feels "like a dream sequence." Its setup "depends very much on a feeling of strangeness and separation from the realities of daily, waking life. The [brothers] move about effortlessly like sleepwalkers" (31). Whether or not it actually is a dream (Groucho's? Harpo's?), its sleepwalking quality may go some way toward explaining its bending of everyday rules.

Another (related) explanation is that the Marx Brothers movies are absurd, and audiences know it. They come to expect all kinds of nonsensical things to happen once Groucho steps and Chico and Harpo tumble onto the stage. Even those viewers of *Duck Soup* who have never heard of the Marx Brothers before presumably will have a chance to form an intuitive sense of the film's genre by the time they get to the mirror scene, and thus may know that violation of expectations is integral to their enjoyment of this scene.

Now, "absurd" does not mean "arbitrary," and there are all kinds of constraints on what violations are allowed to take place in slapstick comedies, but this is a separate topic, and I will not deal with it in this essay.¹ Instead I will suggest that explanations that evoke the film's genre (e.g., absurd, slapstick, nonsense, dreamlike bending of reality) do not fully account for the viewers' acceptance of Pinky's impossible feat of mindreading. These explanations do align with the classical model of narrative communication that Phelan takes to task in his target essay, which means that it is a good occasion to test the usefulness of the alternative model that he proposes, one grounded in the rhetorical view of narrative communication. Can the rhetorical model—one that considers interaction between *characters* an important channel of communication with viewers (readers, in Phelan's essay)—further elucidate viewers' reaction to the mirror scene?

The classical model, as Phelan explains, was proposed by Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse* (1978), and it focuses on the interactions between real/implied author, the narrator, and the real/implied reader. The applicability of the narratological categories to the study of film has been a subject of debate. Some theorists contend that these categories are

rendered meaningless by representational parameters unique to cinematic storytelling,² whereas others maintain that mediality affects “narrative in a number of important ways, but on a level of specific representations only,” and that, in general, “narrativity can be constituted in equal measure in all textual and visual media” (Fludernik, *Towards* 353). The present essay leans toward Fludernik’s view, because I believe that certain features of the Marx Brothers films (e.g., their emphasis on spoken humor, the verbal origins of many of their visual gags, and the fact that a number of these films originated on stage and were thus steeped in the conventions of that medium) make those films particularly amenable to narratological analysis.

If we now take the two complementary yet “functionally independent” channels of communication with the audience that Phelan posits in his essay—first, “the author–narrator–audience channel identified by Chatman” and, second, the “author–character–character–audience channel” that Phelan sees as neglected by Chatman’s model—we can see how both map quite well onto the mirror scene in *Duck Soup*. The information that is conveyed by the framing of each shot, its camera angle, pacing, and cultural contexts (more about that later), and so on, falls under the jurisdiction of the first channel. But the actual give-and-take between Firefly and Pinky, that is, their emotional responses to each other, and the effect of their developing interpersonal dynamics on the audience, belong to the second (and, as Phelan argues, undeservedly ignored) channel.

Along the same lines, note that when, to answer the question, “how do readers explain to themselves Pinky’s display of telepathic powers?,” we bring up the genre of the film, we are operating within the classical model. If, in addition, we attempt to answer this question by inquiring into the interactions between Firefly and Pinky, we are trying on the rhetorical model proposed by Phelan.

So, to stay with the classical model for a couple of paragraphs, we can say that our generic expectations have been fully primed, by the time we get to the mirror scene, by what we have seen so far and by our previous exposure to the phenomenon of “the Marx Brothers.” In fact, the shot that immediately precedes Firefly’s first glimpse of his “reflection” reminds us not to put too much stock in realistic representation: Pinky has just broken the mirror—we have seen the shards lying on the floor—but by the time Firefly runs up to the empty mirror frame, which must take no more than a couple of seconds, all traces of broken glass are gone and the stage is set for the comedy of doubles.

That comedy has a long theatrical pedigree. In the Marx Brothers canon, the mirror scene is usually traced back to Charlie Chaplin's *The Floorwalker* (1916)—in which Chaplin's Tramp comes across his “double” in a department store—but it actually may be two thousand years older. We encounter it first in Plautus's *Amphitryon* and then in Molière's, Dryden's, and Kleist's respective *Amphitryons*, as well as (in a somewhat different form) in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. In various “Amphitryons,” when a servant named Sosia is confronted by his exact double, who happens to be the god Mercury in disguise, he undergoes an identity crisis, struck by the possibility that if someone looks like him it *must* be him.³ As Plautus's Sosia cries out in despair, “if I'm not Sosia, who am I?”

In Plautus's play as well as in subsequent “Amphitryons,” beleaguered Sosia attempts to protect his identity by testing the “other” Sosia's access to the first Sosia's private memoirs and personal history. And, of course, since the impostor is a deity, he passes these tests with flying colors. Rufus T. Firefly can be said to do something similar by making his “reflection” mimic gestures which should be impossible to mimic. Thus to the question that I asked earlier (i.e., how do we make sense of Harpo's sudden telepathic abilities?) we can add another one: why do we find it plausible that Groucho would go through these gymnastics instead of simply reaching out and grabbing Harpo? Why is Harpo as out of bounds to Groucho as Mercury was to Sosia? Surely (except perhaps for the first couple of seconds), Firefly cannot be contemplating the possibility that he *is* seeing his reflection? Why does he need *proof* (just like Sosia did!) that the other guy is not him?

