Interpretation, Irony and "Surface Meanings" in Film

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Abstract:
In theories of interpretation, the artwork's "surface" is frequently cast as something to be looked past in our quest for meaning. As such, the "surface" has also understandably been the focus of several polemics against the excesses of interpretive criticism – in film scholarship and beyond. This article explores what role concepts of the "surface" and "surface meaning" might fruitfully play in the interpretation of fiction films by thinking about a particular kind of expression-by-implication available to the medium: irony. An under-theorised phenomenon, filmic irony could seem to require interpretation in order to grasp meanings that reside precisely elsewhere than the "surface". Yet, can we even distinguish between a "surface meaning" and an "implied" meaning in a non-linguistic medium like film? This article addresses such questions by exploring the possibility of separating the explicit and implicit, as well as interpretation and comprehension, in a medium whose very capacity for ironic expression has sometimes been doubted.

Keywords: film; irony; interpretation; surface; meaning; implication; aesthetics; *Clueless*; Amy Heckerling; V. F. Perkins; David Bordwell

One place we often encounter the notion of the artwork's "surface" is in theories of interpretation. Frequently, it is cast as something to be looked past in our quest for meanings that are assumed to remain

"unrealised in the surface of the text" (Jameson, 1983, p. 48) or "not displayed by the textual surface" (Eco, 1992, p. 64). Unsurprisingly, then, the concept of the "surface" also recurs in several polemics against the interpretive hunt for buried meanings. From Sontag's (1966) infamous rallying cry to salvos like Best and Marcus's (2009) "Surface Reading", pleas for critics and scholars to abandon or rethink interpretation as a practice are often accompanied by recommendations that we "reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it" (Sontag, 1966, p. 13), or "attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths" (Best & Marcus, 2009, pp. 1–2). Within film studies too, calls from various quarters have periodically used similar vocabularies – from the Deleuzian "haptic" criticism of Laura Marks, which "move[s] along the surface of the object, rather than attempting to […] 'interpret' it" (2002, p.xiii); to Adrian Martin's and Cristina Álvarez López's appeal for a critical focus on "the cinematic surface" that might dissuade us from the temptation "of interpreting [films], of asking what they mean" (2013, p. 1). Perhaps the most sustained and famous critique of interpretation in film studies is David Bordwell's *Making Meaning*, and it similarly proposes that "what may matter as much as [interpreting] implicit or symptomatic meanings is the surface of the work" (1989, p. 264). This article explores what role this concept, "the surface of the work", might fruitfully play precisely in the interpretation of fiction films; it does so by thinking about a particular kind of expression available to the medium: irony.

Having long been theorised by literary theorists, philosophers, linguists, rhetoricians and psychologists, it is startling to realise that, while film scholars regularly employ the term "irony", in our discipline it seems "almost never [to be] theoretically scrutinised" (Elleström, 2002, p. 146).[1] This is unfortunate, not least because to think seriously about irony in any artform is immediately to be confronted by many key questions facing aesthetics and poetics – from the proper role of intention in interpretation, to the theoretical possibility of mis-interpretation, to a medium's very means of expression. Having begun to address such issues elsewhere (MacDowell, 2016), I will here try to approach the final one from a fresh perspective: via the question of "surface meaning" in film.

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1. Notable exceptions include Doane (1979), Sconce (2002), Allen (2007), and Currie (2010, pp. 148–185). I also engage throughout with MacDowell (2016) and numerous (often brief) theoretical accounts of irony by other film scholars.

Surfaces, Irony and Meanings in Film

I should begin by saying that I take the methodological appeal of "attend[ing] to the surfaces of texts" as a given. If an artwork's "surface" is in large part its form or style, then insisting upon the fundamental importance of "surfaces" to our accounts of artworks is plainly a necessity. Certainly, at least, consideration of the "surface" cannot be divorced from a consideration of meaning. Whatever "meanings" we take an aesthetic object to be expressing simply cannot come into being except *via* that object's "form". Despite this proposition having been nominally accepted in innumerable guises since at least the days of New Criticism, the methodological responsibility it logically confers is still too readily shirked – not least in film scholarship. So, if to demand attention to a film's "surface" is merely to restate our commitment to attending to the multifarious contributions "form" makes to every aspect of "content", then this project assuredly deserves a permanent place in our interpretive procedures.

Yet it is precisely the validity of interpretive procedures that is so often questioned by those who urge us to linger upon art's "surface". How, then, might wholesale arguments against interpretation hope to deal with a phenomenon like irony, which has been aptly called the "mode of the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen" (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 9)? At least when it comes to the types of irony used in communication or artistic expression,[2] irony is very frequently defined in terms of opposing a "surface meaning" to an implied meaning. For instance, what is usually called "verbal", sometimes "communicative" (see Currie, 2011), irony – for example, sarcasm – will usually be "intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface" (Booth, 1974, p. 6). Equally, "dramatic" irony in storytelling involves engineering "a strong contrast, unperceived by a character in a story, between the surface meaning of [their] words or deeds and something else happening in the same story" (Dempster, 1932, p. 7). The technique we often term "structural" irony, too, typically "provokes questions about the surface appearance of the whole work" (Auger, 2010, p. 282). Given, then, that these forms of expression appear to rely upon implying contrasts with meanings assumed to reside on the "surface", accounting for irony in film could seem, in some fundamental sense, to require interpretation.

