The Hudsucker Proxy: A Comedy of Intervention

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The Hudsucker Proxy, principally created by Joel and Ethan Coen and released in 1994, has ideas worth our contemplation. I take my interest and method in reading this film from the work of Stanley Cavell[1], in particular his elucidation of a film genre: the comedy of remarriage. The Hudsucker Proxy is not a comedy of remarriage, though it borrows extensively (as does almost all the Coens' work) from the greatest films of Hollywood, most centrally from the works of Preston Sturges and (less so) Frank Capra.

The Hudsucker Proxy opens with a nighttime shot of New York, New York, in the very last moments (so the narrator tells us) of 1958. We gently glide through the skyline until we discover an aproned Norville Barnes poised to jump from one of the tallest towers, this one ostentatiously sporting an enormous, brightly-lit clock to help us (and Norville) accurately count the remaining seconds in 1958, and in Norville's life. The narrator has reminded us of the "big shots" in the Waldorf and the "little folks" in Times Square, and hinted that Norville may be where he is because he could no longer cope with the "rat race". What has happened to this man at the top of the skyline to set him so far apart from those at the bottom? In order to answer, the film flashes back to Norville's arrival in New York.

The narration of the flashback raises one of the most interesting philosophical ideas of the film: "The future", the narrator tells us, "that's something you can't never tell about. But the past...that's another story." Is this narrator claiming that no one (including himself) can know the future, that we, the viewers ("you") cannot know the future, or merely that

[1]See Cavell, Stanley. Pursuits of Happiness. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981, and Cavell, Stanley. Cities of Words. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004.

he, whose job here is to tell, cannot ever tell us about the future (though he may know it)? The nature of film (a relation of photographs and time to yield – usually – narrative) allows, and even encourages, a fantasy of having access to omniscience, and we have no conclusive reason at this point to accept the first interpretation of the narrator's claim: he may know the future, if the writers have decided so. Evidence to help us choose one of these interpretations over the others is provided late in the film, and we shall take up this question again at that point of our reading.

The film's title credits appear to carry us back in time, and the title itself demands our attention – why "Hudsucker", of all names? "Hud" is an old English word for "hood", or "covering", and here, I take it to mean "blindfold". The film later equates the words "proxy", "puppet", and "pawn". "Hudsucker proxy", then, can easily be taken to mean "blindfold-sucker-pawn" – and that's surely just what Norville is, or just what the board of Hudsucker Industries later takes him to be. (Having gone this far, we can hardly avoid putting together "blindfold-sucker-industries". The film is going to show us a few suckers who have been blindfolded by these industries.)

Norville's arrival sequence reveals him to be a man of extreme inexperience. Not only has he arrived directly from Muncie, Indiana, the quintessentially Mid-western town[2], but he himself is less interesting in any way, the camera argues during a long tracking shot, than his new suitcase.[3] Standing outside the Nidus Employment Agency, Norville is mechanically bombarded with unmeetable demands for the employment experience he does not have. We, like Norville, strain to catch the job opportunities presented there, but the camera quickly recognizes that we cannot read the entire board at once and leans forward, showing just two postings at a time – but they are still impossible to read, blurring even beyond the

[2]We cannot help but think of the fabled country mouse who visits the Big City, or perhaps of Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). I say Muncie, Indiana is "quintessentially Mid-western" by virtue of being the location of a famous 1930s study of American cultural trends; this film is certainly concerned with the cultural clash between Norville and New York City. See Lynd, Robert S. and Lynd, Helen Merrell. Middletown. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929.

[3]Businessmen are often referred to as "suits", and in this scene Norville is more of a suit-case than a suit. That is, he is not yet a suit, or at least his suit-ability is lacking somehow, empty, waiting to be filled.

comprehension of the equally mechanical camera. Eventually, Norville is left alone before the postings board (uniquely unemployable) to realize that at least the right-hand side of each posting is comprehensible, because each says the same thing – experience is required. The fact that, instead of the job titles, we see these demands leaping off the posting board and into Norville's consciousness tells us, I think, that *all* of the postings were blurred before his inexperienced eyes, and only his unsuitability has become clear to him, as it is to us.

