

Postface: Why Understanding the Bronx Requires the Humorist's Touch. The Art of Listening, Thick Descriptions, and Layered Emotions.

This is the beginning of the post-face of the book "A lady goes to the Bronx", which is not yet published in English

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7.1 Humor as a Style of Observation in the Daily Life in the Bronx

By now I have reached a certain age, and the course of my life—as with any other woman from a middle-class, European family—has led me into any number of beauty parlors, not only in Italy and America, but in other countries as well, from time to time, and even on other continents. But of all the places where my hair has been done, none has had an atmosphere as lively and as full of humor as the one I encountered at Annie's Beauty Salon in Harlem.

I would like, in fact, to begin to draw this book to its close by taking a better look at the constant web of jokes and anecdotes at Annie's Beauty Salon, and to see it now as something more than a special situation that strictly springs from the undeniable wit and strength of personality of the various women who work there. I want to view it, instead, as a particularly telling example of the workings of a principle which is no less crucial to "life in the Bronx" than to "qualitative research" in the social sciences.

Let's start with a series of reflections that were voiced by Pearl White: "Life in the Bronx is a struggle, but you learn a lot from the struggles. You really do. And the secret is to go through hard times with no bitterness. That's the best card. Once you have bitterness, it makes everything more difficult, vicious. And you tackle things viciously. You know how they always say: 'There is always a solution. If you just stop and think about it, there is always a solution.' And I have come to the point of believing that. Maybe you can't see it, and you don't yet know what it ought to look like, but... ask around... try to find out what other people have done in similar situations. At times," she laughed, "you feel like a beaten horse. Just like a beaten horse. But ask around. There are pushers in the neighborhood, but there's always somebody, somewhere, who has already faced that problem and found a way to get rid of them. You can never be resigned, you just have to keep on looking for the answer. You've got no other choice." (Chapter 2.6, pp. 75-76.)

I expected to find sarcasm and irony in the Bronx, but I didn't expect humor. When daily life is charged with tension and full of unpleasant incidents, the most "normal" and "natural" reactions are 1) bitterness, or 2) for people to close up inside themselves, as with the pathological habit of "not reacting to the reactions of others," as we've seen most particularly in the schools of the Bronx. (Chapter 5.1.) Sarcasm and irony are rhetorical expedients that call attention to the things in the outside world that aren't the way they ought to be, and they strike out at others from whom we want to take our distances. Humor is first of all directed towards ourselves; or we direct it towards others with an understanding of the ways in which we resemble them. Humor is circular and reflexive, and its hallmark is a lightness that isn't to be found in irony or sarcasm. Humor allows us to stand at a distance from our problems, but without denying them. Indeed, it casts a new light on our problems, admitting them both to ourselves and to others. In the Bronx, more than elsewhere—as I learned with great surprise in the course of my research—those who want to preserve their sense of self-respect, and as well of respect for others, have no other choice than to turn themselves into "explorers of possible worlds," and, thus, to some degree, into "humorists."

Corroboration for such an assertion can be found with a certain ease: for example, we can simply

turn to those quips and flashes of daily wit which I meticulously assembled in Chapter 3.1, “A Beauty Salon in the Heart of Harlem,” and attempt to translate them into “serious” language. Then we take a look at what has been lost or gained. We can start with a passage on page 109:

Annie: “One night around midnight the bus just wouldn’t arrive, so I took one of those vans for a dollar that follow the same route as the regular busses. The driver drove like crazy, and I said to myself, ‘This is something I’ll never do again for the rest of my life.’ There was a point where another woman on the bus started to pray out loud.”

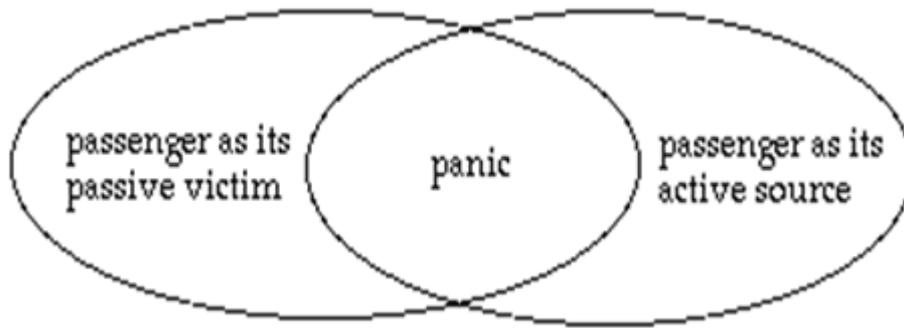
Pearl: “That’s when you get scared: when somebody else starts praying out loud.” (A chorus of laughter.)