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2. That is to say: excluding such types as "situational" irony, as well as philosophical approaches to "Romantic" irony that regard it as "something like a human condition or predicament" (Colebrook, 2004, p. 47).

We might use irony to consider the interpretive significance of the
"surface" or "surface meaning" in relation to any artform. The other
question I want to address is more particular to film: what can even be said
to constitute a "surface meaning" in this medium? Confronting this issue is
necessary partly because of the longstanding assumption that "irony is, after
all, primarily a linguistic concept" (Bribitzer-Stull, 2004, p. 132). Scholars
of irony in numerous disciplines routinely treat the site of ironic expression
as if it were always a "statement", "utterance", or some other discrete unit
of language. This in turn can encourage a taxonomical drift from "surface
meanings" to "*literal* meanings" – sometimes via flat conflations of the
two as, for example, "surface or literal meaning" (Stringfellow, 1994, p. 5),
or even "surface-literal meaning" (Giora, 1997, p. 239). It seems reasonable
in principle to attribute literal meanings to written statements or verbal
utterances.[3] What, though, could plausibly serve a comparable function
to "surface-literal meaning" in a non-linguistic, audiovisual medium
like the live-action fiction film? A complementary problem also attends
the nature of "*ironic* meaning" in films. In linguistic texts, ironic meanings
may be called "non-literal" (Booth, 1974, p. 40) or "transliteral" (Muecke,
1970, p. 100); but to what equivalent category might an implied, ironic
meaning belong in a medium whose relationship to the concept of "literal
meaning" itself seems far less clear?

Given this potentially troublesome fit between the fiction film and
widespread theoretical approaches to irony, it is perhaps unsurprising that
some have argued this medium might in fact have only a "limited palette"
for ironic expression (Currie, 2010, p. 169), or even that "the weapon of
irony [is] unavailable to the visual storyteller" (Kroeber, 2006, p. 59).
I believe that filmic irony is nowhere near so rare or challenging as this
(MacDowell, 2016, p. 21–88). However, explaining why requires us to
think through what is involved in interpreting this medium's "surface".

Interpreting Meanings in Film

I have intimated that abandoning interpretation entirely in favour of
"surface reading" (Best & Marcus, 2009) could threaten to leave us
ill-equipped to deal with ironic expression in general. However, in
practice not all arguments against interpretation are so unpromising
in this regard as they might appear. Best and Marcus, for instance,
largely reserve their scepticism specifically for "*symptomatic* reading",

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3. Notwithstanding certain theorists' sceptical questions about the linguistic concept of
"literal meaning" (e.g. Fish, 1989), which have received – to my mind – convincing
answers from Wilson (1992), among others.

which "argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses" (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 3). The relatively precise scope of this critique is significant. "Symptomatic" interpretation does indeed tend to focus on meanings regarded as "repressed", or only unconsciously present – rather than, that is, those regarded as intentionally implied. As such, a symptomatic reading may well attribute "unconscious" ironies to artworks.[4] However, it will tend to be less concerned with ironic expression *per se*, whose very definition as a mode of address seems to presuppose someone or something "consciously and intentionally employing a technique" (Muecke, 1969, p. 42) – whether that be a flesh-and-blood author (Muecke, 1970), an implied author (Booth, 1974), the text itself (Eco, 1992), or otherwise.[5] By contrast, an approach to "surface reading" that remains theoretically open to interpreting what a work's "surface" may purposely imply seems eminently capable of accounting for irony.

Bordwell's influential critique of interpretation in film, however, goes much further. Interpretations, he argues, may indeed be "symptomatic", in which case they claim to uncover "*repressed* […] meanings that the work divulges 'involuntarily'" (1989, p. 9). Yet they may also be "explicatory", in which case they seek to discern, among other things, "*implicit* meanings" that "the film is […] assumed to 'speak indirectly'" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 8). It is thus in opposition to both symptomatic and explicative interpretation that Bordwell positions his recommendation that we attend instead to "the surface of the work" (1989, p. 264). Since this approach to "surface reading" appears insulated from not only symptomatic but also implied meaning, Bordwell's attention to the "surface" would appear to foreclose the very possibility of acknowledging a phenomenon like ironic expression, which fundamentally relies upon implication. This need not necessarily be a problem – if, for instance, Bordwell were to encourage abandoning or radically decentering the whole activity of understanding films' meanings, perhaps recommending instead something like Sontag's (1966) "erotics of art" or Marks's (2002) "haptic" criticism. Yet this is not the case. Instead, Bordwell crucially attempts to distinguish interpreting films from another, more intellectually justifiable, way of understanding their meanings: "comprehending" them. When comprehending films, Bordwell argues,

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4. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that deconstruction, for example, seeks to demonstrate that "all meaning is potentially ironic" (Colebrook, 2004: 105).
5. For an exploration of why interpreting irony seems to require commitment to some form of intentionalism, see MacDowell (2016, pp. 155–207).

we are concerned with two types of meaning: (1) "referential meanings", which relate to the nature of a film's fictional world, characters, and story (1989, p. 8); and (2) a film's "explicit meaning", which he regards as a "conceptual meaning or 'point' [that] a film is assumed to 'speak directly'" – via, for instance, "a verbal indication such as the line 'There's no place like home' at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*" (1989, p. 8). Taken together, Bordwell suggests, "referential and explicit meaning make up what are usually considered 'literal' meanings" (1989, p. 8).

