

PLANES, TRAINS & AUTOMOBILES

Directed by John Hughes
Produced by John Hughes
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1987

Laughs earn a right to be heard. And if you want to make a point, if there's some bracing truths undergirding the humor, then, first, you've first got to bring the goods. If you can, then you have a chance at a truly great comedy.

Planes, Trains & Automobiles is such a triumph. Writer-Director John Hughes takes his time establishing the characters and lets their personalities drive the narrative. But at the heart of the story is a mystery. Slowly we are made aware that Del Griffith, for all his oppressive affability, is hiding something. And since we see almost everything through Neil's eyes (and Neil is quietly selfish, concerned only with his needs and wants) it takes some time to realize there's more going on beyond the hijinx and gross-out humor. That delay benefits the film, preventing tonal oscillations that would disorient the audience as it is wrenched from comedy, to weepie drama, then back to comedy.

The film starts by immediately granting us a point-of-view shot of Neil looking anxiously at his watch, then at his plane ticket. He mustn't miss his flight, and he's stuck in a meeting. We don't need these POV shots (Neil complaining, "I gotta go," coupled with the dialogue with his colleague at the elevator, provide sufficient exposition), but they reinforce our identification with the protagonist. He strikes us as a well-educated Everyman who just wants to get home to his family. His good intentions are frustrated by an indecisive client, then by an unscrupulous attorney.

So we continue in the story, going where he leads us.

The first time we are granted information that Neil doesn't have is when the trunk is being loaded in the back of the taxi. This selection of shots forestalls great confusion for the audience when the cab drives off without Neil in it.

Soon we're at the airport, and Neil's flight is delayed. Immediately, we jump to an entirely different location, and soon realize that this is Neil's home. The snow that will prevent his flight from landing at O'Hare, the snow that is his enemy, provides an ironic juxtaposition as it blankets his house in soothing domestic tranquility. The cut away from Neil's perspective is especially smooth because his thoughts are on his family, and how he desperately wants to get home. Before the phone rings we see the kids eating dinner and interacting with their mother, Neil's perennially subdued wife. We have a few seconds of time with the family before the phone call. This is another nice touch, as Hughes gives us a little more breathing room, and slowly begins the process of distancing the audience from the protagonist.

Back in New York, grounded by another establishing shot of JFK (we're oriented by the Empire State and Chrysler buildings illuminated in the extreme distance), we start with a close-up of Neil, exasperated as always. Now we're provided a master shot of Neil on the left of the screen, Del on the right. When Neil sees the man sitting across from him he realizes (in a nice little subjective flashback) that this was the man who "stole" his cab (and we—one step ahead of

Neil, realize that it was this man's trunk that caused Neil to lose the first cab)! But it's helpful to note that the alternating shots of the men looking at each other, trying to remember, is not done with Neil seeing Del in a POV. We need to see these men for what they are (and definitely are *not*). Del tries to make it up to Neil, offering a host of possible treats. Neil's response is perfect: "I'm kind of picky about what I eat."

Later, as the film progresses, we discover a pattern of POV shots when Neil is in extreme distress: when he sees Del on the plane, when Del takes off his socks, and, later, when he sees the poor soul laying down to sleep next to an airport trashcan, when Neil realizes that there is only one bed in the motel room (played up by a menacing Ira Newborn musical device), and when he discovers there are no towels left in the motel bathroom.

Right after the reaction shot of Neil seeing Del on the plane, we cut to their plane taxiing to take off. This gives us a nice sense of distance so that the next shot—O'Hare getting slammed by a snowstorm—isn't too jarring.

The following sequence—Neil as sardine—encapsulates the limitations of modern air travel. And, for a time, we still have every reason to hate Del. Still, John Hughes manages to provide hints that he will soon be taking this film in a different direction:

"Ahhh....Look, I don't want to be rude, but, uh, I'm not much of a conversationalist, and I'd really like to finish this article; a friend of mine wrote it, so...."

Neil just won't give in—at least, not yet.

