



Cringe and inattention

Description

It's lunchtime at *Cheers* bar and there are no customers.

Diane is a waiter in the bar. She says, "I think if nobody minds I'll have my lunch now. I got some lovely roast beef today for a sandwich."

She notices Carla, her co-worker, who is pregnant. "I'm sorry, Carla. If it bothers you I can eat in the back."

Carla responds, "Nah, that's okay. I had some nausea earlier, but I'm fine now."

Coach, one of the bartenders, says, "My wife had terrible morning sickness. Know what she used to do?"

"I'll try anything. What did she do?"

"Threw up."

Carla plays along. "It's worth a shot." She adds, "Hey, you know, I'm starting to get hungry."

She then proceeds to set out her own lunch while Diane watches. It includes sardines, olives and a bowl of sugar.

"Mind if I join you?" inquires Carla. "You get cravings?"

She assembles her lunch which includes pouring sugar over the sardines while Diane looks on in horror. "And I just got a sudden craving."

Diane grimaces, "I've suddenly lost my appetite forever." She leaves the room abruptly, leaving her beef sandwich behind.

Always pleased to get the better of her, Carla chortles to Sam, the bar owner, "Works every time."

She picks up Diane's sandwich and starts eating it.

She yells after Diane, "Bring chicken tomorrow!"

Sam watches and smiles.

Sitcom characters are familiar with each other's conversational quirks and behaviour patterns. Thanks to the serial nature of the sitcom format, audiences are onboard with that familiarity.

In a sitcom the dialogue is mostly in the service of a joke. It was essential to the joke in this excerpt to establish that Carla had peculiar food cravings due to her pregnancy. If Diane had not declared her disgust at Carla's food combination then there would have been no sense in her leaving her beef sandwich behind, and Carla's apparent opportunism.

I need hardly say that everyday life situations are rarely like this, especially if one or more in the party tries to inject humour or contrive a practical joke. The exchange in the *Cheers* bar is unlikely to even surreal.

The setting of the *Cheers* bar breaks the "fourth wall." It looks lively but unlike a regular bar there's little background noise; the audience has to hear the conversations among the main characters. But the setting is highly detailed and plausible as a bar, a point made by the director James Burrows in his description of the series' realism. Various factors conspire to encourage audiences to accept unlikely dialogue and actions, especially if they are funny. Sitcom audiences are primed to suspend disbelief.

Social realism

Not all dramatic or comedic presentations are like that. Some writers toy with social and conversational realism. Here is an early dialogue sequence in Harold Pinter's (1930-2008) play *The Birthday Party* (1963).

Meg enters the room while her husband Petey is reading a newspaper.

[Pause]

What are you reading?

PETEY. Someone's just had a baby.

MEG. Oh, they haven't! Who?

PETEY. Some girl.

MEG. Who, Petey, who?

PETEY. I don't think you'd know her.

MEG. What's her name?

PETEY. Lady Mary Splatt

MEG. I don't know her.

PETEY. No.

MEG. What is it?

PETEY. (studying the paper). Er-a girl.

MEG. Not a boy?

PETEY. No.

MEG. Oh, What a shame. I'd be sorry. I'd much rather have a little boy.

PETEY. A little girl's all right.

MEG. I'd much rather have a little boy.

[Pause]

I remember as a teenager watching *The Birthday Party* or similar on television, probably with my parents or older sister. It struck me at the time that this was weird for a play, but somehow more like the

way people actually speak to one another. My fellow watchers introduced *à la Pinteresque* to my lexicon to describe this style of dialogue. According to an article by Alice Rayner on Pinter,

In Harold Pinter's work, the infamous pauses, excruciating silences, and the proclivity for tableaux are instances of delay when the forward motion of events is held and something unspoken happens. Such silences create atmosphere and mood, to be sure, and they may indicate something about character, but they are also part of a signifying structure (482).

Cringe comedy

Pinter's later works reached larger audiences through movie adaptations such as *The Go-Between* (1971), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), and *Sleuth* (1972, 2007). But his early work informed a style of comedy writing that morphed into the *à la Pinter* sitcom. In an article *à la Pinter* histories Jonathan Bignell exemplifies this influence in the case of the works of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, writers of the British sitcoms *Hancock's Half Hour* (1956-1960) and *Steptoe and Son* (2011). Bignell asserts that

Cringe comedies make up a significant body of work in British television situation comedy, with examples including *I'm Alan Partridge* (Baynham et al. 2002-2003), *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2005), and *Nighty Night* (Davies 2012) (1).

US examples include the American version of *The Office* (Daniels et al 2005-2013). I would add *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels and Schur, 2009-2015) and perhaps *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019); and from Australia, *Kath and Kim* (2002-2005). Bignell explains that

Cringe can be defined in a range of ways and has a spectrum of related instantiations, including comedy of embarrassment, gross-out comedy, and awkward comedy (1).

More recently, this style of sitcom is often presented on television without a live audience or a laughter track and is frequently delivered as if a documentary with actors speaking or directing facial expressions of frustration or embarrassment directly to the camera as a *mockumentary*. Bignell attributes cringe comedy explicitly to Harold Pinter: this

strand of dark, troubling but also comic drama on the theatre stage, spearheaded by the playwright Harold Pinter, laid the foundations for cringe (1).

Instead of laughter, the punchline to a cringe or Pinteresque joke is met with a glance of incomprehension by the other participants. Incomprehension is in the company of inattention.

On not paying attention

A classic sitcom script such as *Cheers* depicts the characters as if prepared to play along with each other. In spite of their differences they are respectful of one another's utterances. They respond.

They are friends or at least co-conspirators. They help deliver the joke. That's not cringe.

Cringe realism is closer to everyday conversation. You cannot assume engagement amongst the characters, that they are prepared to play along with each other. Contemporary cringe comedic exchanges, like much everyday conversation, are profiles in inattention. At times people are preoccupied, not always paying attention to what the other is saying, or even their own previous utterances.

I'm exploring the claims that conversation is a key identifier of sentience (and intelligence). If it is, then a theory of conversation needs to take account of the interactions between attention and inattention.

Bibliography

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- Burrows, James. *Directed by James Burrows: Five Decades of Stories from the Legendary Director of Taxi, Cheers, Frasier, Friends, Will & Grace, and More*. New York: Ballantine, 2022.
- Rayner, Alice. "Harold Pinter: Narrative and Presence." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 482-497. 10.2307/3207890

Notes

- I took the wording of the Cheers dialogue from http://www.zen134237.zen.co.uk/Cheers/Cheers_1x17_-_Diane%27s_Perfect_Date.pdf

Category

1. Film and media

Tags

1. comedy
2. conversation
3. cringe
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