

2013

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Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. "Irony in Emmanuel Carrère's *La Moustache*." *French Review* 86.3 (2013): 497-506.

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Irony in Emmanuel Carrère's La moustache

by Nina Ekstein

THE TERM “IRONY” IS OFTEN APPLIED TO FILM, but in varied and often imprecise ways. Sometimes this slippery term is used to denote an intertextual (or more precisely interfilmic) reference with the potential for parody; at other times it may mark a discordance between different channels (for example, between the film music and what is shown onscreen).¹ I will focus on a particular type of irony, tied to undecidability, in which two alternatives are held in suspension, both present, both undeniable, and yet perfectly incompatible. A concrete example is the drawing that from one perspective seems to be of a duck, and from another, of a rabbit (Gombrich 5). The irony comes from the tension between the two, the simultaneous presence of two discordant elements. Unlike simple verbal irony where one may say something but mean its opposite, here both the statement and its opposite are equally valid. Thus it is not a matter of A or B, but rather A and B. The two elements are in play simultaneously, and the irony comes from the combination of undecidability and the tension between the two elements.²

I will examine this type of irony in Emmanuel Carrère's 2005 film La moustache, which is constructed around the concrete undecidability of whether Marc, the central character, did or did not have a mustache. Thus, the entire film deals with what seems to

be an odd and perhaps trivial problem. In Carrère's hands, however, it becomes an undecidable conundrum that engulfs Marc's marriage, raises the possibility of madness, and finally calls into question the ontological status of events in the world. Repeatedly, both the audience and the protagonist oscillate between one alternative (there was indeed a mustache) and the other (Marc never had a mustache). Nothing ever stabilizes, and we are left in an ironic universe. It is unusual for film, a medium heavily engaged in referentiality, to allow doubt to persist in this fashion. The plot centers on the ever-more-serious consequences in Marc's daily life of his choice to shave his mustache and the universal denial of the mustache's earlier existence. Eventually Marc runs away from a situation that threatens to destroy him, flies to the Far East, and seems to attain some measure of balance living in Macao, until one day his wife magically appears in his hotel room as though they were on vacation together.

This film has its origins in a novel of the same title, written by the director, and published 19 years prior to the film's release. Creating the inclusive type of irony described above is no doubt simpler in novels, which do not usually include visual referentiality. As a novel, *La moustache* is of course composed of words, instead of images, and the "reality" that these words reference is focalized strictly through Marc, who may be unbalanced. The transposition of inclusive irony to film is thus of particular interest because of the challenges such adaptation poses.³ My focus will be on how Carrère creates inclusive irony and what it might mean, for undecidability is not in itself ironic. Irony requires a second step: one of the two elements must in some fashion be making a commentary on, or a critique of, the other.⁴

In the film, the audience, like Marc, goes through a series of steps moving from referential certainty to undecidability. We trust what we see onscreen, because referentiality is a convention of realist cinema. Thus we, the viewers, are certain of the mustache's existence because we see Marc shave it off in the first scene, immediately after his wife states explicitly that she has never seen him without it. Carrère's first move is to create an atmosphere of slight discordance. Philip Glass's music plays a powerful, subliminal role in creating a sense that something is "off." Serious, almost ominous, the music first plays when Marc submerges his head in the bathtub just before shaving his mustache (but after shaving the rest of his face); it is a moment that lends itself to an interpretation involving purification, a change of consciousness, or even an ontological shift. The music later recurs with increasing insistence as the undecidability surrounding the mustache grows. Odd details accumulate in early scenes: Agnès, Marc's wife, wears an excessively short skirt and sexy high leather boots to dine at the apartment of her ex-husband (or ex-lover, it is not clear) Serge, his wife Nadia, and their young daughter; at the restaurant where Marc and Agnès eat the following evening, they notice that much has changed; the establishment now offers the gruesome option of a "chiffonnade de petit rouget trépanné." The waiter at their table is filmed headless (from the neck down) and Agnès finds that the food has an odd flavor, as though her sense of taste were, as she puts it, color blind or dyslexic. The jacket that Agnès picks out and purchases for her husband that same day is in itself a disturbing object: velvet with a leaf print in different shades of acidic green. All of these moments contribute to an atmosphere of uneasiness.

