

THE PRODUCTIVITY OF THE OBSOLETE – ABOUT THE RECYCLING STRATEGY OF HOLLYWOOD OUTTAKES¹

Sebastian Kuhn / Ph.D. Thesis Project²
Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Introduction

Whereas individual film artists like Morgan Fisher used to snoop around for footage in the back lots of film studios quite on their own, film companies themselves are now systematically picking up the leftovers from their finished productions. This dissertation explores the recycling strategy of published Hollywood outtakes derived from this pool of audiovisual material once considered obsolete. I examine this strategy through one central question: what components constitute the outtakes' appeal to the spectator, who sometimes finds them even more entertaining than the movie itself?³ In order to answer this question, a heuristic approach to this yet unexplored type of paratext has been chosen: a comparison between Hollywood outtakes and the private family film or home video.

Hollywood's family archive

Since the end of the 1970s, the Hollywood industry has been presenting two to three-minute compilations of outtakes to a broad public audience. They are sometimes situated at the end credits of comedies or comedy-like blockbusters, and often are part of their sales promotional bonus materials on DVD and Blu-ray Disc releases. Even though chosen because of its leitmotiv, the so-called blooper, which denotes an embarrassing faux pas happening in front of the running camera, Hollywood outtakes – or blooper reels, respectively gag reels as they are entitled – are not primarily about evoking malicious joy or about the seemingly given proof that professional film making is not always running perfect. Their appeal mainly derives from Hollywood stars being caught in authentic and intimate situations.⁴ According to Stephen Lowry, the audience is passionate about getting to know who the film star really is.⁵ Hence, outtakes which feature unexpected events forcing the star to act spontaneously, respond to the audience's passion in a unique way: a naughty Ben Stiller sticking out his tongue towards the camera during the shooting of *Along Came Polly* (John Hamburg, 2004); Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor turning a failed lip-sync scene into a crazy playback show (*Moulin Rouge!*, Baz Luhrmann, 2001); Jim Carrey asking Morgan Freeman for a dance after the older actor forgot his line (*Bruce Almighty*, Tom Shadyac, 2003) – these impressions cause laughter *with*, not about the stars and generate a bond between the recipient and the performers. More intensely than the making-ofs outtake clips create the utopian idea of a film set as a place where everyone loves working with each other. These documentary clips give the viewer the impression that the actors are a family-like team – at least

during the film shoot. In this way, Roger Odin’s notes about the private family film, can be applied to Hollywood outtakes:

*Just like family photo albums, private family films [or family home videos, S.K.] are filled with happiness, joy of life and the pleasure of being together. There is probably no other kind of film that provides such an omnipresent smile and laughter. [...] The private family film is governed by the motherly fantasy of a happy family, representing a society without problems, a mythical society.*⁶

When we try to analyze and understand the use of outtakes published by the film industry, we need to think of them as the archive of a mythical Hollywood family. And even though one has to compare the blooper reels to other paratexts such as the trailer or the making-of-film or to experimental found footage films, a comparison to the private family film seems to be the most suitable. With the help of the research done in this field,⁷ we can not only explore the affective potential of blooper reels and their naive and authentic power, but also their typical reflexive aesthetics.

Pre-constructed memories

In the following, I will briefly illustrate how fruitful this adaptation turned out to be during the first year of my Ph.D. project. In order to prove that published Hollywood outtakes can be compared to the private family film with regards to their fragmentary form and thus to their reception function, I will translate Roger Odin’s reception model developed in his article *Sur le film de famille*⁸ into the tripartite relationship structure of outtakes, the actual movie, and their audience.

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|------------------------------|---|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---|-------------|---|---------------------|
| Expérience antérieure | → | Diégèse mémorielle | Film [de famille, S.K.] | → | Indices | → | Spectateur |
| | | | | | | | ⋮ |
| | | | | | | | (Odin 1984, p. 838) |
| Hollywood movie reception | → | Diegesis by memory | Hollywood outtakes published | → | Indications | → | Spectator |
| | | | | | | | ⋮ |

Even though legitimate modifications have been made since this pioneer of academic research on the private family film published his first observations in the 1980s, the home video has often been examined in relation to the narrative cinema and has been labeled as being incomplete and imperfect. The analysis of published outtake clips asks for this kind of comparison to the fictional-narrative film in a similar way. Both share the same origin (the unedited footage), but the clips are subordinated to the finished film: first, as formerly rejected offcuts and second, as paratexts. Furthermore, Roger Odin’s interpretation of the main characteristics of the private family film as phenomena of failure can be applied to the blooper reels and their loosely connected, embarrassing mischances, thus mirroring the cliché of the “badly made” family film. On the contrary, the incoherent structure of the private family film, seems to be the result of a more unconscious action.⁹ But in both cases, the spectator is confronted with diegetic fragments, even though this commonality derives from different preconditions. While in the Hollywood outtakes the frag-