Before we can wrestle with what this notion of "literal meaning" might mean in film, it is necessary to place some pressure on Bordwell's distinction between "interpretation" and "comprehension". To differentiate comprehending films from interpreting them symptomatically is probably relatively unproblematic. However, drawing a dividing line between an act of comprehension and an explicative interpretation – one attentive to "implicit" as well as "explicit" meanings – seems much more difficult. Moreover, the division appears to guarantee that "comprehending" a film, for Bordwell, could not involve grasping any ironic meanings it might express.

Several figures (e.g.: Branigan [1993], Perkins [1990], Wilson [1997; 2008]) – have questioned Bordwell's claim that comprehension can be pried apart from explicative interpretation. Perhaps the most suggestive starting point is the approach V. F. Perkins takes to "explicit meaning". Perkins argues that to regard "comprehending" films as involving "extracting from the movie statements which […] resemble messages such as 'There's no place like home'" (1990, p. 5) appears to demand "an imperviousness to the complexity of cinematic expression" (Perkins, 1990, p. 2). This, Perkins argues, is because,

> Statements always come in a context which guides the assessment we can make of them. When they occur in a movie, what we make of them (how literally, so to speak, we take them) depends on the way we understand them to function in a context that has been elaborately constructed. (1990, p. 3)

The scope of the "context" that a fiction film may use to affect the meaning of any spoken statement consists, we might say, of every single thing that films contain besides isolatable lines of dialogue – guaranteeing it will be "elaborately constructed", indeed. The significance of this for thinking about irony readily suggests itself. Mentioning "irony" only sparingly, Perkins's article nonetheless fixes repeatedly on cinematic moments (from *Psycho* [1960], *Caught* [1949], and *The Wizard of Oz* [1939] itself) which use numerous means available to filmmakers – performance, staging, music, framing – to ensure that statements or

actions which could have been affirmed are instead "substantially qualified by the film's other data" (1990, p. 3). By doing so, he effectively demonstrates that even "comprehending" films requires remaining alert to the various ways in which "explicit" and "implicit" meanings interrelate – which is surely another way of saying that we must interpret them. Furthermore, it seems likely that we will only register how a film demands to be interpreted if we are attentive to precisely that which Bordwell claims to be interested in: "the surface of the work" (1989, p. 264).

I suggest that our frequent need to account for the numerous ironies that a film's "surface" can imply demonstrates especially plainly how difficult it is to separate the "implicit" from the "explicit" in this medium, or indeed "interpreting" films from "comprehending" them. Seeking an example to help illustrate this, it will be instructive to look far afield from the only traditions Bordwell is willing to admit "may well require interpretive leaps for their full enjoyment or satisfaction" – experimental or "art" films (1993, p. 96). In this spirit: the beloved 90s Hollywood teen comedy *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) frequently stresses the perceptual chasm suggested by its title, and employs several kinds of irony to this effect. Looking at just the first few minutes of the "surface" of this most mainstream of movies suggests how crucial interpretation routinely is to our "comprehension" of films.

Mis-Match! Comprehending (and Interpreting) Ironic Meanings in *Clueless*

Following two vibrantly-coloured animated credit screens, *Clueless* begins in an almost aggressively exuberant manner when it thrusts us into a 30-second montage depicting a clique of ostentatiously affluent teenagers enjoying an apparently unremittingly fun existence in and around various sun-drenched, upscale Beverly Hills locales. Accompanied by a bubbly pop-punk cover of Kim Wilde's "Kids in America" ("Friday night and everyone's moving, / I can feel the heat but it's soothing"), the film immediately begins intercutting rapidly between shots of these brightly and fashionably dressed young men and women giggling and grinning while driving around LA in a jeep; striding cheerfully out of stores with shopping bags in their hands; falling about laughing in a diner (one girl feeds a boy a cherry doused in cream); and frolicking by an elaborate outdoor pool replete with waterfalls and faux-Roman statues. Complementing the energetic editing and music, the camera captures the ebullient antics of this gaggle of kids in whip-pans, handheld shots, juddery slow-motion, and a host of crash-zooms into and away from beaming faces. Over two final images of the gang by the pool, we now hear

one of its female members, Cher (Alicia Silverstone), addressing us in voiceover: "So, okay: you're probably going, 'Is this, like, a Noxzema commercial or what?'"