The film continues to feed us Neil's perspective, even after we've become disenchanted with him. Three notable exceptions are Del on the vibrating bed, Del driving like a maniac doing the "Mess Around," and Del sitting in the roofless rental car alone, castigating himself for alienating Neil. (Del has lots of acquaintances. But he has no friends, and he knows very well, at this moment, just how alone he really is.)

If the mystery was impressed upon us too soon, we'd gain an inordinate amount of sympathy for Del. If the mystery was simply reduced to Del telling Neil—without any build-up—that he has no home and his wife is dead, then it would feel like a cheat and a sentimental tag to give a funny movie some gravitas.

Along with Neil, our exasperation concerning Del grows, so that Neil's past-midnight castigation seems overdue. Del attempts some reciprocal denunciations, but, once Neil plows ahead, becoming *very* personal, Del can hardly muster a response, merely affirming that he is an "easy target." We gain sympathy for Del without Del altering his outlandish behavior (so we hang on to some good comic tension going forward), and with the mystery still safely hidden. Additionally, we're not as comfortable tagging along with Neil. This shift calls to mind the *frisson* in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* once Judy has been revealed to the audience (but not to Jimmy Stewart's Scotty) as lost-love Madeline. We are forced to continue (to a lesser degree) tracking with Scottie's perspective, but we now see him as a truculent basket-case—overbearing and dangerous.

This is Neil's story. And it's not because he's the hero. It's because he's the one who needs to change. He has the big job, the beautiful house, the wife and three kids. Del has none of that, but is a much happier man. Del can be difficult. But one of the reasons Neil is so uncomfortable around him is that Del is a constant reminder to Neil that he is not empathetic, understanding, or kind (would *Del* have bombarded the rental-car lady with obscenities?).

Neil's reverie as he rides the El is the most cinematic sequence in *Planes, Trains & Automobiles*. First, we go from a medium close-up of Neil sighing with relief on the El. Then we cut to a crane shot, looking down at the forlorn Del. Then we're down on his level, and he turns away from the departing train to look just past the camera, pain contorting his friendly face. Cutting back to inside the train, the same synthesizer music (vaguely reminiscent of Phil Collins's landmark "In The Air Tonight") from Del's 'easy target' speech returns. Trying to relax, Neil rolls his head around. We cut back one more time to see Del, laboriously, dragging the giant trunk by himself. Back to Neil, he tries to check the time, but remembers he had to barter his watch away. With nothing else to distract him, he begins to look forward to his imminent return. We now see his thoughts, a succession of too-good-to-be-true Thanksgiving impressions: well-dressed happy kids, succulent food, a candle being lit, his wife, and—finally—Neil, himself. Cutting back to Neil on the train, this is the perfect segueway to the next succession of images: Del kissing Neil's ear, Del and Neil laughing as they watch the rental car burn up, then—after Neil-on-the-El shakes his head, trying to convince himself this is *not* a happy memory—we see Neil remembering his awful motel harrangue. But Neil is not relecting on his cruelty; he is starting to piece together's Del's very-curious remarks about his homelife—in the first motel, at the restaurant, and in the motel the night before, amidst their party-debris of chips and liquor bottles.

Convinced, Neil is grim. The train stops, and he walks with anxious haste. He is not surprised at all when he finds Del waiting for him at the station.

"I don't have a home. Marie's been dead for eight years."

Neil finally opens his heart (and his home) to Del at the film's climax, and Del is the very picture of gratitude, which only reinforces to Neil that having this man around—his new best friend—will enrich his life and put a check on his own worst tendencies. And the trunk, the perfect symbol of their division, which Neil would only help carry with great reluctance earlier in the film, is now the perfect symbol of their unity. They carry it not as before—Dell up front, Neil trailing glumly behind—but side-by-side, and Neil has found his smile.

This trunk is Del's. It is his burden, not just in weight and bulk (matching his own body, interestingly enough), but also as a reminder that this is all he has that passes for a home and (we can gather) contains all his worldly goods. Now, finally, Neil shares that burden, and eases Del's pain. It's a perfect way to resolve the story. It's creative, poignant, and very insightful—especially for such a funny movie.