The second move towards undecidability involves the suggestion of two possible explanations for the problem of the mustache. Is the universal denial that Marc ever had a

mustache, voiced by his wife, their friends, and Marc's co-workers, a practical joke? We are led to think so when Serge tells a story at dinner about Agnès concerning a weekend spent years earlier at a friend's country house: she denied and continues to deny turning the heat up for her own selfish pleasure and at the expense of others in a situation in which she was the only possible suspect. Marc thus imagines that she may have orchestrated an elaborate prank at his expense, specifically, telling everyone they know to deny that Marc ever had a mustache. The film provides no confirmation for this practical joke and indeed makes Agnès's orchestration appear increasingly unlikely. The second possible explanation is insanity: is Marc going mad? To the extent that Agnès is the source of information that might lead to such a conclusion, the audience is leery about according it much value because what Agnès says sometimes contradicts what we see and hear. It is she who tells Marc that his father did not just call and leave a message but rather has been dead for a year, and that she does not know Nadia and Serge, at whose apartment they dined the previous night. Visual and aural referentiality interferes again: we *heard* the father's phone message and *saw* the dinner scene with Serge and Nadia. Carrère, however, complicates the situation by adding to the mix one scene that strongly suggests Marc's insanity and another that argues for his complete rationality. In the first case, Marc is in a taxi in driving rain looking for his parents' apartment building. Despite the fact that he grew up there, he is unable to recall the number of the building or even recognize it. The visual impediment of the heavy rain does not suffice to explain Marc's inability to remember the address. On the other hand, Marc's rational state is suggested by an earlier scene: coming out of a *photomaton*, he asks a female police officer, an obvious figure of authority whose gender suggests an opposition between her and his

wife, to compare his identity card with the pictures he just had taken: “Regardez. Vous voyez une différence, là?” he asks. And she confidently identifies the mustache in the identity card picture, thus confirming what Marc and the viewer understand to be true. Both a practical joke and insanity are relatively comfortable recuperations of the vexing status of Marc’s mustache, but Carrère does not allow us that comfort.⁵

Indeed, reality seems to have slipped off its rails. Carrère asks us to consider its nature in several ways. Photographs, supposedly faithful representations, figure in a number of scenes. Their relationship to reality is of course highly similar to that of film and, as such, has a meta-cinematic role. We see the pictures, but that does not suffice to ensure their referential status any more than does the fact that we see—on four different occasions—Marc shave his mustache. We see photographs of the trip Marc and Agnès took to Bali, which Marc uses to assure himself that he indeed had a mustache. Agnès removes the pictures while Marc is asleep (a suspect act), only to put them on the coffee table (an innocent act).⁶ Later he cannot find them and Agnès insists that they never went to Bali. The questionable relationship between photographs and reality is reprised in an even more disturbing fashion at the end of the film after Agnès inexplicably appears in the Macao hotel room. Another couple with whom Marc and Agnès have supposedly spent time in Macao show him the pictures they have recently taken. Marc appears in them, even smiling once, with his wife and the other couple. The audience sees the pictures, but they make no sense to us or to Marc, because they in no way correspond to the “reality” we have witnessed onscreen or to the “reality” of his experience. The audience fully shares Marc’s disorientation in this case. These two sets of pictures are

linked by their subject matter: exotic vacations. By calling into question their referential status, Carrère problematizes the relationship between vacations and reality.

Elsewhere, Carrère's use of photographs takes different forms: when Marc (fleeing his wife who is about to have him committed) grabs his passport, he must decide which of the two passports in the drawer is his, which he does, logically enough, by opening one. It belongs to his wife. Instead of simply grabbing the other, which would be normal given the rush he is in, he opens it, as if to verify his picture in the context of an authoritative document that confirms his own existence. Such confirmation has become necessary, as Marc has just been told that his father is dead, his close friends do not exist, and he himself has been unable to locate his parent's home or correct phone number.

Carrère uses a third kind of photograph in the last part of the film: the postcard. During Marc's first night at a fairly upscale Hong Kong hotel, he comes across a postcard in the desk drawer that reproduces his view of Hong Kong from his hotel window. Carrère shoots one after the other, thereby underlining the photograph's referential status. The similarity of the two images forces the viewer to call into question the relationship between the two, much as in the case of the exotic vacations and daily reality above. Furthermore, the postcard's function is quite different from the vacation or passport pictures. Apart from its potential advertising function, a postcard is used primarily for communication. Marc writes the card to Agnès, and places it in his jacket pocket, but never sends it. Thus the postcard fails to serve its communicative function. Near the film's end, Marc throws the postcard into the sea, in what may be understood to be a gesture of defeat before the possibility of referential reality.