With this we cut to a close-up of Cher smiling while flipping back her long blonde hair, our view soon expanding to reveal her standing alone in front of a large gold-framed bedroom mirror. "But seriously," her narration continues over this image, "I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl: I mean – I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes." While listening to these final words – now accompanied on the soundtrack by David Bowie's song "Fashion" ("Turn to the left! / Turn to the right!") – we see Cher happily skipping towards the doors of a huge walk-in wardrobe. An edit, however, then presents us with a close-up of a desktop monitor displaying a sort of virtual-closet: a computer programme that is allowing Cher to scroll through component parts of various designer outfits. A dialogue box declaring "MIS-MATCH!" now pops up on the screen with an unpleasant buzz in response to an unbecoming skirt/jacket combination. A frowning Cher nonetheless perseveres, previewing how the next ensemble looks on an onscreen avatar of her, and this time nodding with satisfaction at her choice as the camera pushes in on her smiling face.

Within ninety seconds, Heckerling's opening establishes at least three different kinds of irony – dramatic, structural, and communicative (or "verbal") – that will characterise much of the film's overall comic address, and whose implications I consider essential to comprehending the film's most elementary "meanings". We might begin with perhaps the commonest of these forms: dramatic irony, which requires engineering and stressing a "discrepant awareness" (Evans 1960) between our perspective and that of characters.

The "mis-matched" relationship between voiceover, dramatic action and editing here begins the film's strategy of contriving conspicuous contrasts between Cher's words and their context. Especially as scored by the burst of Bowie's mechanical-sounding song about fashionistas, the implication of the cut to the virtual wardrobe is clear: notwithstanding her protestations, Cher's teenage life is far from "way normal". This dramatic irony is also indebted to Silverstone's performance – her repetitive intonation on "I *get* up, I *brush* my teeth, and I *pick* out my school clothes" emphasising the depth of Cher's belief that she is reciting a list of dully predictable chores. Furthermore, the way she is shown perkily prancing towards the physical closet might suggest we are about to experience the familiar sight of a 90s comic Hollywood heroine playfully perusing a rack of outfits (perhaps in a pop-driven montage).

Such expectations having been conjured, the revelation of the computer screen establishes we are instead dealing with a character who regards selecting clothes in this peculiarly impersonal manner to be equally commonplace as the more routine activities we were encouraged to anticipate. Thus, the more blithely Silverstone embodies Cher's relationship to this state of affairs, the greater our ironic distance from her character's perspective.

This moment makes tangible, firstly, that "referential meanings" in film will tend to be at least partially "implicit". Bordwell readily acknowledges that even grasping "referential" meaning typically involves "inferential activities" (1993, p. 103); nonetheless, he also believes that the distinction between comprehension and interpretation represents a difference between "following the story and ascribing an abstract, implicit […] meaning to that story" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 96). Yet, not only will "following the story" involve inferences, but those inferences will often fundamentally depend upon our ability to weigh what a film expresses "explicitly" against what it expresses "implicitly".

Why is it that, despite Cher telling us that the way she picks out her school clothes is "normal", this cannot be said to constitute a "referential meaning" of *Clueless*? In order to regard the incongruity between Cher's description and her routine as (intentionally) incongruous, we must realise that what is being presented "explicitly" – say, what we are told or see of this fictional world – gains its significance only in relation to meanings implied by how that world is presented. We must assume, for instance, that for the film to reveal Cher using this virtual-wardrobe while she is proclaiming her normalcy is not a mistake, but rather a pointed stylistic gesture whose rhetorical purpose we are being required to surmise. In short: the "referential meaning" of this moment is surely not "Cher lives a normal life", but something closer to: "Cher mistakenly believes her extraordinarily privileged life to be ordinary". To infer the latter meaning, however, we must register the precise clash engineered between the film's "explicit" and "implicit" modes of address. We therefore cannot comprehend this moment – even in the sense of "following the story" – without interpreting it.

Meanwhile, the adjective upon which much of this moment's dramatic irony depends – "normal" – suggests something else significant. Bordwell repeatedly claims that only if we are engaged in the occult critical activity of interpreting will we be concerned with "the interpretation of a culture's symbolic values" (1989, p. 16), or interested in, say, "mak[ing] the protagonists bear abstract semantic values" (1989, p. 157). Yet: is it possible to comprehend most films' stories without inferring the "symbolic values" that films themselves frequently make their

characters bear – not least protagonists? I suggest not, which points towards another kind of irony this sequence inaugurates.

Cher is not only *Clueless*' protagonist, but also enjoys an especially privileged position within the film's narrative structures. She possesses the authority conferred by a voiceover, and also knows she is addressing an audience – indeed apparently a cinema audience, since she refers to what we see in audiovisual terms ("is this, like, a Noxzema commercial or what?"). Thus, even if we are not invited to assume that Cher is quite producing the filmic image,[6] she is at least aware of how we perceive her fictional world, and definitely our primary guide through it. A character granted such a superior vantage point seems intuitively to have the potential for superior insight. Importantly, Cher's first line actually promises this. Speaking as if to a somewhat sceptical viewer, she ingratiates herself by aiming some scepticism of her own towards the stridently upbeat initial montage – which, if we share her cultural reference points, may indeed have brought to mind something like a mid-90s zit cream advertisement. This momentarily implies that Cher's values may be not so different to those of the film, nor those of its assumed audience – since, why would a film mockingly comment on its jaunty depiction of cavorting rich-kids, if it did not anticipate a viewer who might themselves subject such a thing to mockery? Her "But seriously", though, begins a rather different relationship between the film's implied values and her own, which will be maintained for much of the movie. That relationship is one characterised by a sustained structural irony.