ments are “wrong” components in the construction of an enclosed narrative-fictional universe, in the private family film the fragments have been created through the amateurish staging of a family’s every day-life. The latter are caused by seven parameters¹⁰ which can also be applied to Hollywood outtakes: 1. the text’s openness, which pulls the recipient into the given situations *in medias res*; 2. an indifference towards spatial as well as 3. temporal coherence; 4. a general lack of narrative patterns in favor of a simple episodic structure; 5. false continuity concerning the microstructure; 6. unstableness of the image due to whip zooms and a wiggling camera; 7. multiple camera addressings. According to Roger Odin, these fragments are not considered disturbing to the family when it watches private movies. The family members do not find them irritating as they participated in the recorded events.¹¹ Similarly, when the blooper reel viewer is watching the fragmentary scenes torn out of a spatial and temporal *suture*, he does not feel confused, either. Even though he did not take part in the shooting of the events represented in the outtakes, he remembers another super-coherent story, which he was privileged to experience: that of the film shown before. But it is less the actual movie narration than the personal memory of this journey through the story-world that is being reactivated by the fragments serving as “indices”:¹² “[C]e qui [...] permet [au film de famille] d’être regardé avec plaisir [...], c’est la *pauvreté diégétique de ses images*”.¹³ And Odin continues:

*Moins les images du film de famille s’imposent au spectateur comme une structure diégétique cohérente et constituée, moins il y a de chance pour que les bribes de diégèse produites par le film entrent en conflit avec la diégèse mémorielle du spectateur, et plus la construction de la diégèse a des chances de se plier à cette “implacable force de répétition qui habite le désir”, c’est à dire à s’identifier avec l’image qu’il se fait de l’expérience antérieure vécue.*¹⁴

In order to activate the recipient’s delight in a retrospective viewing of the movie, the blooper reels have to refer to those takes integrated in the actual film, and preferably in the same chronological order in which the viewer watched them before. In addition, there shouldn’t be any conflict-laden images or tonal derivations. Under these conditions, the potential of these outtakes is set free: they can revalue the remembered images and idealize the precedent film experience. Perhaps one did not find Jim Carrey that amusing in the comedy *Bruce Almighty*, but when seeing another take of the same scene in which he is adding some improvisations, and his partner Morgan Freeman cannot withhold his laughter, then one might think: “Ah, Jim Carrey was really funny in that movie!”

Conclusion

Using comparative approaches, this dissertation seeks to explore the concept behind the recycling of Hollywood outtakes. With the help of the reception model, developed by Roger Odin for the private family film, the closely intertwined relationship between outtakes, the actual movie, and their audience can be summarized as follows: Hollywood outtakes function as a virtual memory store not only of the profilmic, but also of the diegetic reality of a film. Like private family films, which reactivate and modify preceding occurrences in a nostalgic way through the selection of certain moments, Hollywood outtakes improve the actual movie and transform it into a valuable (movie) event. And when directly connected to the movie, they do not only modify these memories, but also anticipate and undermine the development of an autonomous idea of the film.

- 1 Working title.
- 2 Supervisor: Prof. Vinzenz Hediger.
- 3 Cf. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lorika/357951223/>, last visit 9 September 2011.
- 4 Cf. Bernard Weinraub, "Turning Bloopers Into Comedies of Errors," in *New York Times*, November 30, 2001, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CEFDE153DF933A05752C1A9679C8B63>, last visit 9 September 2011.
- 5 Cf. Stephen Lowry, "Stars und Images. Theoretische Perspektiven auf Filmstars," in *montage/av*, no. 11, 1997, p. 14.
- 6 Roger Odin, *Kino "mit klopfendem Herzen": Anmerkungen zu den Emotionen im Familienfilm*, in Matthias Brütsch (ed.), *Kinogefühle, Emotionalität und Film*, Schüren, Marburg 2005, p. 112 (my translation).
- 7 E.g. Roger Odin, *Kino "mit klopfendem Herzen"*, cit.; Alexandra Schneider, *Die Stars sind wir: Heimkino als filmische Praxis*, Schüren, Marburg 2004.
- 8 Roger Odin, *Sur le film de famille*, in Klaus Oehler (ed.), *Zeichen und Realität: Akten des 3. Semiot. Kolloquiums d. Dt. Ges. für Semiotik e. V.* (Hamburg 1981), Stauffenberg, Tübingen 1984, pp. 833-841.
- 9 Cf. Alexandra Schneider, *Die Stars sind wir*, cit.
- 10 Cf. Roger Odin, *Sur le film de famille*, cit., pp. 834-835.
- 11 *Idem*, p. 837.
- 12 *Idem*, p. 838.
- 13 *Ibidem*.
- 14 *Ibidem*.