But where does the fault of his unsuitability lie? The "Muncie College of Business Administration" sticker carefully centered on his new suitcase is soon confirmed to be from his recent alma mater, where he was voted "most likely to succeed" by his classmates. Muncie is clearly considered throughout this film to be "home" for Norville in a way that New York City never achieves on the screen (evidenced by Norville's clear affection for, and child-like trust in, everything and everyone Muncie), and to be idyllic in a sense that cannot be achieved in New York City – at least not without reference to Muncie's locale (such as when Norville and Amy have escaped the "Fancy-Dress Gala" to look out over the city from a balcony). Perhaps it is New York City that is at fault for being unsuitable for Norville Barnes, at the very least until a top-level, high-success position requiring the absence of experience is vacated in short order (by a long fall shown in the first anticipated continuation of the camera's film-opening journey).

Such unsuitability is not limited to Norville. Waring Hudsucker's motivation for leaping from his pinnacle of success is revealed late in the film to be relational; he was successful in industry but (as a result, he implies) not in love, as the object of his affection saw fit to choose Sid Mussburger over him. This woman who wields significant influence by the placement of her affections has apparently placed them several times. Her only appearance in the film is during the Fancy-Dress Gala, at which she gossips voraciously (across Norville, who is wedged into the middle of a matron-packed bench) about past romantic escapades including, but not limited to, and not ending with, the one that led to her marriage. The distance between Sid and his bride is too great for the camera to be able to bring them

together; they share the frame fleetingly only as Sid walks away from her toward some of Hudsucker's "biggest stockholders". We conclude that neither Waring nor Sid has actually won the love of this woman, though Sid has enjoyed the token triumph of her willingness to reject Waring in his favor. In fact, Sid's single-minded focus on token triumphs (the kinds of victories that can be tallied) is what leads him to follow accidentally in Waring's footsteps out of the building and into the skyline: he is so focused on the Bumstead contract (instead of Mr. Bumstead himself, we note) that he steps through the broken window. It is by catching Sid before he falls, and thereby giving Sid his second chance, that Norville earns his place of sincere leadership among the insincere board which cares more for numbers than for people, and for success more than romance.

This is a step up for Norville, but hardly an improvement in the suitability of him and the city for one another. Success without romance is lonely, and true romance requires privacy. But the culture of romance, such that it exists in this city in this film, is one of public privacy, both in the sense that what should be kept private is insufficiently so (evidenced by Sid's wife's meandering affections), and in the sense that there simply are no private spaces, only circumstantially private moments. The most intimate moments captured take place in Norville's "private" office, the balcony off to one side of the Fancy-Dress Gala, and Anne's 440 (a "beatnick bar"). Both Norville and Amy lecture each other in his office, he (ignorantly of her identity) in response to her public accusation that he is an imbecile, and she (after clearing the office of others except for the bodyguard whom she can kick, only not out) in response to his outrunning of his soul. More intimate than either of these moments, however, is what happens when they "leave the party" and find a secluded balcony during the Fancy-Dress Gala. That we are to read this as an analogue to a young couple escaping to a bedroom during a house or fraternity party is confirmed both by the verbal love-making in their conversation and the transitional fade not just to a woman shushing us and a "do not disturb" sign hung on a closed door, but to Norville's silly grin as he thrusts his hips enthusiastically (in order to hula the "dingus" prototype, as it turns out).

But during the party, Norville recognizes the privacy of the balcony and does not quite know how to acknowledge or appreciate it without comparing it to another rumored place of privacy – "old man Larson's feed tower," a lovers' escape near Muncie. Amy, who has "never been dumped by a fella' before" and therefore, like Norville, has no experience in love[4], reveals that her place of quiet, and the place where she would go to hold hands with her boyfriend, is not her apartment in Greenwich Village but Anne's 440. (This wish is fulfilled just before the final credits roll.) But these moments of privacy are manifestly not readily available, and the eyes of the city watch Norville, from his work and relationships chronicled in the newspaper to his initially lonely lunch break (narrated by two cabbies, who are apparently speaking because they have "got gas" – presumeably from their own participation in the rat race).

Norville has the privacy of anonymity when he first arrives from Muncie, but his heroism in saving Sid Mussburger launches him to stardom. By her reporting, Amy, already a public figure (by virtue of having won the Pulitzer prize), contributes to Norville's prominence before the public eye. Amy quits both her real (newspaper) job and her fake (secretarial) job during the film, thereby retreating from the public eye. Norville, of course, remains in the public eye at the film's end. Amy, we might say, retreats because she is re-learning how to have a private life worth living, while Norville learns to live a life worth publicity. What is the content of these educations?