M. H. Abrams defines structural irony in literature as involving an author "introduc[ing] a structural feature that serves to sustain a duplex meaning and evaluation throughout the work" (1999, p. 135). As soon becomes clear, the decision to have Cher serve as our guide to *Clueless*' world is a prime instance of a particular technique that lends itself well to this kind of irony, namely: "the invention of a naïve […] narrator or spokes[person], whose invincible simplicity or obtuseness leads him [*sic*] to persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader […] just as persistently is called on to alter" (Abrams, 1999, p. 135). We must thus continuously "alter" such a figure's interpretations if we are

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6. I tend to agree with theorists (e.g.: Kozloff, 1989) who are sceptical of the concept of "first-person" cinematic narrators *per se* – that is: the notion that characters speaking in voiceover should ordinarily also be imagined as somehow responsible for creating every aspect their film's narration (as we usually assume in the case of "first-person" narrators of prose fictions).

not to misunderstand the states of affairs – or, in Bordwell's terms, "referential meanings" – they describe. We sense how we are being invited to "alter" their interpretations, meanwhile, by inferring how this figure's various evaluations and interpretations differ from those motivating the work, and which the work also assumes will likely motivate our interpretations. To avoid misconstruing the "referential meaning" of *Clueless*' "virtual-closet" revelation, then, we must infer (1) the sorts of values implied by Cher's description; (2) that the film believes itself to be addressing an audience who would be unlikely to evaluate computerised touch-screen wardrobes as "normal"; and finally, (3) that the values endorsed by the film are closer to those imputed to us than to the kind of moneyed entitlement Cher's description suggests. We will be repeatedly required to make such inferences about *Clueless*' broader evaluative frameworks throughout the film in order to comprehend the kind of "duplex meaning and evaluation" (Abrams, 1999, p. 135) that results from having such a protagonist as our chaperone.

Note that the implied "meanings" we must infer in order to grasp these ironies are neither quite "referential", nor a "conceptual meaning or 'point'" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 8). Rather, they come closer to what Perkins calls "balances of judgment on the facts and behaviour portrayed" (1990, p. 5). In this sense, then, dramatic and structural irony will often be indebted to a film's point of view – taking this to include not only a film's handling of, say, our spatio-temporal access to the fictional world, but also its overall "attitude or orientation towards the characters" (Thomas, 2000, p. 20; see also Pye, 2000). Significantly, two of the sharpest critiques of *Making Meaning* have come from two of the foremost theorists of filmic point of view: Edward Branigan and George Wilson. In his response, Branigan actually passingly mentions dramatic irony by name (1993, p. 11) to help explain why "interpretation might penetrate comprehension at rather fundamental levels" (Branigan, 1993, p. 10). Wilson too refers to point of view alongside several other aspects of movies that regularly require interpretation, yet which remain unaccounted for by Bordwell:

> It is widely assumed that interpretation always purports to specify a *meaning* or a constellation of *meanings* for a work of art. […] [H]owever, interpretative work on film is frequently focused on understanding, e.g., aspects of style, tone, and point of view, and the detailed analysis of these matters need not issue in something that one would naturally refer to as "meaning." (2008, p. 163)

What we infer from such aspects of films is indeed perhaps not characteristically best described as "meaning". However, as *Clueless*'

dramatic and structural ironies suggest, we must nonetheless often interpret what is meaningful about, say, a film's point of view in order even to comprehend its story. Another phenomenon mentioned by Wilson, tone, can be equally crucial, and relates to the final aspect of irony I want to consider here.

"Ironic tone" is among the most commonly discussed concepts in scholarship on ironic communication (for an overview, see Bryant and Fox Tree, 2005). In film studies, by contrast, tone is so seldom addressed that it has been dubbed by one of its very few theorists "a missing concept" (Pye, 2007, p. 5). We need this concept, though, to explain the sort of irony at play in *Clueless*' very first moments: the bouncy montage of Cher's friends frolicking around Beverly Hills. This kind of irony is directed less towards particular figures' perspectives, and more towards a film's own manner of expression. This is a type of ironic expression that in linguistic situations – say, a sarcastic comment – would be called verbal irony, but which we can more usefully refer to by a less medium-specific name: communicative irony (Currie, 2011; MacDowell, 2016, pp. 59–81).

Varying theoretical explanations of communicative irony exist (see Sperber & Wilson, 2007), but perhaps the simplest maintains that it involves "pretending to have a certain outlook, perspective, or point of view" (Currie, 2010, p. 157) in order to "highlight the defects of that point of view" (Currie, 2010, p. 165). If a friend announces "lovely day!" during a torrential downpour, we can usually assume they are pretending that – speaking as if – they hold either a mistaken or deeply eccentric assessment of the weather. Communicative irony therefore involves striking an ironic attitude towards precisely the viewpoint one pretends to express. For artworks to create this kind of irony, then, they must ironise an outlook communicated through the very means of expression they are employing. In prose fictions, communicative irony might be "expressive of [an] attitude towards the narration itself" (Currie, 2010, p. 171) – for instance, a novel's narrator could momentarily use admiring language to (pretend to) praise the intelligence of an imbecilic character. In a medium like painting, meanwhile, it often manifests in "parodies of the clichés, mannerisms, styles, conventions, ideologies and theories of [other] artists, schools or periods" (Muecke, 1970, pp. 2–3).