The photographic image, like that of film, operates within the convention of referential reality. Carrère adapts that convention to call into question what we see on the screen or in photographs,⁷ and also to emphasize point of view. The camera stays with Marc for almost the entire film, either trained on him, what he is looking at (point of view shots), or could see.⁸ The director thereby ensures that the viewer sympathizes with Marc and even shares his predicament. By keeping the range of point of view limited to Marc, Carrère would seem to be providing some small measure of stability for the viewer, but here again there is a problem. The tie is broken near the end of the film. In the Macao hotel room, Marc shaves while Agnès packs. For the first time, the camera abandons Marc and we remain with Agnès and cannot see what he is doing for the space of several minutes. The restricted point of view disappears and with it the viewer's stabilizing attachment to Marc goes as well.⁹

Carrère achieves undecidability in another fashion, one that relates most closely to the type of irony we are interested in. The formless uncertainty surrounding referentiality and the photographs discussed above gives way to sharper oscillations as the film progresses. Opposing cultures and their geography provide a particular domain for the back-and-forth fluctuation. Two-thirds of the way through the film, the action moves from the "West" as represented by France, specifically a comfortable milieu in Paris, to the "East," China. The opposition of East and West is undermined, however, on both ends, providing subtle resonances of the "other." Marc and his colleagues eat sushi for lunch at work in Paris; when Marc returns home Agnès offers him sushi for dinner. Given the centrality of food and drink to French culture, these moments are noteworthy. When Marc arrives in China, he travels to the two most Western-influenced places in the

country—formerly British Hong Kong, where he stays in a very Western-looking hotel, and formerly Portuguese Macao, where the colorfully painted houses suggest a decidedly non-Chinese influence. Finally, on their visit to the casino boat in Macao, Agnès wears a Chinese blouse, and, as she packs for their return to the West, she includes numerous Chinese objects. The opposition between the two geographically distinct realms is thus accompanied by interpenetration, resulting in an uncertain oscillation between the two.

The oscillation is **even clearer** when we examine the central image of water. The film opens with a shot of dark rolling water; when the opening credits end there is a cut to the bright water of Marc's bathroom tub, water that is subsequently closely associated with the act of shaving. Itself an oscillating element when it is not still, water reappears in a number of forms—Marc immersing his head in the tub, Marc sitting in the shower in despair as the mustache hairs he has pulled from the garbage disappear down the drain; later, Marc trying to see through the driving rain that renders the taxi windows opaque. There are also brief clips of a red boat running along in dark water that appear without referential mooring.¹⁰ Water separates Hong Kong Island from Kowloon on the mainland, and Marc repeatedly, obsessively, rides the ferry back and forth from one to the other until far into the night. It is this endless crossing of the water that is the most powerful image of oscillation and undecidability in the film. Carrère takes care to underline its significance by devoting nearly seven minutes to ferry crossings. The crossings entail secondary oscillations as well. The boat moves rhythmically up and down as well as back and forth. The latter movement is duplicated by the seat backs which shift to accommodate the boat's direction, as Marc learns. Boats thus permit Marc to partake metonymically in the oscillations of bodies of water.

Boats recur twice near the end of the film, but in both cases they are not associated with movement. Indeed they are immobilized in different fashions, and their presence contributes to the irony of Marc's situation as well as the disquieting atmosphere that pervades the film's conclusion. The first boat is shown in the previously-mentioned photograph of Marc, Agnès, and the other couple vacationing on Macao. The shot was presumably **taken** a few days earlier. The boat is immobilized by its still photographic representation. Marc, of course, has no recollection of any such outing, as Agnès simply materialized in his hotel room; he does not recognize the boat on which he is shown in the picture. The second boat—the floating casino—is literally immobilized in the water just offshore. In this shot, itself static, we see the brightly lit boat and the black water, juxtaposed in an irreconcilable contrast. We may also note the dark boat in the foreground. The eye moves back and forth between dark and light. The oscillation of the viewer's eyes mirrors the inclusive irony of Marc's situation.

Music contributes independently to the pattern of ironic oscillation through the creation of uncertainty concerning the diegetic level at which Glass's music exists. On two occasions, the music is understood to be a part of the world depicted onscreen, while more **often** it has no onscreen source and comes directly from the filmmaker. The first time we hear Glass's music is when Marc asks Agnès to replay a CD; the timing of events makes it seem that she does so, and that Marc hears the same music we hear. The music oscillates undecidably, however, because it is attached to the two levels simultaneously. First it operates inside the film as simply a CD Agnès has restarted. At the same time, however, the music operates outside as a punctuation device for the appearance of the film's title on the screen. In Gombrich's terms, is it a duck or a rabbit?

