

... and then I got off the bus

A slow, long pull back of the camera allows us to see the true extent of Charles Foster Kane's obsessive collecting. The wider angle (as we move vertically towards heaven) brings us closer to our revelation; the landscape of an isolated man replacing human companions with statue stand-ins. Pull back and reveal.

Citizen Kane operates through contrasting modes of storytelling, from newsreel to personal monologues, using a 'prismatic' narrative¹ to describe one man's life (as analogy for American culture at large). We observe the difficulty and unreliability in attempting to author an autobiography post-mortem, while simultaneously being aware that if Kane had written his own life-story, it would have been full of similar ambiguity. Ultimately, the struggle between truth and knowledge is at its center. As the camera zooms back in again during that last scene, mirroring the previous pull back motion, we see the second concealed truth; Kane's deathbed utterance of 'Rosebud' is a reference to his childhood sled. We see it thrown into a furnace for destruction but the knowledge remains allusive to the film's interlocutors.

As well as a filmic and cinematic device (employed since the film camera could be made mobile), 'pull back and reveal' as an artistic trope, may have come originally from radio comedy, where detailed descriptions were used to hold suspense, revealing a change of context through a final linguistic turn. This kind of reveal is one that relies on its re-alignment of the audience's assumptions. It importantly differs from its use in Citizen Kane, in that the intention is for humour.

"I was sitting there, minding my own business, naked, smeared with salad dressing and lowing like an ox ... and then I got off the bus."² It is, as with any formula, often hackneyed and overdone. The comedian Stewart Lee describes it as a, "one size fits all" mechanism – mass-produced predominantly for the British market. But, its function in comedy is interesting to analyse.

The technique alludes to several theories of humour – in its 'making us seem stupid in our assumptions' we may wonder if we are the subject of an Aristotelian theory (laughing at our foolish assumptions), as an incongruity (between the real and the conceptualized) or as a form of benign violation³. In each theory, the joke constructs one image, suddenly shattered and immediately re-contextualised. In this twist, it is both tortuous, being always out of reach, yet humorous. The temporary withholding of the wide angle, the reveal of how mistaken we are as an audience, operates under the context of a benign space designated for humour – we know it is coming, the 'real' image. Is it really that benign a violation?

The withholding or withdrawal of knowledge under other communicable exchanges has the affect of precisely not being laughable. In Hannah Arendt's thesis *Ethics and Politics*⁴, what drives her concern about the loss of truth in politics, is that:

When truth telling is impossible, when truth disappears, when the world wobbles, the result is cynicism. If people begin to believe that there is no truth, that all is image-making and spin, that there is a loss of the common world, then there is no ground upon which a people in public can form a world together.⁵

There is no reveal, each pull back repeats the previous image and so we become cynics – the formula, the mechanism, is after all a form of manipulation. The cynic sees the stories of fraud and turns them into a space in which to believe in truth is naïve and a

commonality of agreement is impossible without undeniable truth. Can a common sense be found today?

Simon Critchley writes that humour allows for a form of *sensus communis*, but interestingly, it does this by initially withdrawing from the common sense world. “If humour recalls us to *sensus communis*, then it does this by momentarily pulling us out of common sense, where jokes function as moments of what we may call *dissensus communis*”.⁶ Critchley focuses his discussion on the analogy to taste and Kantian aesthetics rather than its ethics or politics (as derived in Arendt). But the notion of a *sensus communis* is the language of a political rhetoric that takes a singular, concrete community and denies plurality (postmodernists such as Lyotard claim there can as such be no *sensus communis*⁷). Politics does often directly engage humour as an attempt to ‘speak the language of the common people’, to recall politics as ‘human’, indeed, Charles Kane used this rhetoric in his failed attempts at political reformation. Unfortunately, the consequences are often of merely re-enforcing a stereotype or division that categorises rather than individuates the subject, the space demarcated for political exchange may then be understood differently – an un-benign one. In 2010, when openly gay MP Chris Bryan quizzed the chancellor (Osbourne) in the Commons on his austerity plans, calling him Baron Hardup, he received the retort “at least I’m not the pantomime dame” – queue laughter in the Commons, but not a common laughter.

What of those who don’t ‘get’ the joke? When the joke doesn’t work or is misunderstood it incites an uncomfortable tension, foregrounding deficiency in the aesthetic, democratic ideal of the shared joke. It is anger brought about through exclusion, being left outside in the dark without privilege to the inner knowledge of the commune. In opposition, one can say that inclusion is also neutralization. To become

one who “laughs along”, you must first subscribe to a particular system of class, belief or structure that invites you to relinquish resistance. Dave Beech has highlighted a similar problem in the relationship between participation practices (of which humour seems to fit as a parallel, a tool for sociability) and the political fissure that runs through them, using Rancière, Butler and Derrida as tools to unpack this.⁸

With humour we cannot announce the intention before the action, or else lose the affect (somewhat like trying to analyse humour). The shifts in context required of the pull back and reveal technique, for example, would become null and void. As Beech writes, “the changes we need are structural.” To pull back and reveal the ‘true’ image, one needs also to pull back and reveal the structure, the mechanism. He hints at the way in which the invitation occurs or is structured in the first instance and the methods of how we are asked to join in, its ethical grounding. Certainly, it requires a humour more complex than a simple formula ending with ‘...and then I got off the bus’. It is through the motion of pulling back and focusing in where we oscillate between revealing and withdrawing that allows freedom. Kant described the joke as a play of thoughts that suddenly ends in nothingness.⁹ How we populate nothingness, how we can build a new structure out of the ‘nothingness’, could be more important.

¹ L. Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*, UK, British Film Institute, 2012, p. 31

² S. Lee, ‘Lost In Translation’, *Guardian* [UK], May 23, 2006
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/may/23/germany.features11>

³ Benign Violation Theory (BVT) as developed by A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (as part of the Humour Research Lab at the University of Colorado) states that humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously.

⁴ H. Arendt, ‘Reflections: Truth and Politics’, *The New Yorker*, Feb 25, 1967, pp.49-88

⁵ R. Berkowitz, *Truthtelling. Democracy in an Age Without Facts*. 2011
<http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2011/10/truthtelling/> (Accessed 14 Feb 2015)

⁶ S. Critchley, *On Humour*, London, Routledge, 2002, p.90

⁷ J.F. Lyotard, ‘Sensus Communis’ *Le Cahier*, No.3, 1987

⁸ D. Beech, ‘Include Me Out!’, *ArtMonthly*, v.315, April, 2008, pp. 1-4

⁹ A. Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life*, USA, Lexington Books, 2002, p.213