This potential link between communicative irony and parody may help clarify its connection with tone. Douglas Pye, who has written the only extended study on filmic tone, notes that movies can "take up varying relationships to […] conventions and norms, including parody" (2000, p. 12). One function of a film's tone, suggests Pye, is to signal the nature of this relationship between a film and its conventions – how it "implicitly

invites us to understand its attitude to […] the stylistic register it employs" (2007, p. 7). *Clueless'* opening montage offers a good example of a film's implied attitude towards its own stylistic register being pointedly ironic. If a film combines images of over-privileged young people in glamorous settings with 90s teen-film conventions like a peppy song about the joys of youth, or a flamboyantly vibrant visual style, this could potentially suggest a wholly enthusiastic endorsement of the events depicted and the values they imply. However, as Pye argues, sensing a film adopting a degree of "formal or stylistic distance" (2000, p. 12) towards its conventions,

> has something in common with registering in conversation that someone is employing conventional phrases with a certain ironic distance. Perhaps knowing the speaker and/or responding to the context, we understand that their use of a phrase carries implied "quotation marks". Sometimes of course we hear the quotation marks in their voice, but at other times, although there is no change in vocal manner, we intuit that the phrase is not being used "straight". (2007, p. 44)

When watching films we often similarly intuit the degree of "distance" with which conventions are employed by "mak[ing] a judgement about the film's relationship to its methods, based on our assessment of how particular decisions function in their context" (Pye, *2007*, p. 44). Once *Clueless'* opening montage has been contextualised by Cher's quip about a skin-cream commercial, and even more after what we learn about her own out-of-touch perspective, it becomes difficult to avoid concluding that the tone with which the sequence has been offered is, at least in part, ironic. The film pretends to use these conventional materials "straight", before revealing that it was in fact deploying them with heavy "quotation marks" – indeed, almost parodying them. Interpreting this moment in context thus obliges us to infer that *Clueless* is using communicative irony: mocking-via-imitation a lifestyle, audiovisual style, and a set of associated cultural values, from which the film desires to imply a significant degree of ironic distance.

The elements of *Clueless* whose "meanings" we must infer in order to grasp the film's employment of dramatic, structural, and communicative irony are things such as: the film's approach to voiceover, camera style, editing, music, Silverstone's performance, and so on. Such phenomena might reasonably be said to represent "the surface of the work" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 264). This, of course, is precisely what Bordwell urges us to focus on. Yet it is a curious fact about *Making Meaning* that it culminates by arguing film scholarship should be dedicated to analysing "the compositional processes of form and style" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 271),

when it has previously defined "comprehending" films as something achievable by reading a line of their screenplay – for instance: "There's no place like home." Returning to Bordwell's argument in light of the foregoing discussions of irony should help explain why this surely can never be the case, and may finally allow us to take stock of the prospect of defining "surface meanings" for film.

"Surface Meaning" in Films

Bordwell claims that "what may matter as much as implicit or symptomatic meanings is the surface of the work" (1989, p. 264); yet it is precisely his unwillingness to account for the "surface" that prompts Perkins to accuse him of exhibiting "an imperviousness to the complexity of cinematic expression" (1990, p. 2). If that accusation seems in this case justifiable, then it is because the Bordwell of *Making Meaning* refuses to engage with a key question: what might be particular about the relationship between "surfaces" and "meanings" in a medium like film?

In keeping with his constructivist credo that "meaning is made, not found" (1989, p. 103), Bordwell ostensibly believes meanings can only ever be "postulated", never discovered, since meanings exist only in audiences' minds, not artworks. Yet he nonetheless also desires to claim that comprehension "postulates something concretely there – say, the characters represented, the action of the story, and the dramatic point or significance of it all" (1993, p. 95) – whereas interpretation assumes that "what the film says is not 'literally' on the surface but is instead meaning of an implicit or symptomatic kind" (1989, pp. 31–2). These scare-quotes should prompt us to ask: what meanings that can be attributed to live-action fiction films are ever "'literally' on the surface"? Literal meanings can certainly be assigned to what is "concretely there" in poems or prose fictions, whose "surfaces" comprise words and sentences. They can likewise be attributed to individual lines on the pages of a script. But a literal meaning is not something easily expressed by a textual "surface" that consists not of words, but rather assemblages of edited and soundtracked footage, usually depicting specific actors speaking lines in precise ways, framed in particular configurations, amongst and in relation to concretely realised environments, in certain narrative contexts. Although Bordwell's quotation marks suggest his cognizance of this, he nevertheless effectively glosses over the fact with his attempt to define a film's "literal meaning" as a combination of "the referential meaning of the film and any explicit point or message" (1989, p.64).