Try to imagine a few of the “serious,” non-humoristic ways of expressing solidarity with Annie. My mind turns to things like, “Poor dear! You’re lucky to have survived it.” Or, “No, you really can’t trust the people who drive those vans. Something similar once happened to me.” And so on and so forth.

Here are a few considerations regarding such “serious” comments. 1) If your recounts of such incidents were always met by these sorts of reactions—which finally amount to commiseration—you’d soon begin to feel uncomfortable about telling such stories, and shortly afterwards you’d simply stop. All of us appreciate sympathy, but not too often. 2) If you give up offering reports on such incidents, you also give up the chance to receive and pass on information about an important part of the events that take place around you. That’s equivalent to deciding that it’s better not to see, hear, and think. 3) The implicit message—which reads, “Poor you, poor me, poor all of us, what terrible lives we live”—is precisely the sort of communication that people who live in the Bronx simply don’t need to hear. Countless things are in terribly short supply in the Bronx, but surely this isn’t one of them. 4) Expressions of solidarity by way of commiseration are fundamentally paternalistic. They make you feel small in the face of somebody big. This is another feeling that people who live in the Bronx can do without, unless that somebody is God.

From relational, affective, and cognitive points of view, Pearl’s quip delivers a message of which the implications are diametrically opposed to those of its “serious” versions. It’s a message of solidarity, but free from commiseration. It encourages her listeners to continue to tell such stories about “life’s mishaps,” and to turn them into occasions for mutual support, learning, and collective amusement. It’s a tack that’s available to the person who tells a story, or (as here) to a listener, which makes for a kind of team play, which in turn creates an atmosphere of collaboration and reciprocity between persons of equal stature. There’s no paternalism. Pearl’s quip, moreover, like every humorous quip, embodies a game of bisociation, and bisociation is the fundamental dynamic that links the humorist to the stance of the good observer.

The efficacy of Pearl’s quip lies in the fact of its giving Annie’s story a different and unexpected meaning. “The crazy driver” was the central figure of Annie’s story: Annie quaked with fear, the woman who began to pray out loud quaked with fear, all the passengers were quaking with fear. Pearl’s quip restructures the scene: the source of panic lies less in the driver than in the person who starts to pray out loud in a situation that’s charged with tension! There are many reasons for laughing: because both interpretations of the situation, even though in contrast with one another, make good sense; and because the storyteller’s view of the situation has been suddenly reversed. Laughter is a way of dealing with these surprises, and of signaling recognition of the bisociation, which can be diagrammed as follows:



The two ovals correspond to two conflicting matrices of perception and evaluation. In the one case, the woman who starts to pray is seen as a victim of panic, and in the other case as its cause. Pearl's quip makes us momentarily aware of both of these possible points of view, and we see that the "crazy driver" is not the only person whose behavior might be said to be irresponsible, since the term could also apply to the behavior of his victim. The point is amusing, and it also holds a grain of wisdom. It reminds us that a single thing can be seen from various and apparently incompatible points of view. Pearl thus deploys a faculty which should also be carefully cultivated by a good observer: the faculty, in the words of Clifford Geertz, for "thick description."

So, both the meaning and the method of Pearl's response to Annie are more appropriate and intelligent than anything that might be found in its translation into "serious" language.

Similar conclusions might be drawn for nearly all the witticisms, anecdotes, and ironic or humoristic asides which I have attempted to record in this book: for Carlton Collier's quips on himself and the public administration; for the deliberately comic attitude with which Annie Ferguson, well aware of being no great beauty, decked her neck with a sign that read "help me be queen for a day" while making her way around the neighborhood party for the election of "the Layman's Queen"; for Obie's sonorous outbursts of laughter (it's hardly, moreover, an accident that he took a course in creative conflict management); and so on and so forth. A great deal might also be learned from the quips and the penchant for caricature which we've seen in the sermons of the pastors at the Baptist churches and at the reunions of Families Against Drugs. These sermons' typical attitude might indeed be seen in the light of the study by the theologian Werner Thiede (1986) on the humoristic aspects of the Bible and the New Testament.

None of these moments ought to be mistaken—as is often the case—for signs of a closed, self-centered "ghetto culture" that's incapable of communicating with the outside world. They reveal, quite to the contrary, that there are people in the ghetto who refuse to abandon the arts of looking, listening, and communicating.

But let's go back to the beauty salon. To page 110:

Pearl: "But you don't know what happened to me! Right around the corner from where I live, they opened a new herb shop. So I say to myself, 'Well, now I'll be able to finally find that laxative herb my mother gave me as a child.' So I go to the store, and ask for this plant, but they just stand around and stare at me and don't say a word. 'What's wrong with these people,' I say to myself, 'they must be some kind of idiots. All they have to do is say yes they've got it, or no, they don't.' So I asked again. But they just kept staring at me.... I later found out it's a place for dealing crack. You bet that they were giving me a funny look!" (General laughter.)