Amy is certainly street-wise and well experienced at the beginning of the film's flash-back. She adroitly handles her boss and colleagues at the newspaper, helping create the crossword puzzle by shouting over her shoulder as she types her story, borrows cigarettes, answers the phone, brandishes her Pulitzer prize, and chatters non-stop. Her status as a master of street-smarts is pitted against Norville's pitiful naivete as she manipulates his compassion during the cabbie-narrated lunch, and Norville falls for her well-worn ploy, the

[4]It is possible that Amy has had relationships and done the dumping herself, but Norville's characterization of her (mistakenly delivered in person) calls her a "dried-up, bitter, old maid", and her response validates this as the truth.

cabbies tell us, precisely because he is not wise. Amy, wise without compassion, takes advantage of Norville's compassion, which is un-checked by wisdom. By the end, the narrator makes plain, Norville has learned how "to rule with [both] wisdom and compassion." Norville's initial compassion is lost as he gains some wisdom from experience (the nadir of his compassion is his firing of Buzz, the elevator-boy), but he learns it again after, at the height of his pride, he falls to the "trough of despair" (as diagnosed by the film's psychiatrist). Norville's falling and especially his rising will demand further attention, but we cannot neglect the film's neglect of Amy's rising.

Amy learns (or re-learns) compassion during the course of this film, as evidenced by her upbraiding of Norville for "outrunning [his] soul", and by the respect she gains for Norville's goals (to be motivated for the sake of children, to "bring people together", and to "bring a smile to the hips of everyone in America"). Amy's softening is at least partly in response to a rhetorically probing question from Ol' Moses, the omnisciently narrating clock maintainer. "Why you pretendin' to be such an old sour-puss?", he asks, "ain't gonna never make ya happy." Considered on this axis, Amy's journey in the film is a retreat from public pretension, non-genuineness, and ignorance of her self, not only to privacy, but also (presumably) genuineness and unity with her true nature. Our last glimpse of Amy shows her embracing Norville in Anne's 440, her chosen space of intimacy. The destination of Norville's corresponding journey is clear; he moves from genuineness and self-confidence through pretentious self-importance to despairing surrender, and finally, back to compassion, now shaped and undergirded by the wisdom of experience.

But what is Amy's destination? The answer to this question may simply be that there is no answer because the film is only truly interested in Norville, but this seems insufficient in light of the film's extreme efforts to masculinize the depicted workplace[5] and its explicit reference (via the news-reel on the hula-hoop) to 50's stereotypes of vacuuming, stay-at-home

[5]The Hudsucker tower is full of blues, grays, and browns. The lines are almost always straight instead of curved, and the spaces are cavernous instead of intimate. The only Hudsucker women we see (Amy excluded) are sexless secretaries. The newspaper office is smaller and more intimate, but Amy's rapport with her colleagues is clearly one she has adopted as a woman, and not one that has roots in her femininity.

moms and pipe-smoking, business-minded dads. This film has something to say, or at least something to ask its characters, about gender, family, and profession. A second potential answer is that the film thinks Amy's proper destination – at least in 1959 – was the home, rather than the workplace. Bolstering this answer is Amy's newfound goal, shared with Norville, to do something "you know, for kids." Has the hula-hoop brought them together for the purpose of learning and practicing wisdom and compassion jointly for the sake of progeny? The film's sly references connecting the hip action of hula-ing with togetherness, intimacy, family, and children are amusing, but this answer seems wrong both because no home of Amy's is ever represented on the screen in any fashion, and because the Coens are unlikely to present us with such a stilted view of gender and the workplace.[6]

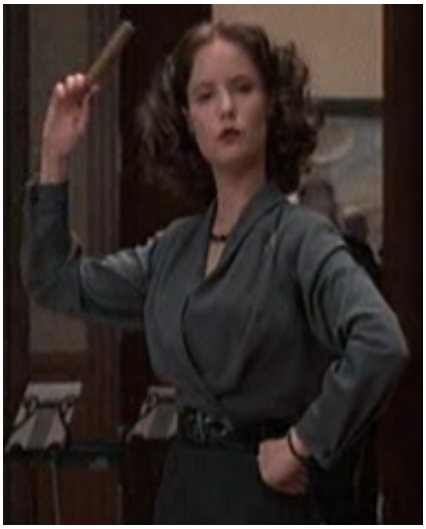
On the contrary, the most fundamental content of Norville's education in this film hints at what Amy's future is likely to be. The pivotal lesson is taught after we and the narrator have come full circle to find Norville back on that ledge, wearing that humble apron. We now know that he is there (isolated from the successful "big shots" in the Waldorf and the romantic "little folks" in Times Square) because he has been unable to suit either himself to New York City or New York City to himself, and we learn that he does fall, though not directly by his own volition. In any case, his descent is arrested by nothing less than the halting of physical time.[7] One miraculous event begets another, and Waring Hudsucker descends from heaven to deliver the film's central message: life (in private and in public, in the home and the workplace) is a series of failures and falls, and we must be given (and take) the liberty to apply what we learn from those and thereby to rise again. It is true that Norville is our central interest, and that is why the film does not stray into the application of Norville's lesson to Amy's life. But if falling is rightly followed by rising, and failure by fresh and more educated attempts, then surely we are meant to expect that a former