As *Clueless*' ironies suggest, however, even the "referential" meanings of a story will often need to be inferred from what we take a film to be

implying through its form, style, and so on. And this is surely only bound to be truer still of a film's "conceptual meaning or 'point'" (1989, p. 8). Assuming we should even attribute such things to films,[7] this type of "meaning" seems by definition to constitute an abstract "message" or "statement". As such, how could we believe a movie might be capable of expressing such a "conceptual meaning" literally without also holding the questionable belief "that the 'literal meaning' of a film is the literal meaning of any statement spoken in it" (Perkins, 1990, p. 3)? This belief would clearly be inadvisable in the case of *Clueless*. Yet Heckerling's film and its ironies can serve as a more general warning against ever confusing the meaning of a line as written with the meanings expressed by a film as made. From *Clueless* to "art cinema" to *The Wizard of Oz*, comprehending live-action narrative films will not only require us to understand words with literal meanings, but will also require us to interpret how these words interact with the whole multitude of unavoidably implicit ways in which a work of plotted, dramatised, designed, acted, shot, cut, and scored fiction will necessarily be expressing itself.

Looking at irony thus helps remind us of something simple but fundamental about filmic expression: that much of what we are doing when "comprehending" films is interpreting how their "explicit" and "implicit" modes of address have been designed to interrelate. One lesson of this would seem to be that, if we want to grasp even "referential" meanings, we have little choice but to interpret, since all that a film's "surface" can do is imply. Another apparent consequence of this, then, would seem to be that films can never reasonably be described as expressing "literal" meanings at all. This possibility, though, raises a potentially tricky question, at least as regards filmic irony: if this medium's expressive properties ensure that no meanings can be called "literal", all are implied, where does this leave the possibility of distinguishing something like a "surface-literal meaning" (Giora, 1997, p. 239) from something like a "non-literal" meaning (Booth, 1974, p. 40), which seems so crucial to irony?

We might begin to answer this by turning, firstly, to strands within research into ironic expression itself. During a recent overview of numerous competing linguistic approaches to communicative irony, Marta Dynel observes that one thing almost all scholars agree upon is that "the literal import of an ironic utterance differs from the implicit

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7. As George Wilson has noted on more than one occasion (1997; 2008), to attribute an "explicit meaning" of this kind to a film would effectively be to commit the age-old critical "heresy of paraphrase".

meaning the speaker intends to communicate" (2014, p. 540). However, she goes on to note that,

> Besides tacitly agreeing on the literal vs. implied meaning distinction, most authors are unanimous that irony inherently expresses the speaker's *attitude*, and thus serves as a vehicle for an *evaluative judgment/evaluation* of an utterance, action, event, situation, etc. (Dynel, 2014, p. 540)

Even in the realm of verbal statements, then, it appears that what may be just as important to irony as literal or implied "meanings" is what another linguist calls "perspective clashing" (Mayerhofer, 2013): the act of meaningfully juxtaposing one perspective against another, one attitude against another. A key general benefit of such terminology is that it seems appropriate not just to communicative/verbal irony, but also to dramatic and structural ironies, which ironise the perspectives and values of characters. Moreover, this account is also clearly much more conducive to explaining the ironic capacities of film specifically, whose expressive properties may prevent them from offering "literal meanings", but which – as we have seen – are certainly able to imply divergent perspectives and attitudes.

But one final wrinkle might still remain. It certainly seems promising for film's ironic capacities if ironic expression can do without the "literal" component of "surface-literal meaning" (Giora, 1997, p. 239). In order to explain ironic expression in film, then, perhaps we need not speak of "meanings" at all, but only of the various perspectives or attitudes that a film can imply. However, can irony really exist without any concept of "surface meaning" at all? It is surely the case that ironic expression still necessarily involves establishing discrepancies between something that seems to be apparent and something else that is implied – even if neither of these somethings need be a "meaning", narrowly defined. If films can only express themselves by implication, how can this medium ever hope to enact this crucial distinction: juxtaposing a "surface" meaning, perspective or attitude against an "implied" meaning, perspective or attitude?

The answer may simply be that movies are evidently capable of granting different perspectives and attitudes different weights and emphases – offering some "straight" and ironising others; this is what Perkins refers to, appropriately elusively, as "the resources that can be discovered in film to shade information, grade effects" (1990, p. 5). Yet, since those resources must encompass film's entire panoply of non-linguistic expressive devices, the first problem is that defining precisely which element of a film is lending greater importance to which perspective will always require hard interpretive work – even if equipped with vocabulary

more sensitive to the medium than "literal" or "non-literal" meanings. An additional issue is that, even in cases of literary irony, it can "often [be] hard to say what is the overt and what the covert meaning" (Booth, 1974, p. 156). This interpretive predicament is considerably heightened when the nature of film's "surface" seemingly ensures that all the relevant perspectives and attitudes can never be more than implied: how are we to articulate why we take one to be more or less "implicit" than another? Finally, there is the fact that the precise weights and emphases granted different attitudes and perspectives can and regularly do shift subtly and frequently across the span of any film.