Later, music is again integrated into the film's action when the couple returns home from the restaurant: Marc puts on a CD, both characters and audience hear the same music, but Agnès asks her husband to turn it off. Marc complies and the music is silenced. It comes back later of course, but only for the audience, not the characters. The instability of the ontological status of the music—does it belong to the world of the characters or to that of the film?—reflects the ironic oscillation between worlds we have been examining.

There are other ironic oscillations in the film, often taking the form of alternating states. Emblematic is the short scene about half-way through when Agnès speaks to Marc's mother on the phone. We see Marc in the foreground in focus while Agnès is completely out of focus in the background. Near the end of her call, the focus shifts completely: she comes into focus and he goes out. Scenes of Marc asleep or at least in bed share this binary quality: we see him go to sleep curled up on his side and wake up on the other side; later in Macao he lies on his back and then rolls over face down. Shoes and socks seem to be an either/or proposition for Marc rather than a happy pairing. As Marc escapes from his apartment he runs out without shoes. When he returns surreptitiously for his passport, he removes the wet socks, but then puts on his shoes without socks. The oscillations never resolve themselves, but like the duck and the rabbit, like the existential status of Marc's mustache, they flicker back and forth.

A particular conundrum attendant to this dizzying atmosphere of oscillation involves truth and falsehood. Lying is embedded in the first scene, when Marc tells Agnès that he did not open the door for her because his shoelace broke. The playful nature of this lie seems harmless enough, but in short order lies take on a different cast. Marc lies repeatedly in his floundering attempts to cope with the sudden ontological

instability of his world, particularly when excusing his odd behavior to his partner Bruno. Because we share Marc's point of view, we may well sympathize with his lies, but the possibility that Agnès may be lying is more unsettling. The anecdote that Serge tells about Agnès and the heating system permits only two possible interpretations: supernatural forces were at work or Agnès is a brazen liar. The uncertainties surrounding the earlier existence of Marc's mustache, the couple's friendship with Serge and Nadia, and the death of Marc's father are all tied to the truth value of statements made by Agnès. The last example is both the most inherently shocking and the most suspect because we, along with Marc, earlier heard Agnès refer to her husband's parents in the plural twice: "chez *tes* parents" et "je *les* appelle" (italics mine). Lying, or even the possibility of lying, creates serious instability on its own, but it also lures the viewer into believing that there may be an explanation for the events in the film, some final truth that could be uncovered. In fact it is Marc's initial lie alone that offers some possible, albeit woefully inadequate, illumination. That first fib about the broken shoelace may be viewed as a trigger. In an example of classic situational irony, his falsehood becomes truth when Marc later breaks his shoelace as he hurriedly puts on his shoes in order to flee.

The oscillations and examples of undecidability that I have discussed do not of themselves constitute irony. We must consider how the contrasted elements create a critical commentary, itself an essential element of irony. It is precisely that component of critique that gives irony its edge, as Linda Hutcheon puts it in the title of her book. I find three such domains in *La moustache*, which can be ordered in a general fashion both chronologically and hierarchically. The first involves the act of shaving. Shaving one's mustache is tied to concern about appearance. Thus the first critique is of vanity. Very

early in the film, although after Marc has shaved, Serge tells Marc to be sure to notice and comment positively on Nadia's new hair-do. The implicit comparison of shaving a mustache and cutting one's hair places Marc's act in a trivializing context that calls into question its significance. At the same time, the vulnerability that Marc shares with Nadia about the judgment of others is emphasized. Bardet calls Marc narcissistic, saying that he is literally obsessed with his image, constantly looking for his own reflection in the eyes of others, especially Agnès (87).

Second is the suggestion of a critique of Marc and Agnès's marriage where honesty and openness are repeatedly placed in doubt, from the moment that Marc playfully hides his shaved upper lip up to when Agnès's chooses to drug her husband and call a psychiatric clinic to come and take him away. The problematic distance between them is figured by the shot in their bedroom after Agnès has called Serge in the middle of the night to confirm that there was no conspiracy to deny that Marc had ever had a mustache. The large painting leaning against the wall, which seems to depict the sea, visually separates them, as will large expanses of land and water before long.¹¹ The issue of masculinity tied to the mustache is brought to bear as the film draws to a close: Marc seems no longer capable of sex with his wife. Her advances in their final scene are met with no more than a chaste kiss and a tender embrace. The sexuality evident in their relationship in the early part of the film has disappeared.