Here Pearl applies the mechanisms of "solidarity as empowerment," and of "solidarity as a process of learning," directly to her own experience. On the one hand, a person who lives in the

Bronx shouldn't be so simple-minded; but, on the other hand, this naiveté is a sign of this person's autonomy and alterity, or of the way in which this person's interior world sets itself apart from "the Bronx." Rather than reject her naiveté and disappointed expectations, Pearl proudly insists on her right to them, and this is what allows her at one and the same time to admit and make fun of her moment of defeat, and thus to rise above it. The anecdote shows her to be stronger than the crack dealers who have invaded the spaces in which she lives, and she makes a claim to our admiration and respect.

"Admiration" and "respect" are crucial words for the subject we're attempting to explore. If we dealt with Pearl's story exclusively by "looking at the facts," we'd have to limit ourselves to remarking that a new location for the distribution of crack had been opened in the near vicinity of Pearl's home, and that the dealers, in calling this place an "herb shop," felt so well-protected and sure of themselves as to be able to think it possible to work from a fixed location, disdainful of all possible control on the part of the authorities. There would be nothing to laugh about at all. Instead of finding an occasion for humor, Pearl, from this point of view, should have set up a meeting with her neighbors and organized an *ad hoc* committee for a complaint at the local police precinct. Humor would be seen as a survival technique for losers, a technique of resignation.

These sorts of attitudes—which are quite widespread, and typical of "passive listening"—take no account of at least two things: firstly, that humor is a valid technique for enabling a potential loser to preserve self-respect; secondly, that self-respect is the premise for refusing to lapse into resignation, and for continuing to put up a fight. In the Bronx, the *lack* of humor is the sign and the style of resignation, whereas humorism is a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for change.

It is not, moreover, to be overlooked that Pearl has a long and respectable history as one her neighborhood's most active organizers. And surely we should ask ourselves what would happen to the climate of that beauty salon if each of the dozens of unpleasant incidents recounted there were taken as occasion for pained reactions or declarations of disgust, or for continuous proposals for collecting signatures and starting a protest action. The strength of Pearl, Annie, their co-workers and clients lies in their lively gaze and behavior, in their dignity and sense of humor. It's a resource they actively cultivate, and it makes them capable of a form of "active listening" that's free from all pity and paternalism. And their ability for "active listening" makes them precious interlocutors for anyone who might intend to draw up plans for initiatives that aim to effect the social and economic transformation of a place like the Bronx. Freud too (1927) found many reasons to take an interest in humor: he saw humor as the antidote to paranoia.

But let's consider a few more examples. We can return once again to page 111:

Another customer: "Tonight's dinner: something out of a can."

Annie: "My son is one of those people who's always reading everything that written on the labels, and he's always saying, 'Now we can't eat this stuff, because there's this in it, or there's that in it.'" (General laughter) "And I say, 'Well, maybe *you* can't eat it, but *I* can.' 'Whole generations of people have eaten this food, and now suddenly it'll make you sick!'" (A second burst of general laughter.)

When I asked a group of my students to explain the reasons for the two moments of laughter reported in this passage, they remained perplexed and silent. They saw nothing funny at all. Some of them later told me that they were similarly perplexed by other moments of laughter, as reported in other parts of this book. They had the impression that these new urban pioneers—as least as I portray them—laugh a bit too frequently, with no real reason for doing so. My students also told me that they saw such "overly frequent" laughter as a kind of "nervous reaction to life in the Bronx." I asked them to try to look at things in the light of a slightly modified version of the third rule of "the

art of listening” (rules already presented in the first note at the start of this book, and soon to be presented again, in section 7.3): “If you want to understand why another person is laughing, you have to assume that his or her laughter is justified and correct, and you have to ask them to help you understand just why and in what way their laughter is justified and correct.”

Try to imagine what facts of common knowledge and generally shared judgments might turn the son’s affirmation—“Now we can’t eat this stuff, because there’s this in it, or there’s that in it”—into something “funny.” The context surrounding the anecdote contains a number of indications (such as the woman’s declaration, “Tonight’s dinner: something out of a can,” and the fluid ease with which Annie picked up her phrase) that allow us to imagine that the women at the beauty salon don’t think of canned food as a choice, but as the only kind of food they can afford. They have no *other* choice. It is not impossible to imagine that the son’s affirmation sounds more or less like this: “It’s not hard to stop eating canned foods. You just have to win the lottery.” Or, again, “You just have to give up eating.”

