
The Theories Of Humor And Laughter

There are five different theories that categorize the different reasons why find things humorous. The Relief Theory claims the cause of laughter is the release of tension caused by one's fears makes one laugh. The Superiority Theory states a sense of superiority causes one to laugh from the misfortune and shortcomings of themselves or another. The Incongruity Theory suggests that "...it is the perception of something incongruous — something that violates our mental patterns and expectations". The Benign Violation Theory claims that humor can occur through violations when three factors are present; a moral norm suggests that something is wrong but another norm suggests that it is acceptable, the violation is not in such offense to the norm, or the violation is psychologically distant that what is to happen normally. The Mechanical Theory can be defined as physical humor that occurs as a result of rigidity or inelasticity. These theories are not to be considered the only reason as to why something can be humorous, as comedy is subjective, but it takes a psychological approach to explaining why they can be seen as humorous in a broad sense.

In a short clip from the television special I, Martin Short, Goes Home (a somewhat sequel to I, Martin Short Goes Hollywood), Martin Short walks down memory lane touring his old Hamilton neighborhood. He stops to see an old woman in a rocking chair scowling from her porch, and remembers her as his old school teacher Ms. DuBois. When saying "Hey, Ms. DuBois", the bit becomes a reference to Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mockingbird", and almost quotes the book to the best of its ability. They even get Atticus Finch (played by Joe Flaherty) to come in and tell Martin to address Ms. DuBois with more respect. Whilst complementing the old woman, he suddenly gets shot in the chest. Ms. DuBois is holding a shotgun and keeps firing. A crew member is seen running away in the background, and soon Martin and the rest of the crew (cameramen, etc.) are running away from an injured Atticus Finch and a deranged old woman. It is a very bizarre experience and nothing groundbreakingly funny. In regards to the video clip shared in class, however, one theory is definitely being used to translate the video's humor.

I believe the incongruity theory is mainly at play in the clip. Expectations are definitely subverted. In many different stages in the video, something you would not expect to happen due to the calm tone and supposed casual feel of the environment and situation in the beginning ends up happening and surprisingly horrifically. Martin Short's casual stroll through his childhood neighborhood becomes odd when it turns into a parody of Harper Lee's classic novel. There's a shift into abnormality when it switches from "real life" to "To Kill A Mockingbird" that I guarantee no one was expecting regardless of the video's title. It soon becomes more and more bizarre with little bits such as: Atticus Finch coming in as if it the Great Depression in Alabama and Finch, a stern and reserved man, punching Short in the groin. But

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of course the biggest violation of our expectations is when Atticus gets shot in the chest and we cut to Ms. DuBois holding and reloading a shotgun with a disturbed look on her face. No one expects an old lady to be aggressively firing a gun, especially with no reason. The madness continues when there's a boom mic operator running away after the first shot, thus destroying the illusion of TV magic. Soon everyone else on the crew, including Martin, starts running and yells to be protected. The fact that no one helps the wounded Atticus Finch and everyone scatters is definitely not the reaction someone would have if they were trying to be caring and humble like in the beginning. It is a rollercoaster ride of violations that shimmers a basic definition of incongruity. However, theoretically, why is that the case?

In "Philosophy of Humor", Immanuel Kant devises an explanation for humor that is incongruous; "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reflex effect of this upon the mind...". It is with great confidence that I say that this explanation, for lack of a better word, explains the humor found in the Martin Short clip. It is absurd and not quite understandable to most, but the reflex and destruction of the mind's broad assumption for how it could go makes it enjoyable and capable of laughter. Such as Kant's example with the Englishman and the Indian, I am not at all astonished by the fact that it could get weird (having watched the special, there are plenty of obscure references with no real meaning), rather I wonder how that came to pass. Not to state the Incongruity Theory as solely absurdist. The theory can simply attest to odd lengths taken to subvert expectations. Arthur Schopenhauer claims that humor is located between our sense perceptions of things and our abstract rational knowledge of those same things. It can become abstract yet grounded. One might not think an old woman would have the ability to be violent and carry a shotgun, but it isn't out of the question. Prison guards allowing a convict to play cards with them, only to catch him cheating, kick him out is absurd but plausible and diverts your expectations. The Incongruity Theory is the best way to explain Martin Short's weird endeavors in the clip.

However, I find the clip to be very funny even without the heavy explaining how a joke is a joke. The real reasons I laughed in the first place. Part of it comes from the fact that the clip and the overall special is supposed to shine comedy icon Martin Short in a humble and caring light, but he soon turns on Ms. DuBois implying that she's not as glorious as Mr. Finch is describing ("He doesn't say a picture of what."); and especially when the shots start getting fired, he runs away shouting "Someone protect me!", and leaves Atticus getting pumped full of lead. The weird shift into a very random reference is also interesting. Why "To Kill A Mockingbird"? Why that scene in particular? Why get really close to quoting the actual lines from the book? Why ask Joe

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Flaherty to be in this one clip to get him to do his Gregory Peck impression and then get brutally/realistically shot? The language and lines also really makes me laugh the most. There's something about Joe Flaherty shouting the lines "She's putting fucking lead in my ass!" and "I'm Atticus Finch, dammit!" that are just perfect. It's a very strange clip but it gets me everytime for those little reasons. Now I guess I can appreciate it for new reasons. More philosophical reasons. Especially now that I can see the Incongruity Theory heavily whenever I rewatch the clip in my head. "Martin Short Kills A Mockingbird" is definitely something that violates typical mental patterns and expectations to create an insane and humorous minute of my time.

Works Cited

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