

Though common use of the term has largely died out, it was common a few years ago to hear a certain new or at least newly popular type of comedy described as “random.” These discussions largely revolved around the Adult Swim lineup, but tended to speak particularly of *Family Guy*, which at the time only aired on that network. Though many Adult Swim shows rely on a humor of non-sequiturs, *Family Guy* seemed to stand out, both in popularity and style. The extremely limited animation of other programs in the lineup, such as *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, relied most often on verbal play in a largely static group of settings. On the other hand, while *Family Guy* used fairly traditional verbal play in many jokes, it also formed a number of them using comic editing.

This structure of comedy editing follows the structure of a verbal joke, with a discernable setup and “punch line.” The incongruity theory of comedy holds that humor is the result of logical conflict. While this theory may not account for *all* jokes, it goes a long way in describing humor. Suggesting Eisensteinian notions of editing as conflict, the *cutaway punch lines* of *Family Guy* function analogously, where edits form an immediate logical conflict between the preceding setup and the short insert.

But *Family Guy* was not the first television program to use such techniques. Though it is commonly accepted that single camera and animated sitcoms have come to occupy an increasingly important place on the television schedule since the early 1990s, too little attention has been paid to the specific techniques that distinguish this format from more traditional three-camera sitcoms and theatrically-staged single camera sitcoms like *Bewitched*. And though it would seem that these styles are largely distinguished through elements of the mise-en-scene, editing plays an important role in distinguishing them. To aid in this discussion, it will be useful to highlight a few prominent uses of cutaway punch lines in television since the early 1990s.

While the proscenium-staged, three-jokes-per-page format generally subordinates editing to ensemble performance, single camera and animation production allows for a more prominent use of comic edits. And while *Family Guy*'s use of this technique may be particularly noticeable (due in large part to the way it often unnaturally shoehorns these jokes into the narrative), it has a longer history in both animated and live action sitcoms.

It is probably not a coincidence that an animated sitcom has taken cutaway punch lines to the extreme, nor that the technique found early expression in others like *The Simpsons* and *The Critic*. Considering the production schedule and increased cost that would have resulted from inserting scenes from distant times and places, it makes sense that live action sitcoms would not have experimented with this style. Instead it was left to these animated sitcoms to prove the economic and entertainment value of a freer, less theatrical style of joke telling.

This style was not limited to animation but spread to live-action sitcoms. Starting in the late 90s, shows like *Ally McBeal* used comic editing to punctuate internal emotional states with visual metaphors. Though the jokes on this show may not have exactly fit the model of cutaway punch lines in that they generally lacked a clear setup and punch line structure, it became a portent of later live action comic editing. Clearly, *Scrubs*' editing style and conceptual basis, having a privileged view into a single character's mind, were influenced by this earlier program, though *Scrubs* uses actual cutaway punch lines. But more naturalistic live action shows like the mockumentary *The Office* (US) also use this editing technique. For example, when Michael Scott's verbal assertions conflict with a flashback showing the truth of that situation, comedic irony and folly result, helping to shape the notion of the character as delusional. Though I paint this technique as being particular to single camera and animated sitcoms, there is evidence to suggest that it may become more ubiquitous. *How I Met Your Mother* uses similar techniques to

a limited extent, suggesting that even the traditional three-camera, theatrically staged sitcom may use this technique now that it has become commonplace in other formats.