What makes the story funny is the contrast between the knowing, petulant air of the son, and the blatantly evident fact (for Annie and her clients) that his knowledge has no practical applicability. What’s funny is the purposely underlined discrepancy between notions “learned at school”—or from the educational TV programs which address themselves to the middle classes—and the realities of life. This also helps to explain the second burst of laughter: “Well, maybe *you* can’t eat it” (in the light of your middle-class pretensions) “but *I* can” (since my feet are firmly planted on the ground). It likewise then makes sense for Annie to continue with a comment on the lack of comprehension between the generations and their varying senses of reality: “Whole generations of people have eaten this food, and now suddenly it’ll make you sick!”

This is the way I interpret the scene, and I hope to be able to confirm it in a future conversation with the women who took part in it.

Before closing this section of the book, I’d like to draw attention to something which until now has remained in the background. It’s concerned with the emotional dynamics of the good observer. The sense of paradox and bisociation that typifies a humorous quip is more than a question of the kinds of result it achieves; more than anything else, it is concerned with the emotional dynamics, and with the dynamics of the sense of identity, in which it finds its origins. The ability to function in terms of such dynamics is precisely what the humorist shares with the good listener, or the good observer.

Still another example may help us to illustrate this point in greater detail. On page 101:

The girl with the writing on her tee-shirt, as she took a seat in one of the arm chairs:
“I have to go shopping this afternoon.”

Nancy, sarcastically: “That’s fine, just so long as you don’t go shopping with my money!! The other day a customer says to me, ‘I’ll pay you next week, because today I have to go shopping.’ She was going out shopping with *my* money!” (General laughter.)

Nancy here is deploying an ounce of prevention. By recounting a previous episode, she makes its repetition a bit more difficult. The tone of her words is also important. While relating that previous episode, she might easily have taken a tone of hostility and irritation. But she chose instead to assume an ironic and almost cordial attitude, even if ambiguously so, as though saying “Are you too planning to go shopping with my money?” The bisociation is beautifully clear: on the one hand, “charging” Nancy’s services was seen (by the previous client) as a right, as a possible option that could nearly be taken for granted; but Nancy herself, on the other hand, sees herself as the victim of an act of arrogance: and as a victim with a sense of humor that allows her to laugh at it all. Nancy’s

story presents us with both of these modes of perception and evaluation, and this is what makes us laugh.

Let's try to "put ourselves in Nancy's shoes" and thus to understand the nature of the emotional and relational dynamics that can allow a person to discover leverage (as in Judo) in the fact of having been thrown off balance, so as then, in turn, to throw the interlocutor off balance, simply by virtue of bringing to light the bisociative dynamic of two contrasting points of view.

The most normal and immediate reactions to a client who suddenly and without former warning refuses to fulfill an obligation are, in this order: surprise and bewilderment, and then embarrassment, and then a mixture of any combination of irritation, anger, indignation, bitterness, humiliation, and a number of other feelings, depending on the rest of the situation. The problem lies in what we're able to do with these emotions of bewilderment and hostility.

The embarrassment that derives from having been thrown off balance contains two levels of information: 1) on the expectations that we took for granted; 2) on the probable existence of alternative points of view from which the event that strikes us as out of place appears instead to be logical and perfectly suitable. A good listener/observer is a person who knows how to deal with the fact of having been thrown off balance in exploratory terms, rather than in terms of self-defense, which can be a question either of aggression or of withdrawing entirely into oneself. The good listener grasps the incidents that occur in the course of his research as occasions on which to "distance from himself" and to reach an understanding of different points of view: these are moments in which he can force himself to look with new eyes—as the Russian formalists put it—at events that present themselves as opaque if approached by way of habitual canons of perception.

A person caught up in such a situation has only two choices: to take his own reactions seriously (the reactions, in this case, of irritation and hostility); or to accept these same emotions, but in a light, playful and paradoxical way (the bisociation of hostility and game), and to use this ambivalence as kind of leverage that allows him to look from a distance at his own, "natural" point of view. In other words, on finding herself faced with the options of hostility/seriousness and hostility/game, Nancy, like every good observer who faces a moment that demands an act of active listening, chose the second. She redimensioned her hostility and gave it a new kind of balance in a framework of benevolence (of which the degree of authenticity is of no importance). Such a ploy is far from natural or automatic; it requires a special level of awareness and a certain amount of training. It's an epistemological gambit that depends on a proper understanding of the nature of the language of the emotions: the emotions don't tell you *what* you are looking at, but they tell you *how* you are looking at it; they offer no information about the actual events in any particular context, but they tell us about the way we structure that context. (See rule four of [the art of listening](#).)