[6]This conclusion is debatable, but I draw it from the strong female leads in, most especially, *Fargo* (1996) and *Intolerable Cruelty* (2002). Both of these women not only work, they are very good at their jobs, and in both cases their male love interests are somewhat vulnerable if not feminized. Aptly-named "Norm", in *Fargo*, seems well-suited to become a stay-at-home dad.

[7]The Coens, ever pranksters, have given us a narrator not only of questionable omniscience, but also with omnipotence, or if not that, then quite sufficient temporal potency even so.

Pulitzer-winner (who won for her "story on the reunited triplets", a professionally-pursued re-establishment of family) will return to the workplace and report not only with wisdom, but also compassion.[8]

In one of the film's most striking poses, Amy demonstrates the pluck and fortitude to wield Norville's cigar (with its usual Freudian subtext) while delivering that lecture about his outrunning of his soul. This woman is not meek and she is not likely to leave all the pants-wearing to her husband (should she obtain one), but she is also (re)learning – from Norville – respect for ideals beyond career success. This is a woman who may be taking a break at the film's end, but who will not be content to give up her habit of stealing cigars from her bosses.



It may seem presumptuous to worry too much about Amy's destination, since Norville and Amy have still to overcome the depth of her deception of him; as far as we know, he believes at the film's end that she is from Muncie. If Amy's admission of that deception drives them apart, then Amy's need for income will surely drive her back into the workplace. I believe the film believes they will stay together. The scene in Anne's 440 depicting their affection for one another (and his forgiveness of her) directly follows the lecture he receives from on high, which instructed him that we must give one another second chances. Surely, like "Hopsy" at the end of *The Lady Eve*, Norville has been prepared by the course of his experiences not only to love beyond just one more identity-shifting revelation, but to share forgiveness duties with Amy in the future as required to preserve their partnership.[9]

The narrator has, by now, answered our question about his knowledge. As he stops the

[8]Jennifer Jason Leigh's Amy is thoroughly reminiscent of Rosiland Russell's Hildy in *His Girl Friday*, and I find it impossible to imagine either woman leaving the workplace permanently in exchange for raising children at home.

[9]The example so vividly provided Norville by Waring Hudsucker's suicidal motives can only strengthen his resolve in this regard.

Hudsucker clock, he turns to the camera and reveals that he's breaking the rules: "Strictly speakin', I'm never supposed to do this. But have you got a better idea?" This camaraderie he establishes with his audience implies that we're on the same plane; sure, sure, his question is rhetorical, but he is speaking to us in present-tense without a wink in his eye or his voice. Not only does this invite us alongside him as spectators of the continuing present ("The Future is Now", the Hudsucker clock's caption reminds us), but this reveals that he, too, is subject to some higher set of rules according to which he is, strictly speaking, never supposed to do some things.

On the screen he is opposed in this rule-breaking by not a higher power, but instead an apparent peer. The character Aloysius has appeared a few times throughout the film, scraping or etching the name on the president's office door, revealing Amy's double-identity to Sid Mussburger (similarly to Ol' Moses, Aloysius has knowledge beyond the natural), or, most recently, closing Norville's office window and panicking him into falling. Both Aloysius and Ol' Moses appear to be creatures exclusively of their places within the Hudsucker Industries tower, as if they are themselves aspects of the building, or the city more broadly, or industry more generally.

I read the former aspect (Aloysius) as an intentional disregard for the past and the lessons it may teach us, and a single-minded pursuit of success at whatever cost. As hints guiding this reading we may consider Aloysius' apparently-long tolerance of the miserable but successful Waring as president, and later his strategic assistance to help un-romantic Sid obtain the office in Norville's place. More chillingly, Aloysius' etching work, explicitly temporary and intended to divert all focus from the past, is in that way the reverse of what a tombstone-engraver strives to do in recording the names of the dead as permanently as possible.