To remind you, we are still within the jurisdiction of Chatman's classical model. That is, we are still focusing primarily on the communication between the “implied author”—let us say a cumulative mind behind the moviemaking process—and the audience. This means that the answers to our questions still remain relatively straightforward: the reason that we are not jolted either by Harpo's sudden telepathy or by Groucho's need to “prove” that the other guy is not Groucho, is that we are watching a comedy with strong elements of the absurd. In addition, the scene relies on the “doubles” motif that has thrived on stage (that is, has been found compelling and convincing by theatrical audiences) for at least two thousand years. Genre and deep history—will we really benefit from digging for more explanations than those?

To find out if we will, we turn to Phelan's model and see what Pinky and Firefly have to say to each other. First of all, they do not say anything—the mirror

scene is acted out in silence—which means that we are on Harpo's, rather than Groucho's territory. Second, characters themselves do not think that they are in an absurd universe, for they intuitively expect that everyday limitations of "theory of mind" will apply to their interactions. That is, Firefly is sure that the pretend Firefly will not be able to read his mind and repeat his moves as they grow more complicated, which is why he makes them more and more complicated. Pinky understands that, too.

Finally, the relationship between the two seem to change as the scene progresses, for Firefly is forced to acknowledge that the intruder is better at this game than he is and that he thinks one move ahead of Firefly. For instance, when Firefly runs out and returns with a white hat hidden behind his back, he gleefully observes that the pretend Firefly has returned with a *black* hat hidden behind his back, but, then, when Firefly whips out his white hat and puts it on his head, expecting to nail the fake Firefly for wearing the hat of a different color, Pinky also whips out and puts on his head a white hat. It turns out that Pinky has anticipated Firefly's plan and concealed the white hat inside the black hat. Now we realize that, when Pinky was imitating Firefly's gleeful smile a moment earlier, he *knew* that Firefly was smiling because he felt triumphant about having finally outsmarted Pinky. The rapid succession of emotions that Pinky goes through next mirrors (we assume) the emotions playing out on Firefly's face: from jubilant mocking to shocked disappointment to the attempt to conceal his shocked disappointment.⁴

Ironically, Pinky now gets sloppier in his mirroring—he slows down, and he lets his hat fall off. Instead of seizing the hat as the evidence that Pinky finally failed in his imitation game, Firefly respectfully picks it up and returns it to Pinky. Pinky puts it back on his head—a moment *before* Firefly puts his own hat back on—which means that now it is Firefly who is imitating Pinky.

In other words, Firefly may have started with the intention to unmask the agent of a hostile foreign state, but their mutual mirroring has transformed the tenor of their interaction. It may still be a game, but not a cat-and-mouse one anymore. In the continuing unbroken silence of the scene, they are now playing by Harpo's rules, and Harpo, we assume, has never really been interested in the "big boy" games of politics, spying, and war.

It seems now that Firefly is on the brink of giving up his intention to catch Pinky. This is why it is important that when Chicolini, also dressed as Firefly, blunders in, Firefly grabs him right away. Chicolini has made no effort at mirroring Firefly—no effort, that is, at paying attention and inhabiting the other

person's mind—child's play, a game, an impossible act of telepathy, anything but a war. As it is, it is back to business as usual. We are now hurtling inexorably toward military confrontation between Freedonia and Sylvania in the verbal world of Groucho and Chico and their aggressive—and hilarious in their unexpected plausibility—misreadings of people's meanings and intentions.

This interpretation of the mirror scene is made possible by focusing on the characters, the focus integral to Phelan's model of rhetorical poetics of narrative. Let us revisit one of his original points as we bring our argument to a close. Phelan observes that foregrounding "scenes of character-character dialogue" can render problematic Chatman's view of the difference between story and discourse, which has been highly influential in classical narratology. Indeed, the wordless conversation between Firefly and Pinky is simultaneously an "event" (and, thus, story) and "narration by other means" (and, thus, discourse). It is discourse to the extent to which Pinky's "impossible" perfect mirroring of Firefly resists being explained away by the consideration of genre and theatrical convention. The space of possibility that momentarily opens between Firefly and Pinky rewards playfulness and attention to the other and a move away from narcissism and solipsism. For the glimpse of that space—for the "value added" (to use Phelan's term) by that vision, viewers may be willing to disregard the mirror scene's "deviation from probability."

LISA ZUNSHINE is Bush-Holbrook Professor of English at the University of Kentucky. A former Guggenheim fellow, she is author and editor of eleven books, including, most recently, *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture* (Johns Hopkins UP).

NOTES

1. For a discussion of constraints on violations of ontological expectations in nonsense narratives, see my *Strange Concepts*.
2. For a review, see Kuhn and Schmidt.
3. This identity crisis is arguably rooted in our cognitive bias for essentialist thinking and its attendant anxieties; for a discussion, see my *Strange Concepts*.
4. The moment when Firefly tries to control and conceal his disappointment represents an instance of "embodied transparency." For a discussion of this concept, see my *Getting Inside Your Head*.