To illustrate briefly what some of these problems look like in practice, consider another moment from *Clueless*, this time from towards its conclusion. Cher is again travelling the streets of Beverly Hills, but now she wanders dejectedly alone, lost in thought, accompanied by the powerfully self-pitying strains of (Jewel's rendition of) "All by Myself". She has been recounting in voiceover her dawning awareness that she is "totally clueless" on many matters of life and love, culminating ultimately in admitting to herself something the film has invited us to suspect for some time: that she is in love with Josh (Paul Rudd), her step-brother. This epiphany comes as Cher is walking by a grand outdoor fountain, which is kept in full view as Cher pauses in front of it, designer shopping bag in hand. Three things happen simultaneously at the instant her realisation arrives: (1) Cher raises her eyes heavenward and announces – aloud to herself, with furrowed brow – "Oh my god…"; (2) the cascading jets of the resplendent fountain behind her suddenly become illuminated from below by brilliant pink and white lights; and (3) a brass fanfare rises onto the soundtrack with a triumphant flourish; Cher then turns slightly to face the camera as it moves in closer, her features resolving into a wonderstruck smile: "*I* love Josh!"

An interpretation wishing to do nominal justice to the different emphases being granted the various attitudes and perspectives implied by this moment must account for a great deal. We might first fall back on our various types of irony. There is assuredly again communicative irony at play in the film's tone here. Even if we do not register a lightly parodic nod being made to a similar fountain-adjacent moment of romantic realisation from the musical *Gigi* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958), the sheer rhetorical excess of combining this sudden lighting change with this exultant fanfare must signal that at least a partly ironic attitude is being struck towards these conventions. Equally, to ironise these aspects of the film's style is also apparently to ironise the state of mind they putatively express – Cher's realisation – suggesting a measure of dramatic irony at her expense. Dramatic and communicative irony thus seem to become fused: the film

pretends wholly to share in Cher's moment of romantic recognition, yet lends it such over-emphasis that we are discouraged from taking either the stylistic register or her realisation entirely "straight".

At the same time, however, interpreting these ironic strategies in context obliges us to recognise that they are also being to some extent qualified. In contrast to the dramatic irony of the computerised wardrobe scene, the literal meaning of Cher's words is no longer being straightforwardly contradicted by what we see. Equally, the film cannot be implying that Cher's newfound viewpoint here is quite mistaken: she often has indeed been "clueless", and does love Josh. In fact, partly because she is now prepared to pass judgement on herself using that titular term (which she has hitherto only levelled judgmentally at others), we surely are being invited to regard her realisation with some genuine celebration. As such, the ironic attitude implied towards the celebratory fanfare and fountain also cannot be of quite the kind that was directed towards the superficially congratulatory opening montage of her friends' affluent jaunt through L. A. Indeed, if that sequence inaugurated the structural irony that has characterised much of our relationship with Cher, this moment seems in fact to signal its end – or at least diminishment. We might say that her own perspective has finally begun to catch up with something much closer to the point of view that Heckerling's film has frequently adopted towards her, and that the film's tone invites us to appreciate the momentousness and joy of this occasion, even while poking gentle fun at its belatedness. The concluding, fanfare-scored track-in towards Cher's thunderstruck smile here thus implies something different than the push-in on her satisfiedly nodding to the strains of Bowie, which concluded her virtual-outfit selection. Rather than paradoxically emphasising the distance at which the film presently regards her, this increased closeness now expresses a still-qualified, but nonetheless genuine, escalation of the sympathy that has to varying degrees always bubbled beneath the film's ironic attitude towards its frequently "clueless", but often impressive and perennially charming, protagonist.

Compared with the apparently solid ground offered by reassuring metaphors like "literal meaning", or even "surface meaning", the requirement of continuously weighing implied perspectives and attitudes, points of view and tones, could appear both extremely arduous and hopelessly woolly. Likewise, a formulation such as "the resources that can be discovered in film to shade information, grade effects" (Perkins, 1990, p. 5) may seem to offer the interpretive critic precious little of comfort to cling to in defining the medium's expressive properties. One possible response is to attempt to withdraw from the field of interpretation entirely by calling for attention only to the "surface of the work" (Bordwell, 1989,

p. 264). Yet if this kind of attention must fail to account for even so commonplace a form of storytelling as, say, dramatic irony, it becomes not only incapable of interpreting fiction films, but unable to comprehend them in the most elementary of senses. Film's "surfaces" remain indispensable to both comprehension and interpretation, but not because they contain overt and incontestable "literal" meanings, nor because they are necessarily more "sensuous" than they are meaningful. It is rather because only here will the interpreting viewer encounter the only resources this resolutely non-literal medium truly has for "making meaning": shading information, grading effects, presenting this embodied perspective with that suggested attitude – in other words: "its possibilities for 'making overt', which in large degree means its capacity to imply" (Perkins, 1990, p. 4).

The fact that film studies can still sometimes appear somewhat clueless about how to conceive of these resources with requisite sensitivity to the medium of filmed fiction is undoubtedly due to a disciplinary tendency Bordwell's *Making Meaning* both diagnoses and perpetuates. As Wilson puts it: like many others, Bordwell still seems to be "looking to 'meanings' in linguistic contexts as models for the kinds of meanings that [...] interpretation purports to explain" (1997, p. 226). However, if wrestling with irony can force even the field of linguistics to decentre the concept of "meaning", without losing sight of other means of becoming meaningful, perhaps it can prompt film interpreters to do the same.

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