As demonstrated in his conversation with Amy and his intervention on Norville's behalf, the latter aspect (Moses) is a respect for the order of the cycles and lessons of life, for history-informed justice ("what goes around comes around"), and for the experience-educated life

of genuineness, self-knowledge, and happiness. Waring and Sid were suckers of Aloysius, and thereby blind (for too long, at least) to the romantic failure that was the cost of their success. That Aloysius is skeptical of Norville's propensity for success is revealed by his scowl and raised eyebrow when Norville compassionately (and un-wisely, and romantically though in a pathetic sense) carries Amy into his new office; it is the natural progression of this disapproval that Aloysius seeks to scrape Norville's name from that door.

Moses claims to know "just about everything...leastways if it concerns Hudsucker," and he backs up this claim by knowing Amy's real name and by quoting Amy's relatively private remarks back to her. Aloysius, too, has shown that he knew Amy's real identity. These two titans of fate are therefore just as likely to know the contents of Waring's final Blue Letter, still sitting in Norville's apron pocket, and they have independent ideas of how the consequences should work out. Aloysius idealizes success in the mode of"taking no prisoners and getting no second chances", and thereby seeks Norville's removal (and demise). Moses idealizes another sense of success that includes not only career, but family (or at least romance), and with a compassionate allowance for education by failure. They box for Norville's soul, not only revealing along the way that failure's viciousness is false (as dentures), but that we must capitalize on our *ignorance* in order to apply the lessons we learn from failure.

It is no surprise that we are ignorant of the future, but this has rarely-acknowledged and profound implications for our volitional experiences. To the extent that one had conscious and precise knowledge of one's own future *actions*, one could not possibly feel any sense of volition[10] in their fulfillment. In a similar but less self-reflexively fundamental way, to the extent that one has conscious and precise knowledge of one's own future *circumstances* one cannot ever experience a "second chance." The narrator has established as a condition of his storytelling that the knowledge of the future is not available to us, and by telling the story

[10]I am using "volition" in the sense elucidated in *Moral Responsibility and the Practical Point of View*, reprinted in Normativity and the Will: Selected Papers on Moral Psychology and Practical Reason. Wallace, R. Jay. Oxford University Press: New York, 2006.

of the past he argues that knowledge of it is necessary for understanding the future. Now he has implied that even he is improvising as he goes along; this improvisation is as directly opposed to the apparently inevitable (gravity!) as one can imagine.

Thankfully, in daily human life we have opportunities to oppose "inevitable" consequences that are less rigid than those imposed by the laws of physics. A "second chance" is, by definition, an additional opportunity for success accorded after failure has become "inevitable." In practice most of us are able to press on in the face of "inevitability," but occasionally we let ourselves have inappropriate levels of confidence in our knowledge of the future, and under such a delusion about our epistemic limits it is easy to lose hope (crippling pessimism in the trough of despair) or lose track of doubt (optimistic fantasy at the heights of gaiety). Norville's inexperience when he arrives in New York City is closer to the latter, with his supremely unshakable confidence that his absurd blueprint will quickly lead to great success in business circles. His optimism gives way to such pessimism that he climbs onto that ledge; semi-divine intervention leads to his fall, and only semi-divine intervention is then able to cushion his landing and reveal to him his own crucial ignorance. He did not know the future as he thought he did, and his fate was not inevitable as he thought it was.

The Hudsucker motto takes on a new dimension to bear the depth of these considerations. To say that "the future is now" is not merely to attempt to "catch hold of one moment of time," but to recognize that the content of the future, its makeup, consists in part of the consequences of what we do *now*, not just what has already been done up to this point. Yes, we can tell the story of the past as an exchange of knowledge from a narrator to an audience, but we deny our own ignorance if we believe we can tell the story of the future by any other means than intervening causally in the world right now.

The battle between Moses and Aloysius seems to be for more than Norville's soul, perhaps even the soul of the Hudsucker tower. That Moses triumphs on Norville's behalf gives us hope that, in the future, Hudsucker Industries may avoid squandering the lives of those suckers-for-success (such as Waring and Sid) who are blind to their costly failures to

pursue romance or to nurture private lives of genuineness. Perhaps Hudsucker Industries will see employees as *people*, rather than as participants in the "rat race." After this victory, at least, the Hudsucker tower (and therefore the city) is a place that is suitable for Norville, and he is a man suitably presiding within the boardroom instead of poised on the ledge without.