The third area of critique is the most wide-ranging and significant: the concept of reality itself. Are photographs real? the soccer games that Agnès watches on television? trivial items like a mustache? more weighty matters like a parent's death? the very existence of friends at whose home you dined only a few nights earlier? The culmination

of this process is Agnès's sudden appearance in Marc's hotel room in Macao. Her reality is that their vacation is drawing to an end and they must pack; Marc's reality is that he has had no contact with her since the day he escaped from Paris and imminent commitment to a mental institution. The difference in their perspectives functions as a mirror on their marriage. In Macao, Agnès looks at the jacket she chose and bought for him earlier in the film as if for the first time and finds it clown-like.¹² She seems to be perfectly unaware of the disjuncture between them, while Marc feels it acutely. The film ends with an extreme close-up of his eyes staring out in the darkness with an expression of abjection and horror. There exists neither explanation nor hope of escape.

Shaving is, quite simply, an act of cutting. Indeed Marc uses scissors on his mustache before employing the razor. He has seemingly cut into the fabric of reality. Aside from the suggestion that shaving his mustache is a castrating gesture, it is clearly one of auto-mutilation. In fact, Carrère's novel of the same name ends with Marc shaving down to the bone in an act of suicide. The film refuses such an extreme reaction to the insoluble ontological slippage of Marc's world I have described. While Carrère himself criticizes the film's ending for being too open (qtd. in Bardet 119), it is precisely that refusal to provide resolution that allows inclusive irony to triumph. Pierre Schoentjes notes that the irony of undecidability has close ties to postmodernism in its abandonment of stable meaning (210). And indeed stability has been completely jettisoned here. Marc's simple act of shaving off his mustache cleaves reality in two, leaving him and the audience shuttling back and forth, denied closure, condemned to ironic uncertainty.

Notes

¹On irony and film, see Hutcheon, Brill, Elleström, Elsaesser, and Engel.

²In Hutcheon's terminology, this feature of irony is its "inclusive" characteristic (58). Schoentjes states: "L'ironie met donc nécessairement en présence deux sens contradictoires dans une aire de tension; l'écart ironique naît du fait que l'ironie exprime toujours l'un *et* l'autre, le oui *et* le non" (93–94).

³It is unusual for the same person to be both author of a novel and director of the film version. This combination of roles shows no sign, however, of being ironic, at least insofar as can be determined from the film.

⁴Kerbrat-Orecchioni points out that irony entails a judgmental stance, involving such acts as discrediting, treating with derision, or making fun of someone or something (119).

⁵In Cronenberg's film *EXistenZ* the ontological undecidability (are we in the game or outside the game? or have the frontiers broken down between them?) is recuperated at the end through the introduction of a superior level firmly identified as "reality." Here there is no such comfortable and tidy resolution.

⁶The envelope containing the photographs is itself transparent, although somewhat opaque. Whenever it appears onscreen, the spectator can see Marc with his mustache through the envelope. We have to wonder why Agnès does not see Marc's picture when she removes the envelope from his nightstand and, later, when it is sitting on the table next to her as she watches a soccer game and then talks to Marc.

⁷Bardet notes the problem of the contagion of doubt that arises if the spectator doubts the referentiality of what is depicted on screen (84).

⁸Carrère states: “Nous avons adopté une règle simple: ne rien voir de ce qu’il ne voit pas” (qtd. in Bardet 86).

⁹I am indebted to Patrick Keating for his insights into point of view in this film.

¹⁰When Agnès approaches Marc seated on the living room floor after the mustache hairs episode, there is a sudden cut to this image of the boat accompanied by background music. Visually it seems to belong to later scenes in China. The image recurs in Hong Kong during one of Marc’s ferry rides. The fact that it appears the second time when Marc closes his eyes would suggest the possibility of a dream. However, there is no support for such an interpretation in the first instance.

¹¹Similarly, a wall hanging in the living room with wave-like markings separates the couple later as Agnès speaks to Bruno on the phone.

¹²In Macao, when Agnès comes across the jacket in the closet, she calls it “cette veste de guignol.” When she insisted that Marc try it on much earlier in the store, he used the same word, asking her: “Tu crois pas que ça fait trop guignol?”

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